

# IN FLIGHT

BY TU THANH HA

**L**ouise was in a bad mood. Her doctor wouldn't allow her to eat and she nearly missed her flight when she arrived at the airport, very early that morning in St. John's Newfoundland.

On board, while the attendants served breakfast, passengers started chit-chatting, telling each other why they were going to Montreal. Everyone sitting in her row said they were visiting relatives so Louise decided to go along. She lied and said she was also visiting someone.

It is a situation many in Newfoundland are aware of but about which few will talk publicly: it is nearly impossible to have access to safe abortions in the province. As a result, hundreds of women every year seek an early end to their pregnancy in Quebec and Ontario. "It's absolutely horrend-

## HOW NEWFOUNDLAND WOMEN ARE FINDING SAFE ABORTION IN MONTREAL

That afternoon, Louise arrived at the Morgentaler Clinic in Montreal and walked into the waiting room. Seven of the passengers on the plane were already there. They'd also lied.

"We sort of glanced at each other with this embarrassed look on our faces," Louise says, "because we all pretended we weren't from the same place."

"I remember sitting there, thinking, 'My God, there's \$7,000 that just flew out of Newfoundland'. All in one morning."

ous," says Wendy Williams, clinic coordinator for Planned Parenthood of Newfoundland and Labrador. "I've worked with people for who it was the first time they ever flew. People who had never been in a city where they spoke French before. And if they don't have the money to go to Montreal or Toronto, they have the baby. Straight and simple."

"Clinics don't keep records of how many women from each province get abortions in Montreal but Dr. Henry Morgentaler has said that he sees four Newfoundland

women at his Montreal clinic every week," she adds. "It could easily be that there are 200 to 300 women a year going out of the province. I wouldn't doubt that at all."

The Canadian Criminal Code allows legal abortions to be performed in hospitals if the patient has received an authorization from a committee of at least three doctors.

In Newfoundland, however, applicants don't meet with the actual committee. They are instead screened by a psychiatrist, a social worker, and a gynecologist, who will send a recommendation to the review committee. Furthermore, only one hospital in the province, the St. John's Health Sciences Centre, provides legal abortions. The review committee only meets there on Wednesdays.

The true purpose of the review board is to screen out people who do not fit the guidelines of the committee, says Williams.

"The whole procedure is not designed for counselling and support the way health care should be given," she says. "This is an adversarial filtering mechanism. You have to justify that there are no other possibilities — like marriage, or adoption, or single parenthood."

Louise (not her real name) is a student at Memorial University in St. John's who went to the Morgentaler Clinic in Montreal. She says women don't have legal abortions in Newfoundland unless they are making a political point because "it is

such a hassle" to have to go through.

"The actual interviewing process at the Health Sciences Centre takes an entire day," says Louise. "[Applicants] have to arrive on the only day of the week the interview is held. They come into town at nine o'clock in the morning. They're poked and prodded and bombarded with questions. They have to spend the entire day going through this process, then stay until they find out whether or not they've been accepted."

"There are coaches who can help you go through this review board," she says. "They show you how to cry at the appropriate moment. It's ludicrous. You have to prove your whole life is going to stop in order to get an abortion. It's fundamentally saying that women don't have a right to their own bodies."

"So when I decided to have an abortion, I went to Montreal. The whole thing cost about \$1,000. I had about two days' notice — it's a big drawback for a lot of people if you don't have that amount of money. Most of my friends are students and when your loan gives you \$1,500 to live off for four months, you can't really blow it on a trip to Montreal."

It costs about \$300 for the abortion and \$600 for the plane ticket. Because of the stress and financial problems, women who come to Quebec will try to find distant relatives or friends they have in

common to rely on for their support.

"I helped Newfoundland women on two occasions," says Jennifer Feinberg, a student at Concordia University in Montreal. "The second time around was more delicate. I didn't know the person at all but she had been referred by a very good friend of mine. Leslie was still living with her parents and they didn't know about it so she was really freaked out."

"She didn't have much money. It was all borrowed — all her friends got together and made a big collection of their savings to send her here. It was a joint effort by a lot of women and it was secret. So I decided to get myself out of whatever work I was doing that night and got her to stay at my home."

