

Two Blue Lines

Jessica Roncker

I hadn't bled. I didn't know the last time I had bled. I blamed my body's behavior on travel—because I was in the Southern Hemisphere at 2835 meters above sea level, though I'd been studying in Quito, Ecuador for five months now. A thought crept forward into my mind and it lurked there while each day I expected to greet my blood with cheer. Finally I bought a pregnancy test after class, the last class I -would take before my college graduation in two weeks. Not ready to take the test, however, not ready to go home to my host family, not ready to know, I stalled. I had dinner with my friends, Ecuadorian Javier and his Welsh girlfriend, Apple. Picking at my plate of *pescado encocado*, lentils and white rice, I told them of my unease. We had nicknamed my boyfriend, Pabel, El Pez-the fish-for his big, thick lips and wide-set drooping eyes. "You don't want to have a little fish?" said Javier. "Ooohhheee, Yesica!" He made a characteristically cartoonish noise, his smile gaping and goofy, his black curls swinging around his forehead. Apple laughingly called me a "fish tank" and ■wrinkled her small nose, burnt red from the vertical sunlight of the equator, in my direction. I smiled, wanly. It was a big joke.

Later, in the locked bathroom, I stared at the two blue lines in the window of the plastic test. I -wasn't convinced, however, that the second blue line was really a blue line. I thought that it was too light, too pale, too wishy-washy to be a real blue line. It looked like it lacked the confidence to be a true blue line. I searched the *guia telefonica* for a doctor to confirm or negate this alleged blue line. A male doctor—middle-aged, overweight, formal—at the women's clinic used an ultrasound on me, rolling a condom over the phallic probe while I lay on the table. He told me that, yes, I was four -weeks and one day pregnant. *Cuatro semanas y un dia*. Tears rolled down my cheeks and into my ears, silently, and he said, "Stop crying." He said that I was in his country now, that I didn't have options. He paused. The stillness was charged. He said that I was going to have to be responsible now.

I left the clinic. I slogged down the polluted Quiteno street, my bloodshot eyes hugging the concrete in front of each step. For the first time I didn't care about the oily black clouds of exhaust fumes billowing into my face from passing buses. In my backpack—my black backpack with the sunburst patch, its right side crudely held together with a row of six safety pins -where an aspiring thief had slashed the nylon—I had put the smooth sheet of ultrasound photos. The images of the four-weeks-and-one-day-old black and -white blob were in a folder, on top of my homework on subjunctive verbs. The corner of the folder jabbed my back as I walked. It bounced among my journal; my colored pencils bound by a rubber band; a borrowed blue sweatshirt, faded and thin from wear ("You call that a jacket?" sneered stylish Quitenos); my 50 cent pack of Belmont cigarettes; my Langenscheidt compact dictionary; my camera; a wallet full of Ecuadorian sucres. A few times, I pressed my palm against my stomach and dragged my fingers along the black cotton of my dress, gripping a fold of my flesh. I thought I should feel something.

I didn't know if Pabel was in Quito. I needed to ask around for him; he didn't have a telephone. The previous weekend we'd both been in Atacames, a small town on the northern coast. I returned to the city high in the Andes Mountains for school. He stayed at the beach to visit his family. Stumbling up Avenida Amazonas, I saw my friend Javier. He sat on the sidewalk behind his orange blanket of silver hand-crafted necklaces for sale, one in a line of a dozen similar *artesanos*. I sat next to him and cried, said nothing, just cried, and he 'wrapped his arm around my shoulders and didn't ask any questions.

I looked in my journal for the day four weeks and one day ago—January 29, 1998. That day, I bought little water guns from a toy store in the basement of the mall *Eljardin* with my American friend Taryn. We filled them up, giggling, from the Tesalia brand water bottles that we bought every day for drinking. We walked into town squirting each other, ducking and jumping, striking poses like we -were the fourth and fifth members of Charlie's Angels. When men on the street said something offensive to us—every few minutes—we squirted them. We thought we -were ingenious to use these neon pink and green plastic water guns against the common verbal assaults that ranged from mild piropos-flirtations-and whistles to crude offers, "Baby, where are you from? You want to fuck?" They all knew this English word-fuck.

