

Mission Abort

SARAH

“Could you do it?” I dared ask.

“I don’t know,” she answered too quickly. “I’d bet that if it happened right now, I could. What’s the point of giving a life if you have to lose yours?” I’d might as well lose it now.

“I could keep it until, well, I mean, I could have it and then..let someone adopt it. Couldn’t I?” I could make something good out of it. Give a human soul to life.

“Yeah, yeah, you could,” she agreed, but I knew she wasn’t done. “You could also go to college on your dad, stay thin and popular, and eventually become happy and satisfied. It’s all up to you, babe. Just you.” Now she was done. She never preached, she just had a rather persuasive way of conversation.

I wanted to think some more, oddly enough, so I told her I’d call her back when I’d decided.

She’s the only one that knows. When I told her, all we did was cry. She never asked me anything. She knows if I have anything to tell, I will tell it to her. She knows who the father is, knows he was my first, and knows that he would not care. So we cried.

When we left each other that day, she wiped her eyes and cleared the red out, but I couldn’t stop. Not because I didn’t know what to do, or because I *did* know what to do. I

just cried. I cried every morning when I woke and remembered I was with child. I cried between classes and sometimes in the middle of them when I excused myself to the restroom. I cried the whole bus ride home, now riding the bus because I didn't want my usual ride to know I was crying; I did not care to know the people who rode the bus. I cried from the time I got home until the time I fell asleep on my wet pillow. My parents were beginning to miss me, they tried to ease me into talking about my sadness, they thought certainly it could only be as bad as boy trouble. They thought I wanted solitude. What I needed from them was solace.

That had gone on for three days. Then I realized that it wasn't going to go away on wishing. There would be no hiding it soon. I put a hold on my emotions and decided to be logical about this. I did have options, after all. Marriage to a sixteen year old boy who was flunking math and in love with someone else, was not among them. Even if I wanted it to be, which I did not. What I could do was tell my parents, and living through that, finish school in total and complete humiliation, or not finish at all; give birth to a baby I'm not to love and give it away to find a life without me. Or keep the baby, and somehow manage community college which my disavowed father would refuse to pay for. A social life would be non-existent; at seventeen I'd already have more baggage than some thirty-year-olds. My

life, as I now know it, is over. I will never be carefree again. I will be responsible.

That is one way I could go. But there is another. It would seem to be the only answer that made everything go away. Why couldn't it be so easy? The actual process was supposedly simple; in at the crack of dawn, out by noon. No one would miss me. No one would know. Except me, my best friend in the whole world, and God. I knew my best friend would be on my side. But what about God? How willing was I to risk hell after death for a life without it? Even if I decide that I'm doing the right thing, will God have mercy on my soul? Does a baby have a soul *before* it's born?

If I thought about it too long it came to me that I shouldn't think about it too long. It made sense very quickly. It's just a thing, not breathing, thinking, or crying. It can be made to go away. Everything could be as it was, everything, except me. But that was something I could deal with, or at least hide and forget. It's not something that comes up a lot, like on school or employment applications: Have you ever been convicted of a crime or committed abortion? No one else will ever know.

They are very safe now, too, I've heard. Not like those horror stories of liquored and unlicensed doctors doing it in kitchens with coat hangers. I will be fine. I'm sure I'll be jogging again in no time and later, when I'm ready, I can try again. I still want kids. Later, I'll

want kids, and I'm sure I'll be able to have them. I think I want two.

So I will do it. My best friend in the whole world will drive me to the clinic and wait for me while I do it. Get it over and done with. That is the only logical solution. I pick up the telephone.

ELISE

"Damn it!" I swear out loud as I wipe the vomit off my cuff. This was the second day in a row I've thrown up. That proves it, I'm pregnant.

