

On Abortion

by Lillian Hogendoorn

There are protesters standing on the northwest corner of Bloor and St. George. They rotate through the intersection throughout the day, big bloody signs on sticks held by the spindly arms of teenage boys and girls with braids in their hair. From where I stand, I can count six of them.

They don't shout, but you can hear them. "Excuse me, what are your thoughts on abortion?" they politely sing in a round backed by idling engines and footsteps and swirling iced coffees. People brush past, waving their hands and diverting their gaze. Some reach into their pockets to turn up their volume on their true crime podcasts. Others scowl and mumble.

I hesitate—wait for the light to change and change again. The young protesters are owed an answer I don't have. I am misaligned, thoughts unformed and feelings raw at the edges.

"What are your thoughts on abortion?" Grateful, I think. For my friends whose lives are shaped by the babies they didn't have. For the doctors who didn't have to worry when they removed an embryo growing where it shouldn't have been, able to focus their concern on saving the woman with childlike fear in her eyes and a pain in her gut. For who that woman was able to become, even with missing pieces.

Six months ago when I peed on a stick between meetings for peace of mind and two pink lines appeared, I walked into my son's room and sat on the floor. Heat coursed from my fingers to my heart. Tears formed but didn't flow. It's okay. I told myself. This is my choice. I thought of the women who I grew up with, women living in states whose options are limited by legislators. I tried to feel grateful. "It's my choice," I said aloud to no one. "It's my choice, it's my choice."

I had needed the peace of mind the drugstore pregnancy test kit had been meant to provide, even if its result caused me confusion. I had an IUD implanted in my cervix at my six-week postpartum checkup. Good for five years and 99.8 percent effective, my OBGYN promised. As a bonus, my periods could become nearly unnoticeable, save for a bit of cramping every thirty days. A feature, not a bug. Pregnancy with an IUD was an impossibility, reserved for extraordinary women who defied norms regularly. I called my doctor, and she asked me if I'd like to be referred for obstetric care or termination. I could not answer. I finally cried

"I know it's hard," she said, as if reading from a script. She told me to call her back when I was decided.

Now looking at protestors' signs featuring half formed heads and tiny fingers, I think, "Is this what was growing inside me?" Inside my body, but outside of my uterus where they should have been for eleven long weeks, while seasons changed and I drank cocktails on patios and read my son stories in the blue chair I had once rocked him to sleep in. While we swam in the lake and built sandcastles together, and I bought shapewear and a one-piece swimsuit with ruching that promised a tummy tucking effect. While I biked until sweat formed under my fingernails, looking at my body and willing her to shrink. While I counted calories and ate salads and longed for the body I had on my wedding day, the body that my husband fell in love with, that used to come so effortlessly to me. While I did not bleed.

At eight weeks of not knowing I bought a dress in the maternity section. White puffed sleeves with blue flowers. An empire waist skimmed over my taught belly. I imagined the hem grazing my ankles, my neck unadorned. I closed my eyes and saw the pearl earrings my husband bought me for my thirtieth birthday, the lipstick at the bottom of my makeup bag, the two of us sipping wine and holding hands under the table while someone else placed our son gently in his crib. I wanted to hide the midsection I had been painstakingly working to shrink as numbers on the scale just kept creeping up and up. On the subway on my way home, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the closing doors. My hand rested on my lower abdomen, a familiar loving touch. I can take care of you, it said. Someday, maybe.

At three weeks of not knowing I ate burgers and drank beers at a surprise party for the birth of my nephew. In the morning, my breasts hurt when I turned to check the time on my phone. Your period may start today, my health app warned me. The app offered a useful reminder, though my periods had been irregular since the birth of our son two years earlier. I packed two Advil and an extra pair of underwear in my purse. Crowded under a tarped pergola with friends of family, the rain poured into the backyard weighing down blue balloons. “When are you going to have another one?” someone asked. We laughed. Not anytime soon, one is good. “Besides,” my husband chimed in, “Have you seen our kid? He’s perfect.” They smiled and agreed, watching him as he tried to eat a blue cupcake nose first. “It’s a shame,” they added, “You make such beautiful babies.”

I never called my doctor back. In the evening we argued in whispers as our two-year-old rode his tricycle up and down the hallway. “He would be such a great brother,” my husband said and I nodded.

“I don’t know if I can do this again” I replied, watching fear and sadness flash across his face. We tried to calculate a due date—date of your last period, negative pregnancy tests taken after the first missed period. An ultrasound would help, we concluded. I thought about the IUD embedded in my cervix. Did it need to be removed? Had it given up on its own?

I asked if he could come with me to my ultrasound, and he pulled up his calendar. We asked our son if he wanted to have a baby in the house. “I am a baby!” he said. “Just my mommy!” I smiled.

“He doesn’t know what that means,” my husband said.

