

ABORTOS

One night in late summer, two months after we graduated from high school, Arlene and I drove from Phoenix, where we lived, three hours through the desert in ninety-five degree heat, to Nogales, so she could get an abortion.

We'd been told to go to the bus depot on the American side and wait in the cafeteria for the doctor to approach us. When we walked in, pairs of brown eyes darted toward us; tired looking women in long skirts and men in faded black pants. Their children pointed and said, "Mira, las hueras."

We sat at a long metal table on an attached bench, drank coffee and smoked cigarettes. A huge clock, its face stained brownish yellow from food grease and dirt, hung on a paint-cracked wall. Its hands, barely visible, read 10:35. Our appointment was at eleven. An evaporative cooler rattled above our heads, spitting out hot muggy air. I tried to conjure up a good outcome, but couldn't help tensing the muscles in my chest and ribs, armoring myself for the possible butchering of Arlene that I would somehow have to handle. Raised Catholic, she feared God would punish us and, though we were almost in Mexico, I worried that if God didn't get us, the government would. We were under age, but we could still be arrested and thrown in jail.

Arlene slumped on the bench, smoking with a shaky hand. We tried to look inconspicuous, which was impossible. All the people who came in and went out of the bus depot were dark-skinned, except for the two of us and a white man who sat a few feet away on the same bench. He wore a ponytail and a thin spotty beard. He half-smiled to no one as he held up a paper cup and picked his teeth with the straw that stuck up out of it.

I'd arranged everything, pretended I wanted the information for myself when I asked Donna, a divorced woman in my art class, what to do. Donna's drawings were confident and technically perfect and she was thirty-eight, so I trusted her. She wrote down a Mexican phone number, said to make the call from a phone booth, not to worry, it would be safe, she'd been through it herself.

“This must be him,” I said, as a chubby man with glasses came through the front door and walked toward us. I flipped the lid of my Marlboro cigarette box, took out another cigarette and lit it.

Arlene looked at her watch. “It’s not time yet.”

I leaned over the table and whispered. “Well, he’s coming this way. Don’t look around.” I dropped my head and kept watching with lifted eyes. “Forget it. He turned.”

Arlene wore a blue tank top. A gold Italian horn meant to ward off evil glistened at her throat. As usual, she had a dark tan and her short brown hair was bleached from the sun. I wore blue too, a t-shirt that read “Ft. Lauderdale.”

“I don’t know why you said blue. This top is all I have and it’s so tight since my boobs have grown.”

“I told you. When I made the phone call the woman asked what color we’d be wearing so the doctor would know who we were. I was so nervous, I couldn’t think. I scanned the inside of the phone booth and saw “Butterfield Blues Band” written on one of the metal slats with a heart drawn below it. You know how much I love them.”

Arlene sighed and leaned across the table. “I could never have handled this alone.”

“It’s lucky I knew who to ask.”

“I didn’t tell Leonard or anyone but you. I have to end it with him. He’s a drug dealer. The people he hangs out with are scary. I’m so grateful you’re here.”

“Me too.” I reached for her hand.

Arlene and I became best friends the year my mother’s third marriage failed. She could no longer

afford to keep me and I was sent to Phoenix to live with my grandmother for my last two years of high school. I didn't know anything about my grandmother except that she drank too much and had money but acted poor.

When I arrived, she told me that, if I obeyed her wishes, things might work out. She had two rules: no wasting electricity—"Like you're doing now," she'd said, "standing there with the refrigerator door open," and no lying, "I can't stand liars." But when I asked for something, it didn't matter what, gum, hairspray, a pair of jeans, her first response was, "I don't have the money," which I knew was a lie. Sometimes she'd give in, but only after I begged, which I wasn't very good at. All discussions had to happen in the morning. She went to bed at four in the afternoon after drinking straight shots of bourbon for three hours.

One day, on my way to Spanish class at my new school, where I hadn't made any friends, I walked by the fence that enclosed the football field. Dirty papers stuck like gray blinds in the diamond shaped holes. I passed the basketball courts where some guys were playing. The sun felt red-hot. How did people live in this heat? I thought I might pass out. I held onto the fence and closed my eyes. Suddenly, a horn honked and I jumped, startled to see a girl pulling up beside me in a red Corvette convertible. She screamed over the blasting radio, "Wanna go for a ride?"

"Sure," I said, looking over my shoulder to make sure she meant me.

"Hi, I'm Arlene." She turned down the radio. "I've seen you around."

"My name's Linda." I walked closer to the car.

"I know. We're in the same art history class.

