

● the 21st OBSESSIONS

This is OBSESSIONS 21, and an *Obsessive Press* number 60, begun on November 29, 1980 to be sent out well before deadline so that I can visit San Francisco and Seattle between Christmas and New Year's without having to borrow someone's typewriter and get in my minac. All material is copyrighted © 1980, by Jeanne Gomoll unless other credit is noted.

When I was a kid on 39th Street (down two blocks from North avenue) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, we used to play a game of tag that centered on a big oak tree in a neighbor's yard down the block. The person who was "it" hid their eyes against that tree and counted to 100 while all the rest of us ran away and hid. When "it" had reached 100, they would try to find us and tag us before we could get back to the tree. If you could get back to the tree without being tagged out, you won.

Well, right now I feel very much like I've gotten back to the tree without being tagged: Very good really. Last November 14, I went in for a tubal ligation. I'm now off the pill entirely, off any form of regularly applied precautions in fact, and home free.

Since so many of you have been mentioning that you are thinking about being sterilized, and because I really want to talk about it and this seems to be the most appropriate place to do it, this is how it went:

One of the worst things about the day was having to get up at 5:00 in the morning. That says as much for my disgust of early morning risings as it does for the comparative rigors of the operation and recovery. By 6:30 I was in the weird open-ended hospital gown and robe reading Eleanor Dark's *Storm of Time* (an Australian book, more about which later). Intermittantly a nurse or doctor would come in and take blood samples, measure blood pressure ("It's OK, I normally have really low blood pressure. I'm fine really.") and lecture us about the effects of the anesthetic procedure and what we could expect during the rest of the day. There were three of us in the ward all having the same operation. Madison General Hospital does (one of the nurses told me) about 10 sterilizations a week.

I was a little nervous, but more excited than worried. And mostly I was anxious about a whole day lost to nothing but sleeping and lounging around in bed. So I read quickly, hoping to finish the book while I was at the hospital. The other two women seemed far more nervous than I was. While I preferred to sit in one of the easy chairs and wait till I had to get into bed, they had themselves laid out within 10 minutes of entering the ward. They complained jokingly about being starved and missing their favorite meal, breakfast (since we were not allowed to eat after midnight the previous night; or drink anything). Since I rarely eat breakfast anyway, I wasn't hungry at all. It was funny though, because later after we'd all been rolled back into the ward after the operations (one after the other), I recovered without any nauseous feelings and had lunch. The other two women who had talked about being voraciously hungry couldn't bear to look at my tray without getting all white in the face. Apparently women have all sorts of different reactions to the operation, and about the worst one possible is several

hours of nausea. I have a theory, based on my experiences and questions answered by the nurses, that some of the differing effects have to do with the attitudes of the women going in to be sterilized. My attitude can be described by the fact that I laughed a great deal that morning, and when the doctors and nurses in OR were making humorous comments just before I went under with the anesthetic (explaining that they liked their patients to feel relaxed), I said that I thought it was more important that they were relaxed. So Dr. Anderson said that maybe I should tell them a joke. And I did. With my feet up in stirrups I told them the joke about the woman (in old Scotland and so the thing was told in a brogue) giving birth. The midwife kept asking the father to hold the lantern closer because, "I think there's another one coming!" And indeed a second child was born. But then the midwife asked the father to hold the lantern closer again, saying "I think there's another one!" And the father backed away in horror, saying "No, it's the light that's attracting them!" In my position, that was quite a weird joke to tell. Later when Dr. Anderson was making his rounds and came in to check on me, I recalled all the times he told me and warned me that I'd have to consider this an irreversible operation, that once done, I would probably never be able to change my mind. So when he looked in and asked how I was, I said "fine...but I think I've changed my mind." He looked stunned for only the small amount of time it took me before I lost control of my straight face and broke out giggling. That hurt my abdomen (the incisions) and I held myself trying to stop laughing and he walked out shaking his head saying that I deserved it.

