

Abortion Mill

by Jerry Ratch

She arranged to have an abortion at a doctor Greene's office, who practiced out of a converted house on Solano Avenue on the north side of Berkeley. I took her there the day of the procedure. You couldn't go to a regular hospital to have this kind of thing done then. It was still illegal, even though it was a generally accepted practice around there and didn't have that much stigma attached to it anymore. The thing that surprised me the most, to tell you the whole truth, was that I had naturally assumed she'd been taking birth control pills and I'd never even thought about it. Every girl I knew was taking birth control pills then, so I was shocked that she'd become pregnant, and I didn't know what the hell to do.

But she did. She asked a lady-friend and was recommended to this doctor Greene who operated on a long string of pregnant women, performing abortions on a regular basis. He had a booming business going in this shady practice. All you had to come up with was the requisite five hundred bucks.

"What!" I gasped. "Where are we going to get five hundred bucks?"

"Do you want another child screaming around underfoot?" she asked matter-of-factly.

"Well, no."

"Then you'd better find the money," she said. "Just get it."

"But I'm only making fifty bucks a week. And ... how do I know this is even mine?" I pointed at her belly, which looked about the same as it always had to me, no different. She'd always had some left-over baby fat.

"Do you know where your own dick has been lately?" she grumbled. "Did you even consider using a condom? Or getting a vasectomy? Mitchell got one, so it's not him, I know that much."

"You mean you've been fucking him too?" I asked. I couldn't believe my ears.

"Women have needs, you know."

“You've been cheating with your own husband?”

“You've been fucking the babysitter, for Chrissakes. Just find the money, I don't care how. Also, my lawyer says we have to get married or else the court will take away my children. And I can't live without them.”

Jesus, I thought. I had to go talk to Warren and Greg and Steve about all this. I was feeling like I was in a trap that was way over my head. What was I supposed to do here?

But before I could do that, she announced that a mysterious donor had come up with the cash, and demanded I go with her to the abortionist on Solano Avenue. The day was bright and cheery and growing hotter and hotter. We drove down the hill and over to Solano Avenue in the green VW square-back. She looked queasy and kept holding her belly and feeling all around. She made a face like she was about to sink under water.

“Pull over,” she said suddenly. I swerved over to the curbside and stopped the car. She opened the door and threw up in a pile of leaves in the gutter. Then just as quickly she shut the door and adjusted the glasses on her nose.

“Okay, drive the car. Let's get this over with before I change my mind. This is too much fun.”

The fee at the clinic was a standard, flat \$500, cash. No checks. No plastic. No records were kept of these transactions. They performed the service with a kind of medical vacuum cleaner. When we got there, a young receptionist was sitting at a desk. Cheap, dark-stained wood paneling covered the walls. Coolly she sat filing her long, bright fingernails, filling the appointment calendar in front of her as calls kept coming in.

Positioned along the walls were old sofas from which the stuffing had begun to emerge. I took a seat where I could find one next to a woman in a flowered granny dress, with streaks of gray in her hair, who was intently doing macramé with jute. Mary Jo found a place across from me in an old stuffed armchair beside a standing lamp. That old lamp offered about zero help in adjusting to the darkness of the place, emitting this weak, pink light through a

brocaded lampshade with a fringe of tassel. Both of us kept gawking around the room. We'd peer down at our laps, then look up and all around the room at the faces of the women who'd come to the clinic for help. Some of them looked just tired and dislocated. They looked like dried flowers that had curled up, collecting dust in an old cut-glass vase without water.

The receptionist wore thick black eye makeup and long eyelashes and bright pink lipstick — while the group of women who were waiting for their appointment couldn't have been more opposite from her. Long straight hair hanging well below the waist, most of them considerably older than me. One minute they were biting at their upper lip, the next their lower lip, then they'd catch themselves and try to look calm.

Everybody sat waiting mutely, when all of a sudden from one of the back rooms behind the receptionist's desk there came a woman's shrill, terrifying scream. The girl at the desk quit filing her fingernails and slipped through a door that lead to the back. There came another piercing scream. It was blood-curdling and sent a chill up my spine. The next thing we saw was two women dressed to the neck in black, their faces rigid, drained of color. They kept running back and forth between rooms with piles of white towels. Things had gone from calm, even boring, to hysterical in under two minutes.

All three telephones were ringing at the abandoned receptionist desk. The screams went on and got unbearably louder and more frequent. They grew repetitive. Somebody yelled: "Shut up!" It was a man's voice. Then the screaming intensified, turning into the repeated word: "No! No! Noo! Noooo!"

There was a loud dull thud of some kind. Next, the two nurses dressed in black ran back into the receptionist area, grabbing more white towels and a stack of sheets out of a cheap gray metal cabinet. The telephones wouldn't stop ringing and ringing.

I saw Mary Jo clawing at her own forearm with her nails. The other women kept gaping at each other, then at the door where the screaming came from. Whoever it was hemorrhaging back there

let out with one more tremendous yell, and we heard a man's voice shouting, "Shut the fuck up, will you!"

That's when Mary Jo leaped to her feet and bolted for the door, and I followed right after her, and we burst into the brightness outside. We ran down the sidewalk, only stopping at the corner where there was a storefront with a display of maternity clothing. A tall woman dressed in a brilliant yellow outfit walked past us on the sidewalk with a little red-haired girl dressed in a brilliant green coat.

Mary Jo lurched to the curbside and hung onto the fender of this yellow car. Sweat burst out from her forehead, drenching the hair at the back of her neck. It began dripping like a soft rain at her feet, then she threw up in the gutter.

"Damn it, Mary Jo, how far along are you anyway?"

"Oh, I don't know. It could be months, I guess. Who's keeping track?"