"Oh, right."

"Get in."

I opened the door and slid into the buttery leather seat.

I lit a cigarette, twisted my bangs and tried to think of things to say. Every once in a while, Arlene looked over and smiled at me. I could talk about art, but I'd never caught on to social friendliness. I knew there was a particular tone of voice and appropriate words to say, questions to ask, to get a positive reaction from another, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Sometimes I wondered if I was an extraterrestrial.

"Neat car," I said, finally.

"It is, right? But it's not mine. It's my boyfriend, Jerry's. You must have seen him around school. He wears designer clothes and he's destined to become a doctor. His parents own Montoya's, a chain of Mexican restaurants in Arizona and Nevada."

"Cool," I said, pretending to be impressed. Jerry was in my Spanish class. I hadn't talked to him. He was cocky. He walked with a swagger in tight pants and lizard skin Italian shoes. He wore a diamond and gold pinky ring that he twisted and flashed like he was in the Mafia.

Arlene pulled up in front of the Ranch House, a small wooden building next door to a gas station. Two old ladies, originally from Bisbee, did the cooking with nets over their hair.

Out back, at a picnic table, Arlene dumped her fries out onto a napkin. "So, do you have a boyfriend?"

"Back in Florida. He's much older, a lifeguard at the beach. He models, too. Cigarette ads for magazines."

"Really?"

"John treated my foot one day at the beach when a stingray stung me so badly I could hardly walk. We dated that summer until I came here."

“Have you gone all the way?”

I'd been afraid to, but I didn't want Arlene to know that. I took a bite of my cheeseburger and didn't answer.

“Jerry and I do it all the time. Some days I can hardly walk I'm so sore after a night with him. Know what I mean?”

I pushed some fries into my mouth and swallowed hard. “I know what you mean.” I wondered if Arlene made the same strange moaning sounds I'd heard from my mother when she came home with her dates.

“Want to come to my house on Saturday? We could bleach our hair.”

I must have said the right things. “Sounds great.”

“I could fix you up sometime with one of Jerry's friends. We could double date.”

“Maybe,” I said, knowing I wouldn't like his friends and wondering when I'd really go all the way.

Arlene's family began to include me in holiday and Sunday dinners. For Christmas, I gave each of them their portraits painted in acrylic and oil. Her mother took me to my first gynecological appointment. Her father took us out to lunch in celebration of our birthdays and Arlene's saint's day. And when my paintings were shown at Baboquivari's, the local coffee house, Arlene came to the opening with her parents and brother. It was too late in the day for my grandmother to come.

Arlene and I spent all our time together except when she was with Jerry. We cruised Central Avenue and practiced smoking. Like my mother and most girls I'd seen, Arlene's boyfriend came first. I had to accept it or be friendless. I couldn't find a boyfriend I liked. I kept things

going with John, writing letters back and forth. He sent me gifts, mostly tiki god necklaces. One had real rubies for eyes. Arlene wanted to wear that one. I told Arlene I was too much in love with John to date other people.

We graduated from high school and my grandmother bought me a used car with a stick shift on the wheel and no radio. Arlene's father took up with a young woman named Trudy, and the whole family fell apart. I felt the same as I had every time my mother divorced. My spine seemed to shrink. My back and neck ached from the pressure.

Jack and Trudy left town and never came back. That's when Arlene got a job as a topless go-go dancer at the Tradewinds Bar in downtown Phoenix.

She'd been afraid to go alone, so I went with her to the audition.

"Your tits ain't big enough," the manager said to me, thinking I was there to audition too. He was fat and sweaty. A tight gold chain disappeared between his neck and his chin. He fingered a large gold cross that stuck to his throat.

I crossed my arms over my chest and stepped away.

Every night, for the first few weeks, I sat at a round Formica table and watched Arlene dance. Colored lights flashed from the ceiling. She rubbed her hands over her breasts and rotated her hips. She moved her arms like waves through the air. She shook her whole body up and down, side to side. She spun in circles across the floor. Men in faded jeans and dusty cowboy boots made loud whooping noises. I felt embarrassed for Arlene, but at least she didn't smile at them.

On her break, she'd join me at the table. We'd talk until she had to dance again, and I'd go home to my grandmother.

"This is so weird," she'd say. "These guys are such creeps."

But when I asked her if she was sure about this, she said, "I make good money," in a flat voice with a stony face. Having been her father's princess, daddy's girl, I knew that more than anything she was doing this to crush him and to get back at Jerry, who had dumped her when her family fell apart.