Taryn and I saw a water gun vendor on the sidewalk and we were shocked into hysteria, doubling over, laughing. This man had read our minds. We didn't know that it was the month-long onset of Carnival, which meant one thing: water. Water guns, water bottles, and buckets sloshing full of water would be poured on us by strangers—children, teenagers and adults who rocked with laughter while bystanders sniggered. Water flew from the windows of buses and cars and from small groups rushing at us from across streets. Old women turned hoses on us from behind the gates of their gardens. I usually threw my hands skyward and shrieked theatrically. I spent a month wringing out my tank top. My friends and I made jokes about relaxing at our favorite sidewalk cafe, Cafe Amazonas, wearing goggles, yellow rain slickers and knee-high rubber waders. One evening we went dancing and the bartender mopped around us.

But on January 29, 1998, Taryn and I knew nothing about Carnival. We just thought it really odd that there was this water gun vendor in front of us. He saw the guns in our hands, hanging by our thighs, and he squirted us. We had a grand water battle with him until a woman 'walking by got very wet and very annoyed. She wasn't ready for Carnival either. I had a lot of fun on January 29.

Pabel didn't return from the coast for a couple of days. I found him in the yard outside *El Cafecito*, sharing a picnic table crowded with travelers and Ecuadorians. Forgetting my *cortesía*, the good manners that Ecuadorians consider the glue binding every social act, I failed to greet each person at the table. I gave no kisses to no cheeks. I just stood in the grass and asked Pabel, who was now standing and grinning happily, to leave with me. I thought that he might call me *malcriada*—ill-bred—for being rude but he didn't. He kissed me.

"I have to show you something," I said. My fingers were shaking as I

unzipped my backpack and opened my folder. I handed him the ultrasound images and I held my breath. He looked at it like he didn't know what it was and then his eyes grew and his head snapped up to match his focus with mine. "Estas embarazada?" he whispered. I nodded. I took in shallow breaths, my heart racing. He cursed softly and said, "Vamos." We walked, trance-like, without touching, to a small triangular park nearby where I lay on my side under a tree and stared at him. I felt numb and nervous and I couldn't believe I was in this park afraid of how this person -would react to something we had made; this life that was inside me; and I hadn't even told this person yet that I loved him; and I had always imagined my pregnant self eating wheat germ and organic blueberries, rubbing palm oil on my belly while my lover rubbed almond oil on my back "while fountains bubbled, brooks flowed, birds sang and I was very careful of my folic acid intake. In my fantasy pregnancy, I glowed. Here I was really: in Quito, Ecuador, drowning in toxicity from cigarettes, from alcohol, from pollution, from drugs. I had thought that I was just having fun, that I was being young and heedless and crazy. The day before, I wrote in my journal, "Ecuador-a place where I am learning what my limits are." Pabel sat cross-legged in the grass and said, "What do you want to do?" I answered, "I don't know." He said that he would follow whatever I decided.

Amy, a friend from school, told her host mother, Martha, that I was pregnant. Martha was a single mother in her 40s -who covered her thin body in baggy jeans and sweatpants and baggy sweaters. She had black hair that fell straight and simply to her chin. She rarely left home; she always had on her slippers. Unlike most women from the Ecuadorian Highlands, she didn't wear makeup. She wore large thick brown glasses that covered her face, which was pretty: finely boned with high cheekbones, a straight nose and dark eyes. Her face often looked tired and older than 42 years, like she had endured much in that time.

Martha gave not only the requisite kiss on the cheek but a hug as well. Her smile was sweet. Martha's only child, a daughter, was 18 years old and had recently gotten married. Martha missed her company and openly lamented that her daughter chose to marry so young. Martha wanted her to experience more independence. Martha was gracious and utterly polite with *cortesía*. At times I had suspected that *cortesía* masked real feelings-it felt phony -with some people—but my friends and I sensed that Martha was sincere. She loved to talk to us and laugh, tilting back her head, closing her eyes, and calling us all, "Mihijta." My daughter.

We trusted Martha because when a girl was raped two months earlier, Martha took her to a second doctor, a good doctor, a doctor who didn't talk about the bullfights to his assistant "while examining a girl who had been raped. The other host mothers and the administrators of our school were distraught for this girl but blamed this girl. They thought that it was such a shame that she had been raped because she was so pretty and asked each other why American girls have to drink so much.

