

In the Heat of the Moment

By Zoe Karpin

I'm not sleeping well; we've only a noisy, whirling fan to cool us in our bedroom, and no breeze through the open window, so instead of lying in bed thinking about sleep I get up and run naked into the bathroom. I gaze out from the wooden-framed window at the empty street below. It's very early morning but I can already smell coffee and bacon from the neighbours. The aromas are strong. I yearn for sleep but it's impossible. I move away from the window and catch sight of my reflection in the enormous mirror over the hand basin. There's no denying it; my breasts are heavier, the nipples darker, my abdomen a tiny bit more rounded. I sit on the bathtub aching with fatigue and wait for the morning proper to begin.

One warm evening at the very beginning of summer Dan and I drank too much red at an old Thai restaurant in Oxford St with my friend Sophie and her boyfriend. The air conditioning was feeble and rattled in the uncarpeted room. This, along with the noise of conversation, meant no one could hear what anyone else was saying. We got take-away leftovers and went on a night walk, to Paddington and back again to the cars. As we walked, we sang "Yellow Submarine."

Dan twirled a perspiring me around on the pavement, sweeping us along in a happy dance.



When we were home again the house was foggy with heat; Dan ran around turning on the fans. But I tumbled onto the mattress, exhausted and barely able to undress.

Dan joined me under our lightest sheet, snuggled up to me and ran his hands through my hair. He kissed me everywhere, on my neck and breasts, but I was too weary.

"Leave it, Dan, I'm tired." I was not focusing on anything except sleep—the air was so moist and heavy, the overhead light glowed in every direction and I'd had a hard day at work before

going out. My responses were slow.

Kiss. Kiss.

“Your legs, your thighs. Your pudenda,” he softly joked.

“I’m not up to it,” I said.

I couldn’t push him off. I don’t have as much strength in my upper body as he does. I let it happen.

Finally I moaned, “Get off me, get off me.”

He slid away, the condom lost somewhere. I drifted into a fitful doze, too worn out to shower. He slept heavily, his arms lightly resting on my long hair. The next day, there was dark dried blood on my hands. I had slept with them between my wet thighs. Even my fingernails needed cleaning with the little bristly brush someone from work gave me for Christmas. No need for the morning-after pill, surely.

Now I sit here on the bathtub remembering all this.

The morning after, we swam in the surf at Bondi beach and washed the evening away. I dove into the water and my breasts fell out of my bikini top and two freckle faced boys in identical green swimmers pushing their boards out to the ocean whistled loudly at me.

“Leave me alone,” I said, surprising myself at the strength of my anger.

“*Leave me alone,*” they sniggered in a high-pitched tone, but quickly took off.

I swam, as far as I could away from them and the floating groups of bathers, then freestyled back to shore.

After our swim, we left the beach without sunbaking. Dan’s tallness and wide shoulders cast a protective shadow over me as we walked to the car but every now and then the shadow slipped off and I was as boiling as if I’d never swum. The air’s clamminess followed me into the house, oppressive and sticky.

This morning, on the edge of the cool metal bathtub, listening to the early morning cars going off to work, I have finally decided to do something. I’ll take the day off work and go to the doctor’s in a few hours, when the surgery is open. After a Weetbix and milk tea breakfast, I’ll ask for assistance with something I never expected to need.

“Why have you left it so late?” the doctor will ask. “You’re an educated woman, and there is so much information on the internet.” I’ll shrug my bared shoulders, maybe sigh, turn my head to the door and wonder if I’ll ever be able to answer that question.

It’s not so bad when I do see the doctor. He gives me a referral to an abortion clinic but says as he hands it over, “The first week you miss your period is the time to do something.”

I leave the doctor’s holding the envelope. The street is without trees. There is no shelter. Inertia clings to me like the summer humidity, unable to be easily dissolved in water. Not in the Andrew Charlton pool in the city where I swim with Sophie, or in the Bondi surf with Dan. Not even at my parents above-ground pool in Marrickville where the water is usually blissfully cold. I swim

alone in this blue-tiled pool, hidden by sweeping wattle trees, as I did when younger, never considering a problem like this.

Only recently my parents have finally accepted us living together. There had been loud arguments over a dinner with them and admonishments drifting out into the sweltering night air, queries as to why marriage was not even a consideration. I know my mother wouldn't be sympathetic about me having an abortion. Even if I wanted to work, save more, do extra study before having a family.

"Your Grandma'd say it's a great sin," Mum would lecture. Grandma was a heavy-set woman who always wore a cross, the daughter of Italian migrants. She sewed and baked for us when she was alive and I was little. "I had you when I was your age," Mum might say.

Her unspoken words weigh me down.