When men approached our table and said things like, "Hey sweetheart, that's some fine dancin'," I'd clench my teeth and glare at them. "If you don't mind, we're having a private conversation."

"Just tryin' to be friendly."

One night, I came late and saw Arlene standing at the bar in the short nylon robe she wore at break time. She was laughing, surrounded by men. One of them had his arm around her waist. One guy yelled, "Hey, Linda. How ya doin' babe?" Arlene waved for me to join them.

How did they know my name? What was Arlene doing?

"Come on over," she said. "These guys are okay. Really."

I couldn't move. I felt frozen inside.

One of them said, "We were just tellin' Arlene what a fine dancer she is. How about showin' us what you can do." He wiggled his hips and they all laughed.

I stood there staring, unable to speak.

"Oh, well," the guy said.

"Forget her," said another.

They all turned away from me and huddled together around the bar. I couldn't even see Arlene. I walked out and never went back.

We didn't call each other after that. I tried to paint but couldn't concentrate. There was a gnawing in my stomach. The odor of oil paint and turpentine made my eyes sting. I'd end up staring, glassy-eyed at the muddy canvas, smoking cigarettes and sucking on frozen chocolate turtles.

One day, I sat at the kitchen table trying to eat a sandwich. My grandmother sat across from me snapping cards down for solitaire. She asked me when I'd be getting a job. "That's why I bought you the car. Weren't you and Arlene going to get a place together?"

"I'm not sure," I said.

"Maybe you should go back to your mother."

"You know I can't. It might still work out with Arlene. I'm going to call her right now."

She said she was living with a guy named Leonard. "He's a bartender at the Safari Hotel. We have a good thing going. I'm meeting all kinds of interesting people. You probably wouldn't like them."

"Oh, I might." I lied.

"What have you been up to?"

"Working on some paintings. I'm thinking about applying to art school. Maybe we could get together."

"Sure, I'll call you."

I didn't expect to hear from her, but soon after that she called. She was in trouble and didn't know who else she could trust. She made me promise not to tell anyone. At first, I didn't know exactly what to do, but I knew I'd think of something. I had to. Arlene and I had been best

friends for two years and, if everything worked out, maybe we could be close again. Maybe she'd go back to the way she was before.

Now, waiting in the bus depot, I thought of the times during high school we spent Saturdays getting stoned and changing the color of each other's hair. "Remember when we dyed my hair auburn?"

"That was the best color on you. Much better than when it turned green."

"Oh, I'd forgotten about the green." I put my head down and laughed.

Suddenly, a slender man, about forty, was standing next to Arlene. He wore a polyester short sleeve shirt with a tie and gray pants. His hair was combed down with something shiny. He smelled like lemons.

"You waiting for me?" He swung his legs over the bench and sat down next to Arlene. She leaned away from him.

"You have the envelope?"

The woman had said two hundred dollars in small bills sealed in a white envelope.

Arlene handed it to him under the table.

His nails looked clean and he wore a nice watch and a wedding ring. I told myself this was a good sign.

"I go out now and you follow," he said. "In the parking lot, I have a brown Chevy. You drive behind me in your car. What kind do you have?"

"A white Plymouth."

“Across the border, three miles, is a hotel, two stories. There is no name. Look for a flashing sign that says ‘Bar.’ You get a room. I watch from the parking lot. After you’re in, I come to the door. Okay?”

I nodded in agreement and he left. I picked up my lighter and box of cigarettes, put them in my purse. I tried to remember everything he’d said.

“Let’s go,” I said. I untangled my legs from under the table, lifted them over the bench and stood up. Arlene didn’t move. “Arlene, we should go now.”

“What do you think?”

I put my hand on her shoulder. “We should go.”

Outside, the night was hotter than before, the air crackling with dryness. There were no streetlights and the moon was too thin to light our way.

“I think that’s him,” said Arlene. “Over there.” She pointed to a pair of uneven headlights off to the right. “What if he drives away with the money?”

I hadn’t thought of that. “He won’t.”

I tugged at Arlene’s arm and we walked faster toward my car. We climbed in and I started it up, followed him across the border through the blackened desert into Mexico. The highway disappeared behind us. Ahead, we barely saw the flickering “Bar” sign. It looked like a dying signal from a space ship that had landed long ago, still trying to get a response from earthlings.

We got a room on the second floor facing the gravel parking lot. The room was small and dark. The curtains and bedspread were a purple and black print, made from cheap rough cotton. It looked clean enough. I parted the curtains and peeked out.

