

TERMINAL TALK

Getting to grips with history.

BY SCOTT AKALIS

Snow fell on the adjacent hills, sleet on the airport. After they announced the delay, she smiled and asked: “Still drinking Coke?”

The motley beer-tap handles looked like a group of childhood friends grown apart. He turned away from them and responded: “Okay.”

As they sipped their sodas, she studied his eyes — blue like hers. “Did you finish all your work?”

“Everything except this essay on abortion. It’s just hard to write about something with no bearing on you.”

She coughed up some cola. “You know, it was considered an intractable issue only 20 years ago.”

“I guess.”

“Do you have any choice?”

Staring out at the amorphous white hills, he shook his head. “What were the different sides, again?”

“I was worrying they taught you not to ask questions.”

He rolled his eyes and pulled out his jEverything, a cheap iAll knockoff.

“Pro-life and pro-choice,” she said.

“Or anti-choice and anti-life.”

“Yeah. It’s weird — we used to avoid talking about this, and your grandparents —”

“They didn’t actually have one, did they?”

“No, they had *me*.”

His eyes blinked and broadened.

“They were young and backpacking around Europe. Neither ever discussed it directly; that’s just not how their generation was. But you could read...” She picked up her Coke and turned away, towards the overhead TV. One team played another.

He planted a hand against the bar and swivelled towards the concourse, his eyes fixing on a passing babe and the pink baggage trailing her.

“Now it seems almost quaint, like that gold-standard thing,” she said, turning back from the TV.

He reached for his Coke without rotating away from the concourse.

Her fragile smile broke. “Anyway, the pro-lifers believed life began at conception, which made abortion murder. For the pro-choice camp, it was more of a women’s rights issue.”

His straw choked on air.

“Have another,” she said. “It’s dry up there.”



He sighed and swivelled back. “Was it, like, an age divide?”

“More a religious thing,” she said with a slight lip.

He checked his jEverything for transcription errors but found none.

“You have to understand that doctors were getting shot over this. Nobody expected a resolution, especially not without some consensus on when life begins.”

He studied the cocktail garnishes below and the liquor bottles above. The wax seal on the Maker’s Mark resembled a bleeding maraschino.

“Progress, if any, was supposed to come from scientific breakthroughs or shifts within the Church.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Are you listening to me?”

He deleted the last sentence and set the jEverything on the bar. She rose up and peered over. Its inferior screen limited the angles from which it could be read. Further thwarting her efforts, he slid his glass in front of the device and resumed their conversation. “Then came the sterility epidemic,” he said.

The bartender, seeing the half-empty glass slide forward, rushed over and topped it up. She grinned and, after a moment, responded: “Right.”

“Do you think someone engineered the virus?” he asked, lifting the Coke off the bar.

“Maybe, but I wouldn’t cover the details of the conspiracy theories in your paper. I mean, half of them implicate that whacko who turned pregnant women’s pee brown.”

He set his drink down. She laughed.

“You haven’t heard about this guy? He thought he could end late-term abortions by adding chemicals to his town’s water supply that would turn every tinkle into a pregnancy test.”

He looked dumbfounded. “So do I just skip the origins of the virus?”

“You could do a brief summary, but what’s

going to get you an A is going beyond that — like asking whether the debate would have ended the way it did if

God’s fingerprints hadn’t been on the epidemic.”

He turned towards the window to contemplate. The outline of the crests appeared through the tapering snow. Closer, a worker finished spraying the underside of a wing.

“Anyway, you’ll want to cover the epidemic itself: the onset and panic, the talk of extinction, the summits...” Her voice grew both more intimate and distant. “What a time to be alive.”

“You mean right before I was born?”

“Yes. And never forget you have science to thank for that whole being-born thing.”

“So I don’t have to buy Mother’s Day cards anymore?”

She grinned and shook her head. He finished his Coke and glanced towards the growing line of passengers at the gate.

“One more thing you should know is that *the pill* used to refer to a contraceptive, not a fertility treatment. I sometimes forget how your conception of pregnancy has always depended as much on those capsules as it has sperm.”

His face reddened on eye contact with the bartender. He dismounted the stool and picked up his bag.

“Wait here a little longer,” she said.

He set his bag on the stool.

“Now do you see the connections between this issue — obsolete as it may be — and its, uh, descendant?”

“Pill access?” he said. “Sure — some see it as a woman’s right; others talk about the would-be baby and protest government subsidies, doctors who give the pill to minors —”

“I think you’re ready.”

The intercom announced general boarding. As they hugged, he gazed out the window once more. The snow had stopped, and the glint of the ice was gone.

“Call me if you need more help,” she said.

“Okay.”

“Will you, please?”

“Yes.” He took a step towards the gate and stopped. Turning around, he spotted his jEverything sitting on the bar.

She handed it to him, saying: “Wouldn’t want to lose that one.”

It transcribed ‘one’ as ‘son’. ■

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