

The Abortion Caravan

By Joan Baril

Our next meeting will be a very important one as we will be discussing our plans for the abortion caravan. Everyone is urged to attend. Thunder Bay Women's Liberation Newsletter, April, 1970.

Laurie passes the letter from the Vancouver Women's Caucus around the circle of ten women who are sitting on the floor with ashtrays, tea cups and note pads at the ready. The letter describes the Caucus' car caravan across Canada. They will participate in meetings along the way in order to educate people about the need to change the abortion laws. As for staying overnight in Thunder Bay, they hoped billets could be arranged.

"I thought they said they'd put on a skit," Edna says studying the letter. "It looks like they've changed their mind. What an f-ing drag." When her two boys are in the room, Edna always moderates her language. "They'll give a talk? That's all? Bo-o-o ring. We've got to make it happen, man. We're aiming for a revolution in consciousness here."

We all look glum for the usual reason. More work than we expected. We're already busy starting up a birth control office and a day care at the university. A national medical conference is coming to town so we're planning an action. But now we have to produce some sort of program for the public meeting.

“They don’t half ask for much, do they?” says Edna, scowling at the letter. “A place to crash, food, a meeting and now a program.” Edna looks over at her boys playing with their toy cars at the end of the bare living room. A single parent, she survives on welfare, but just barely. “I’m going to get these guys to bed,” she says standing. “When I come back, let’s think up a skit.”

“The food part’s easy,” Nora says. “How about a pot luck at the church before the public meeting.”

We nod, still thinking. We’ve booked the hall and kitchen of Knox United, organized the accommodation, arranged emergency babysitting, run off hundreds of information leaflets, informed all the media, got the posters ready but now, somehow, a skit.

I take a long drag on my du Maurier. “I can ask Cathy for some music. As openers.” I flinch a little. Cathy is notoriously fussy to work with.

“Right on,” says Laurie. “But first, we need someone to go on the Marion Vickruck Radio Show on Thursday afternoon. Good publicity.”

More glum looks. Almost all of the women have day jobs. “Not me,” says Edna coming back into the room. “You know I have to keep a low profile with those fuckers from Welfare. Any excuse to cut me off. Too risky.”

Shelagh is checking her day book. “It’s the middle of exams but...” Shelagh’s one of our university students. She swings her wild black hair away from her face and smiles her radiant smile. “I’m free that day. I’ll do it.”

I read out another letter, the one we sent to the Ministerial Association so the local Protestant ministers could include the Caravan in their mothers’ day services and church bulletins.

“I’m really worried,” says Nora, “This could be a heavy trip.” Nora always worries and we usually let her ramble on. “There’s sure to be undercover cops,” she says. “I think we should rap about the possibility of trouble.”

“I think we should rap about this f-ing skit,” Edna says.

White Kleenex flowers edged in black will be passed out on Mothers’ Day. These flowers are symbolic of the number of women who have died as a result of our rigid abortion laws.

Women’s Liberation Newsletter, April, 1970.

On Saturday, Shelagh and I walk downtown to see our poster in Eaton's window. On the full sized Bristol board, curly letters announce the Caravan's arrival and the date and time of the public meeting. We can just make out, in the background, a stylized foetus floating in blue swirls of colour. The posters were silk screened by Laurie's husband, an artist.

"Cathy's freaking me out," I confide to Shelagh. "First she says okay, she'll do one song but now she wants a complete twenty minute set."

"We're not into that," Shelagh says. "This isn't a concert. I think you should tell her one song or forget it." Shelagh knows how chicken I am about confronting people. She smiles at me. "I'll phone her if you want." Shelagh is not only beautiful, she's tough.

"No," I say. "I'll do it. One song."

"A protest song," says Shelagh. "Something relevant to the struggle. Jacob's Ladder. Bread and Roses."

"Shelagh, you were so great on the radio," I say changing the subject as we walk to the next store with our posters. Shelagh's been a guest on three talk-back shows this week, handling all callers, even the nutters, with supreme calm."

"It's all happening," she says.

The Vancouver Abortion Caravan will arrive in Thunder Bay May 3. The public meeting will be held at 8 p.m. at Knox United Church. The Caravan will leave the following morning. The demonstration in Ottawa will take place on the 9th. Women's Lib will be on the Rick Smith talk show on May 1. Be ready to phone in. Combat Chauvinism! Thunder Bay Women's Liberation Newsletter, April, 1970.

