

# Like Jeremy Irons

by Beverly Akerman

In the waiting room, you avoid catching anyone's eye. At least, that's the strategy you set out with, an automatic sort of etiquette. To look down at your lap for a while, till you feel comfortable enough to look about and discretely trawl for stories more sordid than your own. It's very close quarters here at the General. No longer OB—only GYN, the maternity ward closed ten, maybe even twenty years ago, Montreal's English community's closing up shop. The department only performs gynecological surgeries and abortions now. Abortion slots fill up quickly, allotted, like all operating time, to affiliated doctors with admitting privileges.

First, you called the clinic to ask them what to do. They gave you the names of a few private practice doctors. By the time you finally decided and called the clinic back, your 'procedure' was scheduled two weeks later than the date you were first offered. The price of uncertainty: two week's peace of mind.

Usually, you shop around carefully before condescending to see a new doctor, but this time you go to the first gynecologist who would have you, who has time available. Usually, you refuse to see a male doctor (you hate having male doctors!) but this time, you found yourself lying there, legs spread eagled, assuming the most immodest pose on God's green earth. He examined you, to corroborate your story. The speculum snapped open, the sound of a small skull being wrenched from its spine. The examination done, he told you to get dressed. Afterwards, you sat on a chair, glad for the expanse of desk between the two of you. And then you came to, to the realization that he was grilling you, that by law you were required to convince him of the medical necessity of the "termination." You paused. It was a necessity, all right, but a *medical* necessity? That's like when the emergency crew shocks your heart to get it beating again, isn't it? To bring you back to life?

An abortion would be just like that.

The waiting room is small, windowless and beige. The fluorescent light casts its wave/particle glare on the posters that line the walls: gruesome venereal diseases, nagging about AIDS. By 10:00 AM the chairs are almost filled, the room crammed with women's bodies, their sweet exhalations and murmurs suggestive of piety, of nuns at prayer.

The loudest people in the room are a pasty trio of students in their early twenties. From the university next door, you guess. The young man and woman stand, courage bolsterers for their friend who, seated, is the protagonist of this dramedy. He has dark, wavy short cropped hair, black sideburns, and those thick black-framed glasses that, at some point when you weren't paying attention, morphed from nerdy to cool. Definitely not the father. The other cheerleader is in black jeans and a nubby charcoal sweater shot through with jewel coloured threads. As she chatters, she keeps pulling her sleeves down over her hands. The woman they are there to support is chalk-pale, her wispy black hair caught in a loose chignon. She smiles repeatedly, tremulously. They share quiet laughter that hangs on a few beats too long, carrying within it a quality close to hysteria. Been dumped, you think. Or a one night stand. Date rape, maybe?

Across from you sits a slim black woman, about thirty or so. She looks like a churchgoer. Her belted brown shirtwaist dress bears a small pattern of white, pink and turquoise. She wears no makeup, her hair tied neatly back, slim ankles tucked under her chair, black shoes with chunky mid-sized heels. Her hands are neatly clasped around a small format magazine, what you take to be *Reader's Digest* or a romance. No, you decide, she'd hardly be reading romance today. This place was anathema to romance. Here's a list you'll never see: abortion clinic pickup lines

"Come here often?"

"First trimester or second?"

"So, how many weeks along are you, anyway?"

"What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

You imagine that you are all asking yourselves this last one, anyway.

You already have two kids. Girls, one four years old, the other eighteen months. The little one has the chubbiest legs, you call them thunder-thighs. She's just starting to talk, putting words together like beads on a string. The older one is serious, very serious. She asks questions constantly, trying to understand everything: where the sun goes at night, how mosquitoes make that buzzy sound, where babies come from, why mommy's crying again.

Of the big decision, your husband said, "It's your body." Perfectly, politically, correct. But you feel his sadness like the throb of a second heartbeat.

The difference between planned and unplanned? It's the difference between tropics and desert, consensus and rejection, love and rape. You are colonized by a foreign power, an alien's tentacles extending deep inside your true centre. It has taken five long weeks for you to decide that, at this time and in this place, the latter is your truth.

The first time you got pregnant, you knew almost immediately. Your period was two days overdue. You already had an appointment scheduled with your GP, you were having a check-up in advance of you and your husband's first big trip together. The two of you were about to travel to the motherlands, England and France.

"I think I may be pregnant," you told the doctor.

"You were trying?"

"Yes, actually."

"For how long?"

"Three months or so."

"How many periods have you missed?"

"I haven't missed any yet. I'm only a couple of days late."

She raised her eyebrows, her eyes widened, she tilted her head to one side.

You held your ground. "I just have this feeling,"

"What kind of feeling?"

"You know the way a cat kneads a pillow before curling up on it? I feel like my uterus is doing that." You opened and closed your fingers for her, made a sort of squeezing motion.

She held your gaze a little longer than strictly necessary. You wanted to tell her that you have always been extremely simpatico with that part of yourself, the hidden inside. You know when you ovulate, aching for a day or two, one side each month, alternating. There is no other explanation for these pains, they've gone on for years and years. Maybe every woman is capable of knowing so long as she hasn't been chemically neutered. You have often wondered why women would saturate themselves with chemicals for decades just to be sexually available for a few hours a week. It seemed illogical and beneath your dignity, so you have always refused birth control pills.

Now, here in this waiting room, you wonder if dignity has its price.

The doctor handed you a johnny coat and pulled the curtain closed, triggering a sound like wind chimes. You stripped. You're always careful to fold your underwear neatly and this circumstance was no exception. Once on your back, you hitched your lower half down to the end of the examination table. The paper liner beneath crackled in protest. The doctor helped your heels find their purchase and examined you, taking the opportunity to scrape out a Pap smear.