He got out of his car with a doctor's bag. Donna had said he was a real doctor. I thought about what kinds of instruments were in that bag and wondered how often he did this. My chest felt tight. I closed the crack in the curtain and heard his feet crunch on the gravel.

Arlene sat on the bed with tears in her eyes. "You know I tried to get a blessing from Father Michael. He wouldn't give it. He said it's been too long since I've been to church."

I sat down next to her. I wasn't Catholic but I couldn't imagine a blessing from a priest making any kind of difference. I wondered but didn't ask if she wanted a blessing to have an abortion, which would never have happened, or to have the baby.

The doctor tapped on the door and I let him in. He put down his bag and shook both our hands. "I am Doctor Medellin." He didn't ask our names and we didn't give them. "Which one?" he asked. I nodded toward Arlene. "Nothing to worry. How many weeks are you?"

Arlene told him seven or eight in a bad Spanish accent.

He opened his bag and pulled out a needle and vial of something. "You leave," he said to me. "Come back in two hours."

"I didn't think I'd have to leave."

"Neither did I," said Arlene.

"What is that anyway?" I asked the doctor.

"To make her sleep. She will not feel a thing. I cannot start if you are here."

"I'll leave after you give her the shot."

He gave Arlene the injection and I stood up to leave. "I'll be back soon, Arlene. Don't worry."

“I feel fine. Just fine.” She was already getting groggy.

I didn't want to abandon her, but I didn't know what else to do. I got in my car and rolled the windows down part way, locked the doors and sat there staring up at Room 235. Now that I was alone, I wanted to cry about what was happening, but I had to stay alert in so much darkness in the middle of nowhere. My body began to sweat, struggling with the heat and fear. Crickets chirped off in the distance. I'd read somewhere they were a sign of good luck. I took a deep breath and looked at myself in the rear view mirror. Smart, I thought. I'd handled everything. My grandmother thought I was in Tucson on job interviews, staying overnight with Jane, a girl from school. I knew she and her family were on vacation. I gave my grandmother a made up phone number, knowing she'd never call. There was no way she could find out about this trip, unless something happened to Arlene.

But it wouldn't. Soon, everything would be back to normal. I really would get a job, maybe something to do with art. And I'd move in with Arlene.

I'd been in the car for a few minutes when a pair of headlights shined in the mirror and I heard tires grind through the gravel. A car pulled up behind me. A man got out and walked toward me. He had long hair and a moustache. His body was weaving and his speech was slurred.

“Where is she?” he said into my half-open window.

My heart pounded through my veins. My fingers shook as I felt for the handle, rolled up the window as fast as I could.

“I know she's here.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” I yelled through the glass. I realized this had to be Leonard and he must have followed us from Phoenix to the bus depot, waited to see where we'd go, then followed us here. I didn't know what he might do.

“Where is she?” he shouted and started toward the hotel, his arms swinging around his tight muscled body. I had to keep him away from Arlene. I got out of the car and ran in his direction.

“I’ve got a gun,” he said.

With courage I didn’t know I had, I planted myself directly in front of him, put my hands on my hips. “What are you going to do, shoot her?”

“I don’t know,” he said in a quieter voice. He looked down and his arms went limp. The gun swung from his finger like a toy.

“Let’s get in the car,” I said. I led him away from the hotel. “Put the gun away.” He slipped it under the seat. I pulled slowly out of the parking lot and drove up and down the streets of Nogales making sure I kept the “Bar” sign in view. We drove in silence.

He smelled like stale beer. Arlene must have met him at the Tradewinds Bar. Snobby Jerry was a prize in comparison.

“I know what she’s doing down here,” he said.

“I don’t think so.”

“She told me about having to wear a certain color and all that. Pretty far out.”

“What?” I stopped the car.

“I didn’t believe it was mine at first but you know I’ve been thinking about this one night we made love where it felt like something was there that was never there before. Know what I mean? Of course, that doesn’t mean I want to keep it.”

I leaned my arms and then my head on the steering wheel.

“You okay?”

“Just shut up,” I said.

“What’s with you?”

I jerked the car into gear and drove back to the hotel. “Get out.”

“Hey, I don’t know what your problem is. I don’t even know you...”

“Just get out.”

“Okay, okay. Tell Arlene I’ll be in the bar. She’d better be alright.”

Leonard retrieved his gun and got out of the car. He lumbered across the parking lot dragging his shoes through the gravel.

“Bastard.” I rubbed my scalp. My head felt like thousands of pins pricking the inside of my skull. I got out of the car.