They're late arriving. "Maybe they got lost," I say. "I did send them a detailed map." Shelagh and I wait outside sitting on the church hall steps. The others are in the church kitchen trying to keep the pot luck warm. I take a long drag on my du Maurier. "I'm glad to be out here away from Cathy in case she changes her mind again," I tell Shelagh. "Bread and Roses is not her bag, she says. Too convoluted. Every day she comes up with a different, inappropriate song. Every time my phone rings, I wince. Yesterday she says she's definitely settled on "Michael Row the Boat Ashore." Shelagh makes a quizzical face at me. "I know," I say. "It's a meaningless song in the circumstance, but I can't argue anymore. I just said, 'Fine, go for it.'"

They pull up in five cars. We walk to meet them.

The car with the home-made coffin on top is half hidden under the large trees surrounding the lawn of the church. A vehicle with a carrier is not unusual in Thunder Bay. Perhaps just as well. Nora's paranoia is affecting me. Maybe she's right about vandalism but the five cars do not look out of place.

Inside the hall, the Vancouver women all stop in a body, staring around. “What’s this?” one of them says.

“The meeting place.” Shelagh smiles proudly. The young women look surprised as they contemplate the vast room. Their mouths are slightly open. One puts a hand on her cheek.

“How many chairs?”

“A hundred or so,” said Shelagh, “but don’t worry, if we get an overflow crowd we’ve got forty more in readiness. And people can always sit on the window sills or stand at the back.”

The newcomers look at each other as if in shock but then the swinging door to the kitchen flies open with cries of, “welcome, welcome.”

The hall fills up as we eat. I notice a line of matrons settling into the front row, about eight of them, all dressed in polyester and flanked by two burly men. Something odd about that gang, I think. Nutters?

“Welcome everyone,” says Millie, our chairwoman, addressing the crowd. Although Millie is small, she has a commanding stage presence and a voice that carries to the rafters and back.

Cathy steps out with her guitar. *‘If I were a carpenter and you were a lady,’* she sings, her voice floating over the crowd which is pushing in. They take our leaflets from the table at the entrance, find places on the window sills or sit in the aisle or lean along the back wall. The forty extra chairs, quickly set up by Barbara and Nora, fill the front area right up to the edge of the stage, *“Would you marry me anyway,”* Cathy warbles on, *“would you have my baby?”*

What the freaking freak?, I think. I’ll bloody kill her.

Nothing fazes Millie. “Thank you, Cathy,” she says when the scant applause dies away. “We’re here tonight to welcome the members of the Vancouver Abortion Caravan. We’re going to introduce the topic with a little skit, hear about the abortion situation and end with a discussion session. So give a big welcome!” She waves her arm to the Vancouverites lined up at the back of the stage. “From Vancouver, the women of the Abortion Caravan!” Loud applause but also, interestingly, some boos from the matron section.

“Sh, sh,” say their two burly male companions, obviously their minders. The caravanners hustle into the kitchen from the wings. They look shaken.

I’m inside the kitchen peeking through the swinging door, Nora behind me. “They’re not narcs,” she says, referring to the matron minders. Nora has an uncanny ability to detect the police. Laurie and Shelagh are doing clean-up in the kitchen and our other members are in the wings or in the audience. The Vancouver women whisper together in a clump.

The skit begins. Barbara, looking wan and poor with her two young sons in hand, trudges slowly across the stage, first meeting the doctor who refuses to help her, the priest who tells her she will go to hell, her friend who gives her the name of a back street abortionist and finally, as she moves toward a black curtain, the dark shadow of death emerges to sweep her in. Death is played by Laurie's husband, a tall man in hood and black gown. The audience gasps. Applause. Boos from the matrons. A cry "You'll *all* go to hell. You sluts."

"For God sake, shut up in front, can't you," yells a young man sitting on a window sill.

The Vancouver spokeswoman looks as if she'll collapse. She mumbles and stumbles through her speech and flees. Millie, cool as a spring day, neatly summarizes so all can hear. Applause.

"Murderers, murderers," yell the matrons.

"I do request that comments be held to the discussion period," says Millie firmly.

Shelagh, looking like a Mucha painting, her dark hair flowing around her, gives an overview of the present abortion law using slides with statistics. For once, the slide machine works perfectly.

In the kitchen, the Vancouver women approach Laurie who is doing the dishes. "Our cars," they whisper. "We have to save our cars. Where can we put them so they'll be safe?" Laurie dries her hands, looks around for Nora.

"The meeting is now open to comments from the audience," says Millie.

"You murder babies," a matron yells.

"Please take turns if you want to contribute to the discussion," Millie says firmly. "We want to hear everyone in an orderly fashion." Several hands go up. "We'll start with the gentleman standing at the back."

"I'm not sure about abortion," says the young man, "but I can see it for an emergency, maybe. And also rape. But it's something to be discussed for sure and you gals should be congratulated for bringing it up" Applause. A few boos.

More hands and more comments. Millie's gaze sails over the matron section, freezing them out.