"Well," she conceded, feeling around, post-speculum, pressing hard inside and out, "it's *possible* that you're a few weeks pregnant." She still sounds dubious. "We start counting from the first day of your last period. We'll do a blood test for pregnancy hormones, it's more sensitive than the urine test. The hospital lab will have the results tomorrow. I'll call you."

"It's just that we're going away, you know? We'd like to know for sure so that we can tell our families before we go."

"Sure," she said. "You can put your clothes back on."

Later, after all her prodding and pushing, you realized you could no longer detect that cat-kneading feeling. You worried she'd killed it. But she hadn't.

A middle-aged couple sit quietly, side by side. Once in a while, as though he's just remembered, he takes hold of her hand. But they are the exception: most of the women here sit alone, unspeaking. Their eyes look inward and far away. They seem to be in meditation.

The receptionist calls you in one at a time, every fifteen minutes or so. And unlike any other clinic you have ever been to, here they only call out first names.

It's your turn. The nurse hands you a hospital gown, a pair of slipper socks for your bared feet, and hands you a couple of capsules to take with the tepid water she has provided in a small waxed paper cup. You swallow them down, wonder how your throat can feel so dry with water in it. You search out a place to throw the cup that you hold, crumpled, in your sweaty palm.

Then, as the pills begin to take effect—Valium and some other muscle relaxant, things you've never taken before—she sits you down, has you sign some papers and talks to you about “the post-procedure protocol.” If you move your head too fast, the room spins. Everything in it seems to shimmer. The nurse's words become hard to make out. It's like you're doing fifty in a hundred-mile zone.

“You'll probably have to wear sanitary pads for the next four weeks or so, maybe less. No swimming, no baths. Showers are okay. No tampons, no douches, nothing vaginally. And no intercourse before the discharge stops, either. Do you understand?”

How should you answer this? There is so much you don't understand, after all.

“Do you need a follow-up appointment with the doctor? You need to think about what form of birth control you'll be using. Afterwards.” She looks at you pointedly.

You know you're supposed to respond. *Will you go back to the method that so clearly let you down* is what she's saying, isn't it? It's hard to figure out. The pills make you feel strange. You want to tell her you know how this whole thing works, you use a diaphragm. The only time you don't, the only time you allow yourself the freedom to be completely natural is when you are menstruating and the week

afterwards. But this once, you got the dates wrong. Turns out that this one time, it had been twelve days since your period. A small mistake. A mistake which is currently forming gills and a neural tube, a mistake an inch long, maybe less. It seemed so minor at the time, one of those statistical things. Like the Space Shuttle. Worked perfectly, nineteen times out of twenty. But that twentieth launch, like the Challenger's finale, what a doozie.

You have no idea how you've come to be lying on this sliver of a bed, no recollection of hefting yourself from the orange moulded plastic chair and transiting to the operating room. The illumination here is bright as klieg lights. You try hard not to think about where they'll be blazing any second: where the sun don't shine. You spy the doctor, gowned, gloved and masked, his trappings the white of a nuclear-flash. You didn't notice, during that preliminary assessment appointment, the hard glitter in his eyes. He holds his hands up, level with his shoulders, elbows bent. A crazy thought enters your head: he's a priest.

You croak a "hello." He says nothing, not one single word.

Maybe you didn't actually say anything either, you begin to think.

The film *Dead Ringers* flashes before your eyes. Too bad, you think. You used to like Jeremy Irons. Now maybe you've become him, the monster who invades the holy of holies with grotesque metal implements and murderous intentions.

A nurse materializes at your left side. "Hold my hand," she says, taking your hand in hers. "Squeeze it hard as you need to. Tell me if anything hurts too much." Her eyes are brown, as is her hair, her skin. Everything else is a sparkling white. They could make a commercial for laundry soap in here, you think, no problem.

You realize no one has smiled at you since you arrived.

Your feet are in the stirrups: back in the saddle again. A sucking sound becomes audible. The speculum pops you open, the doctor injects something into your cervix. How long is the needle, you

wonder. How lucky you are to know anatomy, to understand what is happening, you think.

Or maybe not.

Your certainty wavers.

You know the procedure: the doctor introduces several small rods to your cervix in sequence, each one larger in diameter. You feel nothing beyond the cotton wool stuffing your brain.

The sucking sound is variegated now, like it's found something to hold on to, some meaning, what it's meant to take away. You work hard to avoid imagining a glass jar on the floor filling with multicolour tissue and fluids.

You hold the nurse's hand, give it one hard squeeze as a single monstrous contraction lurches through your lower abdomen, like productive labour minus the foreplay. You gasp, tears fill your eyes. This is good, you think, *good*. It should hurt, why not?

And then, without a word, he steps away from you. The nurse watches you closely, her latexed hand still on yours.

"That's it," she says, "it's over. You can get up now."

Suddenly, you discover how cold you are. Your thighs are shaking, your legs have been uncomfortably jackknifed far too long. The nurse helps you up. The doctor has vanished.

The luminous sheet which you've just lain upon confronts you, a single crimson globule glistening on the cloth. It takes your breath away. It is the most beautiful colour you've ever seen, perfectly shaped, like a teardrop.

You consider yanking the sheet from the gurney and taking it with you, whipping it round your shoulders like a witch's cape. Or a burial shroud.

And then, you see it as a different emblem of your changed life. You imagine it drenched in sunshine, hanging proudly outside your parents' home, the day after the wedding, centuries ago. Its lacy edges dance, gently ruffled by the breeze.

[From the award winning fiction collection 'The Meaning of  
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