I took my third pregnancy test at a clinic. While Jon and I waited for the results, I visualized the word please. When it looked as bold as I could make it, my mind gave it a shove and the entreaty drifted out into the ether. I hoped it would catch the eye of a merciful deity, one who had perhaps been off-duty before but who would now take hold of the situation and reduce it to a false alarm.

Jon sat with his arms crossed and his eyes closed, his head tilted back against the wall. We did not speak, but the jittering of his boot on the dull floor tiles told me exactly how he felt.

After a time, the clinician came in, closed the door behind her, and sat down at the desk. Laying out a file, she quickly scanned its contents before looking up at us. Then she said, “The results are positive.” Her words lacked the power to surprise me. Instead, they shook the last scrap of hope I’d been clutching and sent it wafting away like a leaf in the wind. Glancing at Jon, I saw dismay flood his face.
“We want an abortion,” I said.

“That’s a big decision, one you need to think about carefully. Have you considered other options? Adoption is a possibility or . . .”

Surprised and irritated by the clinician’s response, I didn’t let her finish. “We’ve already thought about it,” I said, “and we want an abortion.”

“Well, I’m afraid we can’t get you in for at least another week. Look, why don’t you think about it over the weekend and give us a call on Monday? Here, take these pamphlets.”

Jon thumped the dashboard with his fist. “Now we have to wait? Just in case we haven’t thought about it enough? I can not fuckin’ believe this.”

I thought I knew what he meant. For days, it seemed like I’d been thinking about our dilemma and little else. What am I going to do? Either the question shouted and swelled so that it threatened to burst my cranium or it stood off to one side and whispered a relentless interrogation.

“You might as well get rid of those pamphlets,” Jon said. “Why’d you even bother to take ‘em?”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on.”

“I guess it just seemed rude not to.”

“Well, all I can say is, you’d better not be backing out on me, Jess. You said you’d have an abortion. When we talked about it before, that’s what you said. Remember?”

“Of course I remember. In case you didn’t notice, Jon, I’m the one who told her we want one.”

“Okay, okay. You don’t hafta bitch at me. Just don’t go getting any crazy ideas about keeping it.”

I knew Jon was right. After all, I hadn’t set out to become pregnant. When it came to sex, I wasn’t a reckless person. Far from it: I had consistently used birth control, but it had failed me. I didn’t see why I should be punished for that and so part of me resented the creature unfurling in my womb. Abortion was the logical choice.

Still, logic couldn’t appease another part of me. Since the moment I’d realized I was pregnant, it seemed that babies waited for me around every corner, and each time I saw one, the life I carried felt more compelling than
everything else put together. It was disconcerting. In the days when the idea of a surprise pregnancy was only an abstraction, I had never suspected that I could feel fierce love for an embryo.

I wanted to discuss my mixed-up feelings with Jon, but I didn’t know how, especially since it was clear that his mind was already made up. I needed to talk to someone who would understand. My mother? Maybe. She had chosen to have four children, but she had also taught me that a woman has options beyond motherhood. Even though we weren’t as close as we had once been, she might still be able to help me untangle this knot.

Back at Jon’s house, I stopped long enough to shove a few things into my pack before telling him I was going to stay at my parents’ for a while. He didn’t try to stop me. “Okay,” he said, and that was all.

Driving alone down the highway, I felt as though Jon was still beside me. I kept hearing his demand: Remember? How could I forget? In my mind’s eye, I saw us the summer before. Conjuring my old Kent Street apartment, I lifted the roof and peeked in like a child cracking open a dollhouse. There we were, Jon and I, supine on carpet as bland as porridge, our heads pressed so close together that strands of our hair touched. From the tape deck, Taj Mahal’s voice crackled and crooned... How can you sleep when your baby is gone? ... and a hot breeze carried the spicy-sweet scent of wild roses through the open window. We had not yet had sex, but we were dancing toward it, and, as though we were the stars of a film about sexual responsibility, we had already begun to strategize about birth control. Jon had told me that he and his last girlfriend had tried everything except intercourse, so he was technically still a virgin. That made me the font of experience, and I thought that in order for his first time to be perfect, he should be able to feel everything, so I vetoed condoms. He didn’t object—why should he have? We were free of disease. I wanted to take the pill, but Jon worried that its chemicals might harm me. His concern for my health, for me, was something new in my experience of men, and it left me giddy with gratitude and tenderness. When Jon suggested the diaphragm, I agreed. A few days later, I would go for a fitting.