As soon as I get to work I'll call that clinic, I think the number is in my rolodex. It'll have to wait until lunchtime, when the office is nearly deserted, otherwise, with my luck, I'll just be saying "I'd like an abortion, please" when that bitch Chloe pops her little head around the corner and I'll never sell anything else at that outfit again. They've fired before for lesser improprieties. For some reason, the owners have some belief that the real estate business is about credibility. Morons. They have no idea I've slept with more potential clients than not. That was what usually got them to *be* clients. I can't believe this is happening to me. This is the second time in one year that damn pill screwed up. Or rather, screwed me up. There's got to be a better way.

Maybe this time I'll just go ahead and ask them to tie my tubes. I've had my chances, lived a certain way, I don't believe I'll ever miss not having any kids, I've never had time. I could forget about the pills, the bad cramps and excessive facial hair. There would be no more worries the morning after. There may have been a time, the last time, when I wasn't sure, didn't know which direction my life would lead. But now I do. I don't have time for this. My life is too full.

I go back into the bedroom to finish my morning rituals and try desperately to wake my newest client from his alcohol induced sleep.

"Get up!" I yell. "I have to be at a meeting in half an hour. Get up!"

Slowly the man whose name I'll recall soon rises and heads towards my shower. He will be the one to call in the middle of the meeting to say he wants me to find and sell him a house in the hills. It will be the celebration of the month. The commissions from this client would pay for a college education, if I had a kid to educate.

It's not as if I hate kids, I love my sister's twins. They're precious. They love when I come visit, they try on my furs and spiked shoes, and scream with delight as I drive them around the neighborhood in my Beamer with the top down. They look up to me, they want to be me. And why not? I have it all. And I've never needed anyone's help. I have done it all by myself.

This too, I will handle by myself. I have to, I have no one. Besides, this is an easy task. It will take less time than showing a penthouse apartment. The cost is minimal; I've spent more on meals I ended up regurgitating with too much vodka. There's no need to put too much thought into this. It will be done.

As I wait for Greg to emerge from his metamorphosis, I go through my appointment book, there will surely be a conflict with a previous engagement and this new client, but nothing that can't be worked out. I can juggle twenty clients at one time if I have to. Sometimes I have to. You never really know what you're capable of until it's dire. Anyone can tell you, it's all a matter of priorities.

Friday morning was booked with the Branson's. Newly married, plenty of money, just starting their quest for the perfect home. They can wait. A quick phone call this morning and they can be put off. Saturday's no good, the big party for the Annual Home Show kickoff was at eight and I still have to buy a new gown. It'll have to be Monday before I can meet with them. It was decided.

I called the newlyweds as soon as I arrived, minutes before the meeting, canceling and postponing until Monday. I quickly shuffled the Bransons and hung up. I remember, as I'm flipping through the cards, that I have filed *that* number under "A", after all, it's not my regular clinic. The sweet young voice that answered promised to squeeze me in first thing Friday morning.. I shock myself a little,

entering in the space provided under 8:00 a.m on Friday's page, the word "Abortion" as though it's the name of a client. I erase and firmly insert the phrase 'Dr. Appt.'.

MILLIE

Lookin' in the mirror at my face, tears streamin' from the strain, I think I know what's goin' on. Lordy, Lordy, not again.

I hear ~~mamma~~ screamin' in the kitchen already, she's got a way of blessin' ya out without using one swear word, and makes you feel twice as bad as if she had. She's lettin' into Les. I better be gettin' in there.

With a deep breath I forgit what I's supposed to be gettin' and open the bathroom door right into the thick stench of bacon. It almost makes me throw up again, but I hear Les tellin' ~~Mama~~ just exactly how old he is. That can't be good.

"What's goin' on, you two?" I say as I come into the kitchen. They's all in there, sittin' already, lookin' at me like I'm late. Lord, yes, I am

~~Mamma~~ started in on me fast. "Bad dreams, baby? You don't look like you been sleepin' good." She always had that sarcastic tone. I try not to take offense. I answer quick and pour milk in Lilly's and T.J.'s bowls. They've already started eatin' an' I tell T.J. she got her shirt on backwards.