Shelagh is standing beside me in the kitchen doorway. "I know who those women are," she says. "St. Maria's Church. The two guys with them are lay brothers."

A woman from the audience is speaking. She had to have an abortion when she was fifteen. "I was terrified" she says. "I knew I was breaking the law and the place wasn't very clean."

Another woman. "There was a doctor in Fort William but he was really expensive."

"He was a murderer," cries a matron. "And you're a slut who'll burn in hell."

The lay brothers look shocked. They lean down the row, shushing and tutting.

A loud male voice breaks in from the back. "I don't know who you are up there at the front, but maybe you can behave in a civilized way and watch your language." Applause.

"Right on," says Millie. "Let's continue one at a time." She points. "The young lady at the side."

A young woman with long blond hair stands up. "I had an abortion. I'm not afraid to admit it. An abortion was the right thing to do at the time."

"Murderer," yell the matrons. "Slut. You should hang. Scum."

The lay brothers stand. "We're leaving," one says. The matrons rise obediently and are led away. As they charge along the central aisle, tripping over people sitting on the floor, the cries of the audience urge them on. "Good riddance." "Thank God." "Who needs you," and similar shouts follow them.

But the next speakers are drowned by the noise from the audience. Everyone seems to be talking and arguing with each other.

Millie uses her gavel for the first time. "I do think," she says, "that the meeting is over. Thank you for coming. And thank you women from Vancouver who came all this way for this important and interesting discussion."

I look around the kitchen for the Vancouverites but someone says that Nora took them to move their vehicles to a parking lot several blocks away.

Outside, people congregate on the lawn still talking and arguing. The matrons immediately zero in on the young woman with the long blond hair. "Slut," one of them is saying. "evil creature. You should hang for murdering an innocent child."

"I know that girl," said Shelagh. "Better watch out. I think she's from Westfort."

The young woman argues spiritedly but when a matron shoves her face an inch from hers and chants, "slut, slut," she slowly leans back a little, straightens her arm, opens her hand and swings a roundhouse that connects with the church lady's check in a loud thwack.

"Oh, oh," says Shelagh. "Told you."

The young woman falls into hysterical sobbing. "Sorry, sorry," she cries. "Please forgive me."

"Not from Westfort then," says Shelagh. "Grab her," Shelagh calls to me as she runs toward the melee.

St. Maria woman: This girl slapped me and I am going to press charges.

Shelagh: How about a little Christian charity?

St. Maria woman: I am a Christian and I'm pressing charges.

Lay Brother. Please reconsider. No charges.

Unknown man flashing some sort of badge. All these girls are on drugs and this girl is on drugs and this caravan won't leave town until they have been thoroughly searched.

Minister of Knox United Church: The meeting is over. Everyone off church property.

Thunder Bay Women's Liberation Newsletter, May, 1970.

I grab the blond woman by the arm. She's still sobbing hysterically as I'm running her around the back of the church to my car. I shove her in the back seat. "Get on the floor and stay there. I'll drive you out once it's safe."

The minister waves everyone to the sidewalk. He is patrolling his property. He yells at anyone who puts a foot on the grass. "Everyone go home," he says.

They do.

Inside the kitchen, all is tidy. Nora says the Vancouver women have gone to their billets to work on a press release. "In case national media calls." We all laugh.

"I understand the St. Maria gang call themselves Right to Life," Nora says. "It's a national organization to combat abortion." We fall silent at this piece of news. For the first time the scope of the opposition becomes clear. Nora was right all along. This *is* a heavy trip.

Later, I drive the blond woman home. She has calmed down but when I say, "great hit," she starts to cry again. The next day I get a visit from a Mountie. I tell him, truthfully, that I have never seen her before that night. I do not know her name. "All I remember is her short dark hair," I lie. And that is all I tell him. Strangely, he does not ask me about how she got home, and I don't mention it.

The Vancouver visitors depart early in the morning, leaving me with the press release. They'd stayed up most of the night to work on the wording. As expected, the national media do not call.

The group disbursed, the meeting adjourned and in our opinion, overall, it was a success. The meeting room was over flowing with people who were interested in our cause. I'm sure we gathered more supporters. The Vancouver girls said that Thunder Bay was their first trouble spot and that in other western cities the meetings, which were much smaller, and mainly showed solidarity.

Perhaps it was good practice for them in case they encounter other Thunder Bays along the way. Thunder Bay Women's Liberation Newsletter, May, 1970.

EIGHTEEN YEARS LATER

The Biggest Step Since Women Won the Right to Vote. Victories are Rare. Celebrate Them. Eighteen Years of Struggle. Champagne punch. Pot Luck.

Northern Woman's Centre poster to celebrate the striking down of the abortion law in Canada. February 14, 1988.