

Before Roe v. Wade: A Memoir

Thirty years after Roe v. Wade protected a woman's right to choose, a Manhattan Beach woman looks back on an ordeal that pre-dated the historic case and nearly cost her her life

By Bev Morse

I got pregnant when I was in college, and I had an abortion and yes, I will always remember the terror, shame and unbelievable, delirious pain of that two-day medical procedure, of that nameless doctor in a high-ceilinged, sack hotel suite, with lines of other young and old women, mostly poor, all terrified, looking as the newcomer walked in, I walking by them, my mother being told to leave, to wait in her car downstairs, and they, women like me but so unlike me I thought at the time, as I was led past them, out of turn, they waiting their turns in the bedroom with no assistant, no anesthesia, and what I consider now to be this brave doctor, his tools of trade coming out of a black leather bag, so like my own pediatrician's from house visits so far in the past, those instruments now sucking the life out of me, my own and the embryo, parts of my uterus being torn from me, as I would later learn when, married and wanting children, I suffered through more than a dozen miscarriages because of scar tissue.

Yes, I got pregnant when I was in college and thank God an illegal abortion saved my life, literally. I remember in perfect detail the faded splendor of that once grand hotel on Manhattan's West Side, its marbled and tarnished brass lobby and beautiful, man-attended elevator that took me and my mother up to the 11th floor, the sleazy operator insouciantly looking me up and down as I



This is the author's college graduation photo snapped one year after her abortion. She had no photos of herself from the year she had the abortion, and she had them shredded long ago.

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Published February 20, 2003

I got pregnant when I was in college, and I had an abortion and yes, I will always remember the terror, shame and unbelievable, delirious pain of that two-day medical procedure, of that nameless doctor in a high-ceilinged, back hotel suite, with lines of other young and old women, mostly poor, all terrified, looking as the newcomer walked in, I walking by them, my mother being told to leave, to wait in her car downstairs, and they, women like me but so unlike me I thought at the time, as I was led past them, out of turn, they waiting their turns in the bedroom with no assistant, no anesthesia, and what I consider now to be this brave doctor, his tools of trade coming out of a black leather bag, so like my own pediatrician's from house visits so far in the past, those instruments now sucking the life out of me, my own and the embryo, parts of my uterus being torn from me, as I would later learn when, married and wanting children, I suffered through more than a dozen miscarriages because of scar tissue.

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It took two days to empty my body of what was left there by a rapist, although who left it and why is now irrelevant. Any woman or girl who was raped back then was 'asking for it'- as is still thought, by many. Young, old, mother, married or not. Skirt too short, heels too high, too much leg, clothes too tight, built too well, hair too long, too short, too curly, too straight, too blonde, too black, too much lipstick, makeup, no makeup - 'she' - the Eve of us all, was looking for it. Too loud, laughing too loud, drinking too much, smoking in public - you name it - if she got raped, she was looking for it.

If you got pregnant for any reason back in the sixties, you were doomed to scorn and an embarrassment, not to mention severe financial hardship to your family and other children. There was no way I could have a baby, in college and working part time, and suddenly realizing I was pregnant, I began climbing trees and throwing myself down, jumping off kitchen counters, drinking vile things, running stairs, even horseback riding for hours. I forgot about their equine exhaustion, to my horror now; I only remember my own desperation. All day, every day, I took advantage of a moment of privacy to try to hurt myself. I pounded my stomach, tried to reach inside me to dislodge my womb. I screamed at God and cried to God, I begged for mercy, and for my life, and yes, for my father's. I couldn't tell my parents. I was loved and adored, as were both my sisters; we were wealthy and privileged and had "standing" in several wide communities, my parents in positions of leadership and voice in many areas of the world.

I couldn't tell my father I was pregnant. It would have broken his heart. Really broken his heart. He had had a very serious heart attack just a year before, and I knew I would kill him, not so much that I had shamed him, although the shame would have been mighty, but because of his broken heart for me, his own impotent fury, his dreams for me and my future, and for the terror, pain and suffering he would know I had felt, had experienced. Was feeling. Would always feel. I knew it would kill

him. He couldn't know.

And I would never have given it up to a stranger, never to know what could, might happen to it out of my care. It was my responsibility. I had no choice but the choice was mine.

Yes, I was suicidal - and relented, and went to my mother. She went crazy with fury and grief, but kept it from my father, and took over. At that point, I had become little more than my own shadow, outside myself, asleep while awake.

I attended school, went to my job at a publishing firm off Park Avenue, and my mother's interning physician, a woman, injected me with incredibly long needles for two weeks, trying to force a "spontaneous" abortion, a miscarriage, my mother and I driving in silence back and forth into the city on weekends, from our home on the Island. For long minutes in her offices on the upper West Side of Manhattan, as I stayed immobile during the injections, I stared at the wide, moving Hudson River, and across, to the New Jersey shore and Cascades on the other side. To no avail. The doctor, near tears and all business at the same time, hugged us both, slipping my mother, her former intern, a piece of paper with the name of an abortionist in the city. She told us to call him, and we left.

Unable to withdraw a sizeable amount of cash without my father's knowledge, my mother approached my aunt, my father's sister, a woman who loved her nieces so very much and showered us with love our entire lives - and who had no children of her own. I can't imagine what pain there must have been for them both, but my aunt paid for my abortion, and I stayed overnight in her and my uncle's apartment, also overlooking the river, which to this day, I find myself tasting the memory of wanting to jump in, those two months of agony trying to abort, trying to find an abortionist and then - thank God - finally being aborted, and so torn up inside, bleeding and lying as if dead 'til much later.

Sometime, I think, I must have half-dreamed of walking into a clinic or a hospital, like any other human being, and being treated in safe and sanitary conditions to help myself, my body, my life, in a time of need greater than life itself. My life. Mine.

I am a mother now, my two children making it through nearly a dozen miscarriages, and just recently, a grandmother.

If governments can legislate abortion, they can legislate birth. If they can outlaw abortion, they can, in fact, demand it.... We mustn't overturn Roe v Wade. A woman's body has nothing to do with government.