"C'mon, girls, we got to hurry, I got to be early today." I whispered.

"Why?" Mamma flat out asked me.

"I just wanna get some more studyin' in." I say without lookin' at her.

"You shoulda been studyin' last night 'stead o' messin' wit' that Cole boy." She was always callin' him 'that Cole boy'. I never knew what was so bad about that, 'cept the way she said it.

"I'm gonna pass, mamma, don't you be worryin' 'bout me." I sassed.

"Don't you be sassin' me young lady. And don't be thinkin' you can tell me what to worry 'bout. You best be worrin' 'bout findin' T.J.'s shoes if'n you need to be leavin'. I've done looked ev'r'where, I can't find nothin' in this mess..."

I try not to listen to everything she says. I think if I do, I just might have to kill myself. I go straight to the bathroom to fetch T.J.'s shoes. I spotted them earlier, there behind the toilet.

As quick as I can I get them shoes on that kid and I drag the two littlest from the table. Mamma was still goin' on. Its hard not listening but still payin' enough attention to know when to say yes'm or not. I had to do a lot of noddin' and yellin' jus' to get outta there. But I did it. And I hadn't had to look at her once.

With the kids in the car, all strapped in, I finally get a chance to think. While my young'uns fuss amongst themselves I flat out decide right there I am havin' an abortion. I just can't have another kid! Five is way more than any woman has any obligation to bear. I shoulda stopped a long time ago. But I never could keep a secret. I never knew what to do, always had to ask somebody else what to do. Now, I ain't askin' nobody.

I drop off my two babies on the way to class. I got a test today and even though I barely had a chance to study, I still think I'll do good. I just got a way with numbers. They always seem to work out for me. I only got one more year 'til I graduate, and by then Lilly oughta be just gettin' outta diapers, savin' me a fortune! With a good job I could maybe even get a place of my own. Les is gonna be wantin' college and Lord knows I can't pay for both of us to go.

I get to school early so's I got time to use the pay phone. I hope I got a quarter.

THE CLINIC

The room had gotten crowded in just the last ten minutes or so. I's sittin' by myself on a sofa, flippin' through, but not really readin', a magazine, just like everybody else. The door opened and I tried not to look at who it was, but it wasn't anyone I knew; a rich white woman and a kid who could be her daughter. The kid sat right down

next to me, left room for her mamma, but apparently, she wa'n't her mamma; the woman who come to get her abortion wearing a crimson red suit sat in the last remaining chair on the other side of the room.

The girl beside me didn't even bother to pretend with a magazine, she just stared at her hands wringin' in her lap. She 'bout jumped out o' her seat when the nurse come in, made me start a little. The nurse said they was gonna call three of us in at a time, to speak with us, make sure we had made a sound decision. I hope I get called first.

The nurse went on about some forms we'd be fillin' out and one to see if we wanted a pap smear, too. The little girl next to me looked at me a bunch, but I just kept pretending I was listenin' to the nurse, just like everyone else. She couldn'a been no more than sixteen, made me think of my Adelle. Wouldn't that be funny to walk in here and accidentally run into my own daughter, both of us gettin' abortions?

My name was called, along with the girl's beside me and the rich lady. I didn't catch their names, why'd they have to say'em out loud like that? We all followed the nurse out the door and down the hall, I couldn't help but look at the kid when I let her out the door ahead o' me. She looked like she hadn't stopped cryin' since conception, but she smiled at me still.

They shuffled us to another smaller waiting room and I took the seat beside the kid on the sofa. Before the red

lady even sat down another nurse came in. She had stuff with her, looked like we were gonna get a whole presentation! She had placards with graphs and charts, (she spilled 'em on the way in) and what looked like a plastic uterus. She pulled a tiny stool on wheels over from against the wall and sat down in front of us. She said there wa'n't any shame in any of us bein' here. We had ourselves a problem and we was here to get help with it. Wa'n't nothin' wrong with that.