Martha told me that she'd had a maid once who'd had an abortion; she knew of a doctor who would do it, for 100.000 sucres, twenty-five dollars. It was illegal, but the doctor needed the money. I didn't know what I wanted

and I didn't have much time. My mom was coming to visit from Ohio in four days. My dad would arrive a few days after that and we "were going to have a two-week family vacation. I decided that I would talk to my mom if I was still undecided. My mom is Catholic. She is also open-minded and the most generous person I know. Her most conservative opinions regard sexuality. She is uncomfortable with both sex before marriage and abortion. She knew that I had sex in relationships. She had said in the past, -when we fought about sex, "I feel like I've failed you. I feel like I've failed to teach you well." When I was younger, she'd sent me to a Montessori school that emphasized independence and critical thinking, instead of the Catholic schools that both she and my dad attended, but she wished that my critical thoughts matched hers more closely. I knew that if I told her that I was pregnant, she would support me. I also knew that she would always consider it her mistake as much as mine; that she would take it personally. I remembered her sobbing in the shower when I was 18, after she learned that I had lost my virginity. I didn't want to burden her and I didn't think I should have a baby, so I asked Martha to make an appointment for me for the day my parents left.

The whole time that my parents were in Ecuador, I felt sick. I wanted to vomit constantly. Nausea made it very hard for me to be entertaining. I was tired and didn't want to plan excursions. My mom could tell that I didn't feel well and I said I thought I had a parasite—all of us in Ecuador had amoebas from time to time. I said I knew which medicine to take and that I would take it. On my birthday, though, while visiting a family friend in Ambato, a 2 and a half hour drive from Quito, I was being so unbearable that she tried to make me go to a doctor. I got flustered and angry and she couldn't understand. "Shirley's uncle is a doctor. He'll see you for free. Come on, why not?" she begged. I'm sure it was bewildering to my parents that I got so mad and I said that I just needed to go to bed, that I knew what my problem was. I didn't need anyone's help. I stormed to the terminal terrestre, caught the next bus for Quito, and laid in bed, exhausted, eating bananas until they returned the next day. I took them to Mariscal Sucre Airport and we all kissed goodbye, pecks on the lips. I thought about how they had sat at desks in the conference room of our whitewashed school building and told me how proud they were of me when Rose handed me my certificate. My graduation present was money to travel more in South America and I "was also thinking about going to the turquoise Caribbean. My stomach churned with relief and guilt.

The same day, I -went to the doctor with Amy, Martha and the maid. In the dingy -waiting room, I gave my name, or Martha gave hers; I don't remember. We sat in hardback chairs. I may have leafed through *Vistazo* magazine. When I went into the examining room, the nurse followed and closed the door behind us. The room was small with brown walls and a medical table covered "with white paper, wedged into the center of the room, at an angle. The room was on the 12th floor of the office building. It was a corner room and two of the walls were lined with square windows without woodwork or windowsills. They looked out onto other boxy South American high-rises and the green slope of volcanic Mt. Pichincha. A dusty bookshelf filled with texts ran along the wall underneath one of the rows of "windows but the rest of the

wall space was bare, with the exception of a metal cabinet and sink. The room was lit with an old yellow light from the ceiling. The light bulb hung above a frosted glass panel and the light was weak and shadowy. At the foot of the table were metal extensions securing stirrups, a bright floor lamp shining into the empty space between the stirrups, one chair and a stool. The stool held a metal pan and in the pan were vials, a needle, a shiny speculum, small knives, a straight-edge razor, rubber gloves, a folded towel. Next to the stool was a wastebasket.

The doctor was a woman but I have no idea what she looked like. She didn't want to talk to me. She hardly looked at me. She told me to lie down and with a shot, gave me a local anesthetic. A moment later, she opened me with a speculum and began to scrape out the inside wall of my uterus with something hard. I held onto the sides of the table and said, "I can feel everything. Should I be able to feel everything?" I said, "It hurts so much." She wouldn't answer me or look at me. I felt that she was mad at me. I felt raw. I felt metal meet muscle. It wasn't a polite exchange. I felt something slipping out. It hurt, badly. I held very tightly onto the sides of the table and I twisted my head around and I arched my neck so that I could see out of the windows behind me and I cried and I said softly, over and over and over, in a wet throaty voice, "Mom, mom, mommy," and "I want to go home." It was lying there that I decided that I wasn't going to stay in Ecuador, that I wasn't going to rent an apartment for the summer, or do an internship, or go south to Peru and Macchu Picchu. I was going to break my promise to my Colombian relatives who I'd met over Christmas in Bogota—I wouldn't return. Trinidad and Tobago -were now out of the question. I wanted to go home.