

The Girl in the Striped Socks · *Laura Shahera*

THREE YEARS AGO TODAY, on my birthday, I had the abortion. Always *the* abortion; never *an* abortion. It was an eight hour drive, round-trip, between Madison and home. The abortion took fifteen minutes. Pushing it, I was back in time for the birthday party my mother had planned. She didn't know about the abortion. In my scrapbook there is a photograph of me, smiling, cutting the cake. I've captioned the photo: "Twenty-two. Laura grows up."

Some years before I had met with a group of women to view an abortion film. I was raising my consciousness. I remember the girl in the striped socks, brave, letting her abortion be filmed for all her sisters' peace of mind. She was on the table, her feet in stirrups. She had left her socks on, striped socks. We never saw her face nor heard her voice. She was motionless, silent. But she was saying something to us all: "Look! It's so easy I can do it with my socks on!"

In the film the doctor and the nurse were very efficient, smiling. So white. They talked to the camera: "Now we are dilating the cervix. Now we are inserting the suction tube. Now we are turning on the machine." The tube turned red. The machine hummed awhile longer. Then there was a sound, like when you suck up the end of a milkshake. "You have just seen a successfully completed vacuum aspirator abortion with no complications." The lights came on. The women murmured: "It really is very simple." "Very clean." "Looks painless practically." I was motionless, silent. This was not a Hollywood movie. It was real life, real death. Right on the screen.

The summer was hot with promise when I flew to Oregon to fulfil a popular dream of the counter-culture: living off the land. I was going there to join Daniel. We were in love. I'd brought birth control pills with me, although I hadn't been taking them since Dan had left several months before. I knew the pills weren't good for me, and I had plans of getting a diaphragm, but they were harder to come by then. So, until I found the right doctor, I would take the pills again, as soon as my period started. It never did. Cigarette smoke made me sick. I began vomiting in the afternoons. To get to the nearest doctor was a twenty mile drive. I rode in the pick-up with a new friend, Jeannie, who thought she was pregnant, too. She was, and I was.

"Dan, we're going to have a baby!" "Oh shit." Then the talking started, days of it. And something else; I was bleeding. I had been given a biopsy at the doctor's office. "There will be a slight bleeding for the rest of the day." Five days passed and the bleeding continued. Back to the doctor. "In the case of a probable miscarriage there's really nothing we can do. We could go

in and have a look, but many times this proves more harmful than good. Go home. Stay in bed. If the bleeding doesn't stop in a few days, call me."

I went home crying. In bed, Dan wiped away my tears with the back of his hand and told me it was all for the best. He smiled. I hated him. I stayed in bed, lying still, so still that the flies settled on me.

The next day Dan asked me to do the laundry, told me what he wanted for dinner, and drove into town. I cried all that day, and the next. Every time I went to the bathroom there was blood. I forced myself to look. Sometimes there were little pieces of tissue, but nothing more. Dan was tired of me and my tears. At night I lay awake beside him, waiting, while he slept. Blood came at night. The next time I felt it coming, I thought, I would not slink silently into the bathroom. I would reach down my hands and cup it up. Then, I would share it with him. If it came out in one chunk I would save it and serve it to him for breakfast.

Finally, the bleeding stopped. I had one beautiful, bloodless day. Dan was thrilled. We hadn't made love for ten days. It hurt, but only slightly. I was happy, too. Then I saw the blood again. It was everywhere: my legs, the bed, on him at last. I started screaming. Dan screamed, too: "Well, get a towel god-dammit! Shut-up! I'm tired of being your babysitter!" Babysitter? He went into the bathroom. I heard the water running as he washed himself, cursing, making himself clean. The blood was touching me everywhere. I ran out of the house, into the woods. I wanted it over with. No more waiting while death seeped from me slowly, teaspoon by teaspoon.

I stayed with Jeannie and her husband. After the bleeding stopped for good, she took me to another doctor to make sure the miscarriage had been complete. He told me I was still pregnant. "That was a hell of a butchered biopsy, though."

Daniel and I didn't say much. He said he'd like to take me to Eugene for an abortion but didn't have the time. He was starting a business, building fireplaces, and had lots to do. Better for me to go home where my friends were. He gave me some money, and I took the first bus back to Iowa.

It was the usual Greyhound gang: old men, fat black women with plastic shopping bags, students, soldiers, and two other pregnant girls. We took turns puking in the john, synchronizing the swells of nausea with the swaying of the bus. The girl behind me called, "Hey, Lady!" to me, although she looked my age. Served me right, crouching in my seat alone, working crossword puzzles and reading *Cosmopolitan*. She giggled with the servicemen, drinking shots of whiskey from a paper bag. I didn't change clothes for three days. My hair hung in greasy strings. Finally, at night, I shared my secret with her. She stared at me unbelievably, retying the straps of her halter top. I didn't blame her. Who would want to make love to me?

Sleep was impossible. I opened my diary and toyed with Tom Wolfe. "You're either on the bus or off the bus." "Hell," I wrote, "I *am* the bus."

I arrived in Iowa City at midnight, bad planning on my part. I shouldered my backpack and walked to Claire's house. She cracked the door, blinking at me with sleep and surprise. Then she swung the door open and took me in her arms. I'd made the right choice.