She's gonna make us all talk. We gotta say why our predicament has brought us here. The rich lady went first:

"Look," she said to the nurse. "I know I can't convince you to skip this part altogether, but you must take my word when I say I am committed to my decision."

When she was done, she crossed her arms across her chest, just to make sure we knew she was done. The nurse didn't know what to say. She looked at the kid, who was still staring at Red and then she looked at me. I thought I'd help her out.

"I'm not married," I started. "Never have been, but that ain't never stopped me from having five kids. My oldest is seventeen and the baby is just over a year. I live with my mamma, go to school, and get help from the gov'ment. I'm thirty-three years old and I'm just about to get my life together. I can't be havin' no baby." Whew, that was easier than I thought. It came out quick and simple, but they were all starin' at me. I thought for a second that

maybe she had decided to skip this part altogether. Then she asked me: "You have five children?" she sounded astonished. I just nodded.

"With whom did you confide in, when making this decision?"

It took me a second to understand her question. I just shook my head.

"You told no one about your pregnancy?" she asked.

"No." I simply answered.

"How about you, young lady," The nurse directed her attention to the kid. "Did you share your dilemma with anyone close to you?"

The kid nodded and tried to speak but nothing came out. She cleared her throat and started again: "My best friend, I told my best friend. But she really didn't help me decide, she just held my hand while I cried." She cracked a smile in spite of herself and then looked back at her hands.

The nurse took on a professional tone. "I think we'll take the time this morning to discuss all of your options, some of which you may not be aware." The nurse suddenly came into her own and took her stack of placards off the table.

She was right, she was aware of more options than I was. I hadn't even thought about adoption, didn't even know what open adoption was. I thought it sounded good for the kid. She seemed to listen but she didn't have no questions

when it came time to ask 'em. The nurse looked right at her when she showed us some pamphlets she had about it.

Then the nurse said that in order for us to make an intelligent decision, we needed to know exactly what was in store for us. Red let out a big ol' sigh. I believe she wanted to skip this part too. If I'd known, I woulda voted to skip.

She started out with how far along the baby has already developed. I had no ideas on these things. You'd think going through this five times I'd know everything there was to know 'bout babies. I hadn't even really thought about there being a baby inside me, I was more worried about what was gonna happen when it came out. The nurse said my baby already had a face, and fingers, and toes. My baby was already a baby.

I looked over at that kid and she was intent. She just stared at the picture of a ten week old baby and looked like she'd seen a ghost. I wanted to put my arm around her and tell her it was gonna be O.K. But I wa'n't sure it would be.

We all sat there, tortured for having to listen. Even Red looked uncomfortable, but maybe her pantyhose was just too tight. The nurse finally got off the baby stuff and started talkin' 'bout the actual procedure; how long it's gonna take, how it might be 'uncomfortable' and how long we'll bleed after it's over. The kid had gone back to watching her hands.

Finally, she was all done. She opened the door for us to go out and I saw the other three women from the first room headin' our way. I wanted to tell 'em something, I don't know what, so I just followed Red down the hall. She seemed to know where she was going, I think she's been here before.

We entered a pine-sol smellin' room with three beds all separated by hospital curtains. Miss Red went straight to the first bed. She snapped the curtain 'round the track as she told us: "Make yourselves comfortable, ladies."

The kid just looked at me. I could tell she really wanted to cry. I put my arm around her, but I still couldn't say it was O.K. I walked her to the last bed, figured I'd give her the longest time to change her mind, guessin' the doc comes in and does the first bed first, that's why Red took it. I talked her on over to the bed and showed her the gown she needed to be wearin'. I laughed, "They spare no expense." She sat down on the bed and wept into her hands.

"Honey, now you ain't gotta do this, you know? You can get right up and get on outta here. Ain't nobody gonna be upset 'bout you wastin' their time. You got to be sure 'bout this honey, there ain't no turnin' back once it's done. You understand?" I swept the hair out of her face and she looked up at me. She made me think of Adelle again.