The following day, the two women went to the Morgentaler Clinic, an unassuming red-brick townhouse in the east end of the city. As they arrived, Feinberg and Leslie were confronted by anti-choice protesters, two men and two women dressed in dark clothes and holding placards and photos of fetuses in jars.

The protesters didn't say anything, watching solemnly as the women went up the steps. Leslie got very upset when she saw them, Feinberg says.

"Here she was, facing this incredibly difficult ordeal already and there were these people saying she's a filthy baby-killer. So I hustled her

in and I yelled at them, 'Fuck you, get your laws off our bodies...'"

The anti-choice people try to intimidate women who go to the clinic. For that reason, Feinberg says women usually go there in pairs so the protestors don't know which one is going to have the abortion.

Inside, the two women waited for about an hour until Leslie was admitted in for preliminary tests.

"In the waiting room, there was a young mother and a friend and another woman who was reading," says Feinberg. "Just being the nosy twit I was, I was looking at their faces and I could tell they were nervous, agitated."

"There was tension and anxiety but the nurse was being really cool. At least three times I mentioned to her how disgusting I thought the marchers were. She was used to them but for me it was a new sense of revulsion. I just couldn't believe they were trying to make these women uncomfortable during what was probably the most difficult time of their life."

After the medical procedure, Leslie was led to a recovery room. It was quiet and cozy, with curtains. On a coffee table beside the bed were pamphlets and samples of different birth control methods: diaphragms, condoms, spermicides, etc.

"One thing every woman I know who has had an abortion feels afterwards is relief," says Feinberg. "You feel you're staring a new life

because, from the time you get a positive pregnancy result to the time it's finished, it's hell. Just a disgusting mess."

"Newfoundland women I talked to describe it as a really sick feeling because you're living a double life. On the surface of things you have to keep busy but inside, you're a nervous wreck. You feel your head is going to explode because you deal with people you see every day but now there's something different plaguing you that you can't tell."

According to Louise, the issue of abortion in Newfoundland is too shrouded with moral arguments, leaving pregnant women unprepared for the practical problems they have to face.

"When I found out I was pregnant, I was totally numb," she says. "In my case, I had only two days to sit down and decide to go to Montreal. You get hit in the

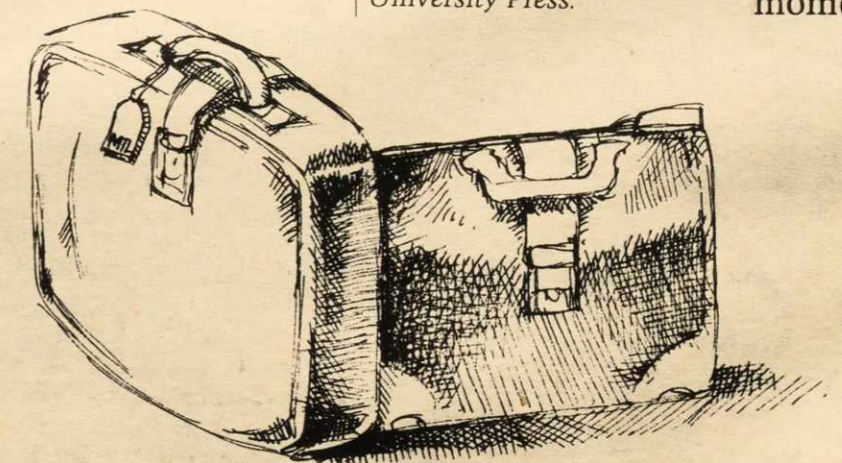
face with the practicalities of getting an appointment at the clinic, and buying a plane ticket, and finding some obscure brand of suppositories and so it's twelve o'clock and here I am driving around trying to find a pharmacy. These are things you really don't think of in advance."

"That's a bit emotional but still, when it comes down to it, you're fundamentally alone because you're the one who has to travel, you're the one who has to come up with the money, you're the one who has to go through the medical procedure, you're the one who has to live with it afterwards."

"We're talking about a terrible situation here that's not getting better," says Williams. "But it's not a political issue because the government isn't interested in dealing with it, provincially or federally."

"And everyone pretends nothing is going on."

Tu Thanh Ha is the Quebec Bureau Chief for Canadian University Press.



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