Lounging on the floor next to Jon, I felt pleased that we were taking such an open, practical, mature approach to sex, and I was thinking that that was just one of many reasons Jon outshone every other guy I had dated. It wasn’t
long, though, before something began to disturb my glistening bubble of competence. It was the Worst Case Scenario, an entity that I seem unable to hold at bay for long, no matter what the situation. The problem was that I didn’t know what Jon thought about abortion. I had a choice: I could keep quiet and just go along hoping I never got pregnant or I could ask him. I was tempted to keep my worry to myself. Jon and I shared similar views on most things, but what if it turned out that we were at odds on this one issue? It would rend my heart to have to let him go, but I also knew that I couldn’t leave this detail to chance. I had to say something.

I turned on my side so that I could see Jon’s face. His eyes were closed and he was smiling. I rested my head on his chest and closed my eyes too. The sound of his heart plodding beneath my ear lulled me and I wanted to follow it into sleep, but I forced myself to take a steadying breath instead.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Jon said, his long fingers in my hair.

“I was just wondering what would happen if . . .” I shifted so that my chin was propped on his chest. He opened his eyes and lifted his head. “I mean, if I accidentally got pregnant, what would you want to do?” There. I had said it.

Jon let his head fall back to the floor. He was quiet long enough for me to regret speaking. *I should have kept my mouth shut!* At last, he turned on his elbow and looked at me again. “Well . . . I’m not ready to be a father. I mean, I have to finish school and then I want to do a bunch of other things . . . you know, drive across the country, play my guitar. Besides, we’re too young to have a kid.”

I felt my face warming. Did he think I meant that I *wanted* to have a baby?

“Oh, I agree,” I said. “That’s what I was hoping you’d say. I mean, I’m sure I won’t get pregnant, but what if I did and I didn’t want to have it, but you wanted me to? God, what a mess that would be!”

“So, you’d have an abortion?”

“Yeah, of course. I wanna finish school too and even if I wasn’t doing that, I’m pretty sure I couldn’t handle having a kid. I mean, I can hardly care for myself. And anyway, I’m probably too crazy to be a good mother.”

“You’re not crazy.” Jon pulled my head down to his chest and resumed stroking my hair. I wasn’t sure I agreed with his assessment of my mental health, but I kept quiet and snuggled closer to him.
When I reached my parents’ house, it was nearly dinnertime and I found my mother standing at the stove. On the iron skillet, fat hamburgers spat gobs of grease and the stench of searing flesh filled the kitchen and made my stomach wobble.

“Hi, Mom.”
She glanced over her shoulder at me. “I wasn’t expecting you,” she said.
“Well, here I am.” I hoped she would hug me, but she stayed where she was.
“No Jon?”
“No. He’s working late.”
She gave her attention back to the skillet. “You should have called first. I would have made an extra burger.”

“That’s okay. I’m really not hungry.”
“You have to eat.”
“I know. It’s just the smell.”
“The smell?”
“Yeah. Of the meat. It’s kind of getting to me.”

My mother turned to face me then, a hand on her hip, her mouth barbed.

“What’s the matter? Preggers, Jess?”

Beneath her gaze, my body seemed a clear pool, but if my mother truly glimpsed what stirred there, she was unmoved. Jostled by her scorn, I placed a hand on the counter to steady myself. I was too rattled to look her in the eye and say, “Well, as a matter of fact, I am pregnant, mother dear.” Instead all I could manage was, “No. I just don’t like the smell of meat anymore. I do work in a vegetarian restaurant, you know.” A bowl of salad sat nearby. I grabbed it and hurried out to the picnic table.

At dinner, my parents hardly looked at each other and when one of them spoke, the other pretended not to understand. Though long accustomed to this routine, it still rankled. In the past, I had often acted as interpreter, but that night I sat still and silent and wished for them both to be struck dumb.

