part four

Practitioners and Clinic Support
The first time I put on an escort pinny and stood outside of my local abortion clinic was in February 2007, on one of the coldest days of that Fredericton winter. At the time, I didn’t know anyone who had had an abortion (at least none who had told me). As for me, I had never even had a pregnancy scare. I was driven more by my rage at the Catholic protesters than by any understanding of the movement or the struggles of the women I was escorting.

It wasn’t long before abortion became my whole life—at least, it seemed that way. A part-time job at the clinic, along with a blog and a media training workshop, catapulted me into becoming the go-to person for pro-choice opinion in that small city. I became involved with bigger pro-choice organizations and began going to conferences and even giving workshops on abortion activism.

I have never felt more fulfilled, however, than I did during those first few months of volunteering as a patient escort, stuffing toe warmers into my boots, stomping and jumping in the howling wind
to keep my blood flowing, and always watching the movements of the ten or twelve old folks who marched back and forth in front of the clinic with their asinine signs. My mother once told me that religion is something men do to women, with other women’s help. I didn’t understand that until I saw those women out there.

There were men, too, of course—the surly priest we nicknamed Father Grim; the Knight of Columbus who had written more than seventy screeds against abortion on his personal website; the tall, burly fellow who used to stare into the windows at the staff. But the women were the most hateful and vocal. The Holy Ghost, as we called her, who patrolled the boundaries of the clinic unencumbered by a sign, entreat ing the patients in her wispy voice. Crazy Legs, the “counsellor” whose arms and legs flailed every which way like a giraffe as she chased women down the sidewalk, sometimes throwing herself on their moving cars. Glare-y Mary, dressed monochromatically (usually in red) and holding aloft a bloody crucifix whose Jesus was continually losing limbs until it was just a gruesome torso clutched in her hands.

These women seemed to find purpose in passing judgment on our patients, a way to channel their own insecurities and fears into condemnation of other people. Their church appeared to encourage this projection. I saw them gather in prayer before setting out, huddled in the parking lot next door at their so-called crisis pregnancy centre. Although they called out to the patients, they rarely entreated or even addressed us; perhaps they believed us to be beyond redemption.

What must it be like to work in a clinic that doesn’t have to deal with this, I often wondered. An eye doctor’s or a dentist’s practice. How nice it must be to book an appointment with a patient who is not crying, how pleasant to sit at the front desk without having to move a plant in front of the window to block the stares of the scary man outside. How lovely it would be for our counsellor to have to simply inform a patient of the risks of the procedure and obtain her consent without having to wade through twenty minutes of traumatized sobbing caused by her experience with the bullies outside. How convenient to not have to padlock our dumpster. What must it be like to work or volunteer in a place that is free from harassment?

By necessity, I eventually had to prioritize activism in the movement over work in the movement. It is a relief that my life as an activist makes me less fearful than did my life as clinic staff, and that it brings less stress to the people who love me. But mostly, my heart aches for the people who don’t
have that choice—for those women who need abortions, who have to walk the gauntlet of judgment to reach the safe space of the clinic. I worry about them and their safety, and their emotional well-being. I worry about a country that allows this to go on.

My working life in abortion services taught me many things, but the main lesson was to trust other people as the experts on their own lives. There were some patients whom I couldn’t stand, some who I thought were making the wrong decision—but whenever I needed a reminder of the consequences of going down that road of judgment, I had only to look out the window and see the bitter old people staring back at me, shivering in the cold and sacrificing their mornings—time that would have been better spent with grandchildren or a cup of tea—in order to stand in the snow and register their contempt of the choices of strangers. May that never, ever be me, I would think to myself, and then turn to meet each person with love.

What separates those who work for universal access to health care and those who oppose it is not a political difference of opinion or even a religious or ethical one. It is the ability to take responsibility for our own fears and insecurities, to resist the urge to push them onto others. From there, we learn to trust other people. The actions of the people who stood outside our clinic had nothing to do with babies or abortion. They had to do with the inability to trust women with their own bodies. For men, that comes from a desire to control women; for women, it comes from an inability to trust themselves.

When I think about the possibility of becoming pregnant, I am not afraid, because I trust myself to make the right decision for myself at that time, just like I trust myself to know when to go to the dentist or the eye doctor. In the four years I spent working in abortion care, I came to trust hundreds of patients, and through that, I learned that I, too, am worthy of trust. And that is something that no judgmental stranger with a sign and a crucifix can ever take away.