The other two women, on the other hand, really didn't want the operation. Both had had quite a few children and in one case simply couldn't afford any more than the two she'd had, and the other probably couldn't survive any more than she had had (5 or 6 of which only 2 had survived being born). Both said they loved babies and loved giving

birth, and would like many more children if it were possible. One of the women (Elsie, the one who simply couldn't afford more children), said that her sister in Dubuque had been sterilized the previous year and her relatives had found out about it (one of them worked at the local hospital), and she had been grilled about it and "talked to" by nearly every member of the family. Elsie decided that she didn't want that treatment, and so to preserve her privacy had come up to Madison secretly (only her husband knowing) under cover of a visit to her sister-in-law's. All Elsie could talk about before going into OR was how she loved babies and how she wished she had been able to tell her mother about what she'd decided to do. She was a bundle of regrets. And Elsie came out of OR sickest of the three of us, doubled over in cramps and throwing up every little while. She almost had to stay the night.

You see, even with the "worst case," the bandaide sterilization is almost always an out-patient procedure. The only discomfort I had, after I'd gotten through anesthetic after-effects (sore throat, etc) was a 2-3 hour feeling of being beat up all over from my upper legs to my shoulders, and a 2-3 day discomfort at the incision points. The beat-up feeling is an after-effect that only some patients get and results from the carbon dioxide that they inject into one's abdomen during the operation (to give a clear view for the doctor to cut, tie or burn the fallopian tubes: in my case, it was to burn them with a tiny lazer beam). This gas rises to one's shoulders (or right shoulder if you happen to be lying on your left side, or visa versa) and until it dissapates (through movement mostly) it's slightly uncomfortable. It wasn't bad enough for me to want aspirin or anything. Slightly more uncomfortable, mostly because it lasts longer, is the pain at the incision points. I can save you from a lot of that by pointing out one of my mistakes though: When you go to the hospital, don't go, like I did, with only the jeans you came with to change back into. Or anything that belts at

or near your navel. That's the place where the uppermost incision is (the other for me was in the lower part of my abdomen area, just within my pubic hair and directly below the other incision. Think dresses, mumus. It's a very simple operation. For me, it's worth a hundred times over the feeling of relief I get just knowing that I will never get pregnant, never have to get an abortion, and most of all, not have to worry about the possible effects more years of the pill is having on my body.

As I lay on the bed waiting my friend, Nancy, to come to pick me up (since we weren't supposed to spend the night alone, she had generously offered to have me over to her house and take care of me), I watched the TV with a nurse who sat with me. She was explaining something about the show we were watching and asked with an incredulous voice didn't I have a TV set?? "No, I haven't had one in 6 or 7 years," I assured her. A long pause followed. She was young—21 or 22, I think—and had the most enormous green eyes and I grinned at her, but immediately lost my amusement for a moment when she finally responded, "Well...wait till you have kids!" "What have you done to me!!" I cried, then laughed uncontrollably (painfully) at the sight of her embarrassment and apologies.

So that is the whole thing. A few hours of boredom as you wait for the thing to start. A couple hours of unconsciousness (though the operation only takes 15 minutes). A few hours of discomfort during which you want only to stay lying in bed (and you do). A couple days of limited activities. Then home free. I recommend it to anyone who is sure that they do not want children. Most insurance policies cover it in their maternity sections. (It's much cheaper to pay for a sterilization for these companies than it is to pay for possible abortions or, especially, pregnancies.) If you are covered by health insurance you are probably covered for sterilizations. That's one of the main considerations, of course, for women who want to be sterilized. It was for me,

since I've known for 8 years that I wanted to be sterilized and delayed only for financial reasons. With my state job and the insurance coverage, I've finally been able to do what I wanted to do. For those who wonder if they can afford it without insurance, the total cost of mine was about \$400. (That's the hospital bill and Anesthesiologist's bills totalled. I don't think there will be any other costs, but it is only a couple weeks since my operation and there may be more. It does not include the three office visits: one to plan and discuss the procedure, one a week before the operation date to do a quick physical, and the third three weeks after the operation to check that everything went alright. That one's next week for me. So add about \$20 to the total.)