When the meal finally ended, I shouldered my pack and walked through the shadows lengthening in the sugar bush. At the top of the hill, I clambered over the mossy stone wall and into a neighbour’s field. Purple vetch tangled the high grass and I stretched myself out in it. Closing my eyes, I slid a hand over my stomach. Now I knew better than to expect any help from my
mother, but little else was clear. My emotions were still jumbled. It seemed incomprehensible that I could feel both love and hate for the thing inside me, and I turned the riddle of my responses this way and that. I couldn’t make much sense of them, though, so I decided to draw up a list. I rolled onto my stomach, pulled my journal out of my pack, turned to a blank page, and drew a line down the middle of it. At the top of one half I wrote PRO, and on the other CON. What could be simpler? Then I noted every reason I could think of to support or oppose having an abortion. This is what I ended up with:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ABORTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>too young / still learning to care for self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have few $$ / skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>still in school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>history of depression!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was four to two with PRO in the lead. I had hoped that seeing my reasons inscribed in black and white would free me from uncertainty, but I remained troubled.

Everything I’d written in the left-hand column was undeniable. I had turned twenty-one two months earlier and I felt like I was only just beginning to be able to look after myself. Furthermore, I didn’t know how to do much besides clean and cook—hardly the sort of skills that would bring in enough money to support a child. Besides, I needed to finish school. While it was true that I had no idea what, exactly, I wanted to do, the spark of the past semester still shone within me. Didn’t I have a right to figure out my own life before bringing another one into it? How could I be a good student and a good mother at the same time? And even if I could manage to tend to both books and baby, what if it turned out that my depressive tendencies were genetic? The year before, I’d been hospitalized because I couldn’t seem to haul myself out of despair. What if my potential child were to fall into the same hole? I imagined a small black spot of a mouth screaming *How could you do this to me? I never asked to be born!* Besides, it wasn’t just the illness that concerned me, it was also the cure. As my psychiatrist had written out a prescription for Prozac, he’d remarked that the drug was so new he considered it somewhat
experimental. Though at first the absinthe-and-cream-coloured capsules had guided me back into the world, ten months later, they'd boomeranged and shot me right back to melancholia. I had recently shaken the pills into the trash, but I assumed their trace still lurked inside me. Might it affect the developing embryo?

Surely, caring about this tiny thing meant protecting it. I knew that for some people, that's where adoption came in. They preferred to allow their embryo to grow into a fetus and then a baby so they could give it away. Maybe that was noble. My brother Nate was adopted, and loving him made me think I appreciated something of the sacrifice his biological parents had made. Yet when I remembered Nate's habit of calling himself “ugly” every time he looked in the mirror or was asked to pose for a picture, I couldn't help wondering if that initial rejection had scarred his psyche. What's more, I also knew that red tape had bound my brother for two years when he could have been with us. Anyway, how could I ensure that my potential child would be adopted by good people? Or even adopted at all? Given the way it was already demanding my allegiance, I suspected that if it spent nine months snug inside me, I would love it too much to be able to give it up. And then where would we be? I could see us wailing together in a peeling apartment behind Dunkin’ Donuts, me adding Green Stamps to my welfare check in an endless attempt to create something that resembled security. We would have no one but each other. Grandparents, probably. But no partner for me and no father for the child. Jon had made that clear.

To the PRO side of my list I added:

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Jon doesn't want it

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That one obstacle trumped all my other concerns. I imagined myself pleading with Jon to demonstrate even the slightest interest in his child: *If you can't bother to visit, you could at least call!* At the same time, I heard myself trying to reassure our little one: *Daddy's very busy, but I know he thinks about you all the time.* Whatever else I might be able to do for our child, I knew I could never force Jon to love it. Of all the pains that await us in this world, I most desired to protect it from feeling unwanted. I knew something about that and I was damned if I'd subject anyone else to it.
As for God, well, I’d just have to take my chances. If He really existed, rumour had it that He was either a well of infinite compassion or a control freak gone galactic. I thought I’d rather take responsibility for my own soul and risk hell than accept being moved about like a tyrant’s chess piece. Besides, wasn’t it sinful to give birth to a child you didn’t really want and couldn’t properly care for? The truth of that conjecture hummed through me, but it didn’t make me feel better.

I stood and looked about but it had become too dark to see much. Clouds sailing across the indigo sky caused the stars to blink and stutter like flames in a draft. As I followed an old wagon track through the field to the road below, I sometimes caught an incandescent glimpse of Queen Anne’s lace stirring the night like a ghost’s frilled skirt.