The doctor’s car was still in the parking lot but the two hours were up. I wanted to talk to Arlene, hear her explanation.

I knocked at room 235. The doctor opened it and stood there wiping his hands carefully on a towel. The room smelled of sweet lemon cologne.

“Just finished,” he said.

“Is she alright?” I moved closer to Arlene, passed out on the bed, covered with a blanket. She was still breathing.

“Everything’s fine. A little bleeding for a few days. Nothing to worry. Do you want to see it?”
His eyes got bigger and he smiled.

“See it?”

“It’s in the toilet.”

“God, no.”

He went to the bathroom and flushed. He came back, still smiling and rubbing his hands together. He sat down on one of the chairs. “What’s your name?”

I looked over at Arlene and said nothing.

He crossed his legs and leaned back in the chair. “She will be out until the morning. I order some drinks from the bar. What do you like?”

“You’d better go.”

“We have a party, no?”

My palms beaded up. He wasn’t going to budge. I cleared my throat and crossed my arms over my stomach. He could do whatever he wanted and no one would know. Who could I call for help in Mexico? Leonard was it. I watched myself pick up the phone and ask for the bar.

The doctor said, “I like scotch.”

I put my hand over the mouthpiece and said, “I’m calling her boyfriend to come up. He’s been waiting downstairs. He has a gun. If I were you I’d get out of here as fast as I could.” The bar answered and I asked for Leonard. “Come up to room 235.”

The doctor grabbed his bag, ran out the door.

“Creep.” I watched from the window as he slipped on the gravel and headed toward his car. Arlene looked peaceful and innocent. I was furious. My chest and throat tingled. The doctor’s wheels spun as he took off through the parking lot.

For the rest of the night, I sat draped over a chair, clutching a pillow and chain smoking, waiting for the double-crossing Arlene to wake up. Leonard dozed in the other chair, holding the gun in his lap. I wanted to pull the trigger right where the barrel was aimed. I hated that he’d become my rescuer. But at least he didn’t know that.

Before daylight, Arlene began to stir. I woke Leonard and told him to go get coffee. I wanted Arlene alone. I sat on the edge of the chair and watched her wake up. Her face looked soft and puffy, mascara globbed under her eyes.

“How do you feel?”

“Fine, I think.” Arlene pulled back the blanket and sat up. “But I’m pretty sure that guy had sex with me right before I passed out. I could have dreamt it.”

I didn’t care. “Leonard’s here.”

“Where?”

“He knew everything.”

“Where is he?”

“You said I was the only one who knew.”

“I couldn’t help but tell him.”

“Why did you lie?”

“I didn’t think you’d help me.”

“Of course I would.”

“Look, he followed me here. That proves he loves me.”

Arlene got up and moved slowly to the bathroom. Over running water she said, “Your problem is you’ve always been jealous of my boyfriends.”

I felt the acid rise up into my throat and mouth. The sour taste was sickening. It was all I could do to gulp it down. I could have strangled her.

“How can you say that?” I shouted into the bathroom.

“I don’t have the energy to discuss this now. I’ll drive home with Leonard. I’ll call you later. Thanks for everything.”

Leonard came back to the room and they left. I stood by the window barely breathing. My chest felt like a cave. I watched him help her navigate the stairs. They got in his car and sped down the highway.

When they were out of sight, I made my way to the parking lot. The sun climbed up the sky as I made the long drive home. I’d worried about Arlene being butchered, but now I felt permanently cracked open and wondered what I would tell my grandmother about the job interviews.

I got home to find all my clothes and belongings in a pile on the lawn. I saw one of my drawings caught in the rose bushes. My whole body went numb. I couldn’t believe my grandmother wanted me out of the house that badly. She must have gone on a binge. I rang the doorbell over and over. I banged on the door, screamed, “Grandma, why did you do this? Let me in.”

After several minutes, she came to the door, drunk, wearing only a pajama top. She weaved back and forth behind the locked screen. “You lied to me.”

“I did not.”

“That Jane called here, tried to cover for you but you can’t fool me, Missy.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, half choking, still trying to swallow my failure. “I had to help Arlene. She needed an abortion. She made me promise not to tell anyone. I was trying to be a good friend. What’s so bad about that?”

My grandmother didn’t say a word. Her eyes closed. She held onto the doorframe. She looked like she might pass out. Finally, she unlocked the screen door, wobbled down the hall to her bedroom. “Don’t forget to turn on the burglar alarm.”

I stayed outside for a while looking at my life in a heap on the lawn. I retrieved my drawing and dragged my things back into the house, making as much noise as possible.