Probably another consideration, that I really didn't have to worry about, is finding a doctor who is willing to do the operation if you are unmarried, single and young. My age, 29, is probably no longer such a worry to the patriarchal medical institution. But I made sure that I didn't encounter a doctor who would want to cross-examine me and possibly would not believe my motives "correct" enough, by calling in at Planned Parenthood which (in Madison, at least) publishes a list of doctors who do female sterilizations and what their surveyed attitudes are. Thus I could avoid all those doctors who had been found to do sterilizations only for married women with their husbands' permission... When Dr. Anderson asked me if I was sure and I said yes, that I had been sure for 8 years, that was all there was to it. I didn't have to bring out the list of personal and political reasons I had for wanting never to have children. A friend of mine who was sterilized 8 years ago (the impetus, in fact, for my decision) had quite another experience. She had to visit Dr. Zartox (a woman doctor!) once a week for 6 months to talk about her decision. And Vickie had a heart condition that would have made pregnancy possibly fatal for her! Nevertheless, Vickie was very young (20), but she was extremely articulate (chair of the local Friends of the Earth group), and very sure. It made me furious and quite

Something subtler was at the root of his uneasiness. It was not the men whom he was doubting, it was . . . the place. . .

. . . the almost terrifying differentness of the land. . . he himself must be all the time alert to catch the mood of changing time and circumstance. He thought of it as a voluntary adjustment, not conscious of it as the first moulding process of the land.

...It was the place which frightened her.

...He saw this proclamation of ownership, with its pathetic bravado of pomp and ceremony, as a piece of infantile impertinence, of presumption so colossal and grotesque as to be worthy of nothing but the aloof indifference with which the land was treating it.

Suddenly he felt it. Things happened differently here. Seasons were reversed, the earth, the soil itself seemed another kind of substance, the very pattern of the stars overhead was unfamiliar. Everything which lived in it, everything which grew in it, was stamped unmistakably with its character. What happened, then, to men transplanted? Had he not felt, already, the necessity to adjust, to compromise? Acknowledging it, he felt himself stiffening against the thought which inevitably followed. Moral adjustment? Moral compromises? Different standards, different habits of thought, truths for which their fathers would have died become no longer truths, the clear-drawn pattern of the social structure they had known blurring, fading, growing unreal and unimportant, and some new conception arising, born out of their union with the land...

The land itself!...Neither welcoming nor repelling. Neither genial nor inimical. Only watching out of some colossal past in whose arms they had rested so securely for so many ages that no change seemed possible.

See what I mean? And those are just some of my notes from the first book, *The Timeless Land*. Dark seems to be drawing on the natives' conception

as being true to the identity of the land—and showing that western culture breaks down as a result of its conflict with the spirit of the place. The idea is rampant in everything I've read or seen from Australia (as I was saying last time). It reminds me of that short story by Sheckley (I think) about the explorers who land on a new planet and end up entirely ingested by the mono-culture of the planet, totally assimilated. I think awareness of the land must be a fairly common theme in writings by people involved in immigration from a densely populated society to a wilderness area, cut off from easy communication to the mother-land. But there is something about writing done about Australia that seems different to me. For instance, in writing about and by European colonists in America, the feeling is communicated that people will mould the land in contradiction to the often-mentioned Australian conviction that the land is moulding the people.

After the two Dark books, the library notified me that they'd found a couple more books on my request list through inter-library loan. I've finished Kylie Tennant's *Ride On Stranger* (1943) now and liked it a lot, though it doesn't add much to my notes on the land/Australia theme. It's an interesting book chiefly from a feminist perspective, though. The main character, Shannon Hicks, goes from one series of adventures to another (chapter by chapter), constantly leaving one group and one occupation for another as she becomes disillusioned by them. It's a picaresque novel in form. She leaves home for an aunt's place in the city because her mother can't handle her (much like the character in *My Brilliant Career*). She gets really mad at her teacher when he says that she should have no ambitions other than a normal girl's ambitions to be a wife and mother. Shannon wants to be a lawyer. Eventually, after a series of short-lived careers that moves through charleton and prosteletyzing groups, back-to-nature cultists (in which I found an interesting Aboriginal word, *Alcheringa*, which means "the spirit of the place"), radio and finally Marxist movement people, she does work as a self-taught lawyer. She stays carefully celibate and is an interesting character. The book was