I want someone to go with me to the clinic when I have the abortion and think of Sophie. Though it would be embarrassing to explain the conception and all the rest to her.

But Sophie left for Europe last week.

Sophie wouldn't hold back. I imagine her telling me off.

"Nora, you dope, don't you know about the morning-after pill and RU-486? Why didn't you just take one in case?" We know no one who has had an abortion, but we believe in our right to have one absolutely.

On the Sunday after I get the referral, Dan and I go to Bondi beach together. It is a meant to be

a relaxed outing at the end of the working week. We pass families along the unprotected, scorching promenade, a sweet toddler barely three years old with black hair, her little round face smeared with ice cream, and a wide-eyed baby girl in a pram.

"Ooh, what's your name?" I coo at the three-year-old.

I do have some favourite names for a boy or a girl. I wonder what my unborn not-yet-baby would look like. So this is what it is like to be pregnant, I think. Dan would not be able to have any firsthand understanding of this. I discreetly place my hand on the slight swelling under my white kaftan and breathe deeply.

Does Dan wonder at my new interests, or why I'm a little chubbier? But if he does, he, like me, says nothing. Just as we both have not discussed the uneasy night of the slipped-off condom.

That evening, lying awake long after Dan has fallen asleep, I listen to his easy, deep breathing. The summer air is thick around us, fighting with the fan's breeze. I shouldn't worry about what might happen to me while having an abortion, should I? Nor fret if, years from today and childless, I look back and wish I'd had this baby. This decision seems almost impossible. Could Dan understand any of that? Would anyone?

I feel pathetic and ridiculous.

If I tell Dan, I might say, "Dan, I'm pregnant. I have no money, I'm too young. There is so much to do yet; work, study, travel. I'm going to have an abortion."

I swim alone in this blue-tiled pool, hidden by sweeping wattle trees, as I did when younger, never considering a problem like this.

He will be supportive. “When is it? I’ll come with you.”

I’ll tell him, “I have the referral, but I haven’t organised it yet.”

And then I know he will ask me the one question I can’t answer, “Why not?”

There is no way I can give him a satisfactory explanation.

Monday, catching the bus to work on Oxford Street, the damp humid air hits me. I step into the air-conditioned bus, a relief from the mugginess. There are not enough stories in literature of abortions, if only there were, I would have something to go by. I remember one by Helen Garner about her sister; other than that, nothing.

In my air-conditioned office I latch onto a free keyboard, go online, and read about the medical details of abortion. I copy and paste them into a Word document and then change all the “yous” to Nora. For example, *During a suction abortion procedure, the doctor or nurse will:*

1. *Examine Nora's uterus*
2. *Use a speculum to see into Nora's vagina...*
6. *Use a small, hand-held suction device or suction machine to gently take the pregnancy tissue out of Nora's uterus*
7. *They may also use a small surgical tool called a curette to remove any tissue that's left in Nora's uterus, or check to make sure Nora's uterus is totally empty.*

The procedure reassures me. It’s straightforward and simple. There is a small window for me until it gets more dangerous than a birth itself. I must make the appointment with the clinic soon.

I save the text with my inserted name. I print it out and put the paper in my bag. I will look at it again and again when I get home.

Outside the refrigerated office at four in the afternoon, Sydney burns. I’ll squeeze in a swim before it’s too dark. I pack my black leather bag, rushing around to finish things.

After a swim, finally cool. Back on the beach, grabbing my yellow towel, wrapping it across my middle, I sigh. I sit down in the middle of nowhere on the sand. I have done this discreetly for weeks, and now once again, just to be sure, I slip my right hand into my bikini pants and run my index finger around my inner labia into my vagina. I bring my finger out. No blood, of course. I have never had so much as spotting. No escaping the pregnancy.

That night is very hot again; the minimum temperature is about twenty-six degrees. I stretch out in bed. My arms are thrust above me, reaching for something to hold onto. I dream I’m stuck in an early 1970s magazine ad; flattened out, an adoring, checked-apron-wearing mother. The children, in their white undies, are lined up in a

sparkling pale-green tiled laundry in front of me, handing over their clothes as I embrace the newly-acquired washing machine. The magazine ad becomes animated. Dan is in the dream. He calls out, “Honey, I’m home.” Just like in an American sixties sitcom.

The children rush to him, screaming, “Daddy’s home!” I’m left with the dirty washing and the gleaming washing machine.

I wake up sweating. The sheets are drenched. I’m breathing heavily, almost panting, with tears in my eyes. I must say something to Dan. The abortion has to happen.

“This heat,” I say aloud, while Dan sleeps deeply.

Image: “[Manly Beach](#)” (CC BY-SA 2.0) by [TheGirlsNY](#)