"I...I think I want to hear about that adoption again. Do you think I could..."

I stood her right up and told her to 'C' mon honey,' and I held her as we walked out of the room back down the hall to the discussion room. I knocked on the door and peered in. The nurse looked at me like she di'n't even remember me. I told her my friend had some more questions she needed answers to and I walked that little girl right to a seat. I patted her shoulder and told her that now, everything was going to be O. K.

I went back to my bed, pulled off my sweatsuit and got into the paper gown. I hadn't bothered to shut my curtain, me an' Red were the only ones in there and hers was pulled tight. It was too quiet. I just had to say something.

"Poor little one," I said to Red. I don't know if she was payin' me any mind, she coulda been asleep for all I know. But I kept on. "I don't think we'll be seein' her in here again. That's a good thing, I think. She's just a baby herself, not like us. She's too young to know what she wants her life to be. Kids just be startin' so young nowadays." I was sittin' back in the bed, on top of the sheet, still talkin' with Red whether she was listenin' or not. It was just too quiet in there for me not to talk.

"I'm gonna graduate in jus' a little while and then I can take good care o' the babies I already got. Get 'em all new clothes and new shoes, even the littlest one. I believe if ever I do get rich I'll never make 'em wear hand-me-downs again. Wouldn't it be somethin' if I could get a job good enough to buy T.J. a pi-ana? She's got a thing with music

the way I got a thing with numbers. I'll tell ya, sometimes them kids can surprise ya." I was experiencing an emotionally stressful situation, and it was startin' to show. "Do you know that Adelle, she's fourteen, she tried to make me think she didn't wanna go to the school dance, but all the time she was just worried 'bout me havin' to buy her a dress. Ain't that somethin'?" I started to tear up. Honestly, I did. In order to keep from cryin' I kept talkin'. "The kicker is, when T.J. told all of us Adelle's secret, Lester went out and bought her a dress with his lawn mowin' money." I had to stop for a minute. All that just happened last week, and it still made my heart cry from joy. But I got a hold o' myself pretty quick, I ain't one to be all sappy. I spoke up so's Red wouldn't think I was.

"That's why I gotta be doin' this here. I owe it to them kids to give 'em as much as I can. They shouldn't have to suffer with less. I can barely..."

"Will you PLEASE shut up!" Red hollered at me from behind her curtain. I guess she wa'n't sleepin' "I shouldn't be surprised with the quality of clientele at such an establishment." Miss Red continued. Apparently she needed to vent. "My God," she mumbled, "Could there be anybody here that just does their job?" I could here her movin' 'round. I don't know what she could be doin'. "You pay somebody to do a job you expect them to just do it," she said, I don't think she was talkin' to me. "I should be home by now recuperating in the privacy of my own tastefully

decorated home. I'm forced to room with Minnie Pearl," her voice got louder there and I stopped listenin' to her snooty tone. I heard a zipper go and I figured out what she was doin'. I interrupted her in mid-gripe.

"Are you leavin'? What's the matter, you don't like my company?" I almost had to yell at her to get her to hear me. She still acted like she hadn't, but she shut up anyway. All of a sudden she snapped back her curtain and told me:

"I am indeed leaving. Nothing personal."

Red turned on me and I could hear her heels as she went back down that hall. "What, you think they got separate rooms in here for rich people. Like an airplane? I got just as much right to speak my mind..." I quit hollerin' at her footsteps, the doctor just come in. I laughed out loud. "It's too bad you di'n't get here a minute ago, doc, you coulda helped me out with somethin'" I stood up and pulled my pants back on. "You bein' a professional in this day an' age, you should know how them rich one's are. Yeah, I'll bet you get a ton o' them in here." He just stood there not sayin' anythin' while I took off the gown and put my sweatshirt back on. "You guys might try to do like she said, have two separate rooms, one for us and one for them. It'd keep peace a little better and you'd prob'ly do better business. You lost three customers today alone."