Three days later, cleaned up and psyched up, I walked into the Emma Goldman Clinic for Women. Four women were there that morning for abortions. We talked with counselors individually. We talked together, supporting each other. Amy, the sorority girl, was getting married in the spring. Her boyfriend wanted her to keep the baby; she wanted to finish school. Dorie was seventeen and had been pregnant three times: one baby to adoption, one miscarriage, and now one abortion. Still, she wouldn't accept any birth control from the clinic. She was afraid her mother would find it. "I'm just not gonna fuck around no more." After more discussion she agreed to ask her boyfriend to use condoms. Megan was married. They all had someone waiting for them downstairs. I explained that my boyfriend was in Oregon. "But he called me this morning and tried to talk me out of it, he really wants the baby." Why was I lying to these women? We all shared the mistake of our pregnancies, but I felt alone in being unloved. I had other feelings too, that I couldn't talk about. That I wouldn't talk about for fear of undermining the others. I was thinking about the girl in the striped socks, about the split second before the button was pushed, the barest moment between life and death.

One by one we would leave the room and return after our abortions. A lavish tray was brought for later: bread, fruit, nuts, cheese, tea, and honey. We were supposed to be hungry when it was over. Dorie volunteered to be first. We chatted quietly while she was gone, smoothing the wrinkles in our flowered cotton gowns. Too quickly she returned, smiling for us all. "Nothin' to it! Havin' a baby's lots worse." Her eyes were wet. Megan said nothing when she returned, but smiled for us, too. Amy got sick, disappearing into the bathroom to vomit in private. I was last.

The room was cheerful, sunny. The doctor was hip, all afro and wire rims, a woman. They must have a woman. My counselor, Jan, was with me. She held my hands and looked into my eyes. She'd been where I was, but in New York, when it was still illegal almost everywhere else. I didn't feel unloved anymore, and all the love I would have had for my baby poured into her hand.

The doctor inserted fingers into my vagina, small fingers. She pressed down on my abdomen with her other hand. She frowned, probing. "Tell Barb to come in here." Barb also probed. They talked, disagreeing quietly. Finally, the doctor concluded: "I think you're over ten weeks. Maybe even over twelve. We can't do an abortion that late here. It's too risky. I won't do it. But we'll give you the name of somebody who will."

Jan took me back to the waiting room. Amy was still in the bathroom, and the other two women were gone.

The doctor they named was in Madison, Wisconsin. The appointment set up was four days away, on my twenty-second birthday. But my thoughts were of two other things: I needed somebody to take me to Madison and I needed more money. All moral questions were pushed aside. I felt capable of anything. Nothing mattered except that if I didn't have the abortion soon, it would no longer be possible to choose.

I called John, my lover before Daniel, whom I hoped had enough affection left for me to help. I had gone back to my home town the day before I moved to Oregon to say good-bye to him and we had spent the night together, thinking we'd never see each other again. If I really was over twelve weeks pregnant, it meant that he was the father, although, by then, the idea of paternity seemed to be ridiculous and almost irrelevant. But he had loved me, and I was ready to trade on that now.

John picked me up at the bus station in my home town. He wouldn't look at me in the car. "I can't. I'll fall apart." That's right. Get rid of emotion. Get rid of love. "I thought you were gone for good," he said. "I'd rather feel nothing than pain." I was sorry, but I couldn't do it alone. I worked on him, making false tears where there were no real tears left. And I won his pain.

I told my mother that I was home for my birthday, and that John was taking me to Madison as a present. Later, I would feel guilty about that lie. I had no room for guilt then. John felt guilt for me, but his was external, Catholic, masculine. It disgusted me. I hated him and yet I needed him. Before, I had wanted someone to love with me. Now, I wanted someone to hurt with me.

The doctor's office was very slick, very posh, with dollar signs incorporated into the decor. In the waiting room were several couples: scared-looking young women and guilty-looking young men, stealing glances at one another. Nobody was talking. The receptionist asked for medical information in front of everyone. Her voice was so loud. I felt ashamed and stupid, to have ended up in that room with a bunch of teenagers, cracking gum and twisting their class rings. Only my eyes had dark circles. Where I'd started to get fine lines in my forehead, they still had acne.

I heard my name called like a winner at Bingo. I was taken to a small white room. The machine was in the corner. The doctor told me to take off the bottom half of my clothing and to get up on the table. He had an accent. He had come to America to get rich no doubt. I slid out of my jeans and underwear, carefully folded them, and put them on a chair. I left my socks on. The nurse, his wife, came in. So white, just like the film. She held my hand as Jan had, but without love. The doctor's fingers hurt. I was given a local anesthetic. I didn't want it. I felt that I must punish myself, not for murder; for stupidity, for vulnerability. The pain came and I knew that the doctor was fucking me. With a sterile plastic tube, he was taking out what another man had put in. Opportunists. Fuckers of women. I was glad I was

killing the baby. If it would have been a boy I would have hated it. I was being siphoned out like a fish tank. I heard screaming in the sucking sounds of the machine. What did he do, I wondered, when the machine was full?

The recovery room. They know we're supposed to be hungry, too. Would I like a Coke or a Seven-Up? An Oreo or a Fig Newton? I wanted John to get me out of there. The other women's boyfriends came in to see them. Some were sitting up on their cots, feeling great. "We can make that party after all." I alone was sick. Sick with anesthesia, stupidity, and shame. The nurse told me that John had stepped outside. He said he was feeling ill. I laughed out loud and knew I would be all right.

We left the office. John asked me if I was hungry. I laughed again. Did all these people read the same magazines? But I *was* hungry. I ate compulsively, filling up the hole. All the way home, John kept asking me how I felt. He looked terrible. I gave him one of the pills the nurse had given me, for pain.