Has anyone ever talked to the kids protesting on the corner about the complexity of motherhood? Of loving being someone’s mom and not wanting to be a mother again? About your soft body becoming a host, violently rejecting foods you used to love, sweat beading on your forehead while people say “You’re glowing!” Your organs squishing against each other until you can’t breathe or see your toes. Your peripheral vision disappearing as you drive alone on the highway, seatbelt below the bump, trying to keep everyone safe and wondering if this is normal. Holding your partner’s hand through pain and pressure as a small and helpless person is pushed from your body and into your

arms. Thick blood and sweet tears and he is yours. You feel love in a way you didn't know you could and darkness in a way you hoped you wouldn't. None of this you could have imagined even hours earlier when you were bouncing on a ball in a hospital gown eating a popsicle. When he was still just an idea. As unreal as the day you looked down at your belly in the shower and whispered, "If you're in there, I promise we'll take such good care of you."

As quickly as we had learned about another life growing inside me, a familiar pain shot through my body—the ghost of a contraction. The only decision made was that we could not make a life altering choice on an empty stomach. Walking on the sidewalk to grab a burger, my husband and I each holding one of our son's hands, my body contracted once again. I braced myself. "One, two, three, wheel!" He squealed. I grimaced. *I need to go to the hospital* I mouthed to my husband. *It can't wait.*

At the hospital I say the words. "I think I'm having a miscarriage." They tumble out of my mouth as my spine curls from the pressure in my abdomen. A stranger behind me in line rubs my back, and I tense. "It's okay," she says, "I work here." A bald woman with no pants runs out of the sliding doors into the warm August night. A police officer follows behind her. The clerk sends me to the "yellow zone," where my name is on a list of a dozen other names on a monitor with an estimated forty-seven-minute wait. I try to listen to a podcast. I check my emails, deleting BOGO promos for sushi restaurants and shoe stores. I text my husband to ask how bedtime went. "Fine. He misses Mommy," he says. "How are you?" I don't know the answer.

I go to the bathroom to check for blood, but there is nothing. Maybe I'm okay. I think. I catch myself. Maybe the baby is okay. This isn't comforting; it rests the decision back in my hands, saddling me with the possibility of lifelong regrets and resentments. Why should I choose? I am a bad mother who didn't know enough to take care of her unborn child. I am a good mother who is too selfish to want to mother again. I want someone to tell me the answer. I want to be a child, tucked in at the time my mother deemed appropriate and woken by an alarm set by my father, punctuated by the smell of bacon and coffee. I think about the purple and orange striped overalls I had when I was

five and wonder what happened to them as I tie the back of my hospital gown and pull up my yoga pants. I can hear a thread snap as they struggle to hold my growing body.

The nurse asks me about the date of my last period. “June 7th” I say, but I quickly explain that I had a negative pregnancy test in July. “That doesn’t matter. Eleven weeks” she says confidently. She takes my blood and leaves. “Usually takes about an hour,” she says, already out the door to the next patient. I Google “Due Date Calculator.” March 16th. Take away two weeks, when I was induced last time. March 2nd. I flip ahead in my calendar—it’s clear. Great. I wonder if I should put an event in the calendar, but I decide against it.

They say they need to do an ultrasound. An orderly wheels me through the empty halls. He asks me about my last name and I tell him it is Dutch. He says he loves stroopwafel, and I don’t have the heart to tell him that I am not even a little Dutch. That unlike most of my friends I chose to take my husband’s last name against his better judgment so that I could have the same name as our child. In the dark ultrasound room, the technician is silent. I think maybe if I catch a familiar glimpse of a beating heart I will know my answer. I crane my neck to see the screen but he has it turned. He says we’ll need to do a transvaginal ultrasound and calls a female technician in to supervise. He pushes a probe into me and presses on my stomach and I flinch.

They bring me to a new room. There is a sign on the wall. Pregnancy and Infant Loss Network: We Know It Hurts; We are Here to Help. I take a picture and send it to my husband. “Dark,” I caption it. Very, he agrees. A doctor tells me my HCG levels are too low, the IUD is in place, there was too much blood on my ultrasound to see much. It could be extrauterine, or not. I’m “probably” miscarrying. I ask if there is anything they can do. I have a friend, I say, who had a DNC when her baby’s heartbeat failed her growing body. And another friend whose doctor prescribed Misoprostol and sent her home to speed things along. And I have a family member who had laparoscopic surgery to remove the embryo from a fallopian tube. I would like an abortion, my heart screams. “Is there anything you can do?” I ask.

“No,” she says. Instead she tells me that I’ll probably start bleeding soon and bleed for weeks. I am to follow up every week until the pregnancy is undetectable in my body. Until then, I will be both pregnant and not.

“How long will it take?” I ask. She doesn’t know. It could be soon or not. She asks me if I have any other questions, and I do. What would we have named the baby? Could I have lived with myself? Would my husband have ever forgiven me? I ask her about pain management. Tylenol and Advil. “Take it easy.” She leaves.

In the waiting room again, a nurse comes over and holds my hand. She has kind eyes like my mother and she asks if there is anything she can do for me. I ask for Ibuprofen. “Better not.” she says “You still have a baby in there.” I will cry about this in the car, I think. But I am too numb. Before I go to sleep, I fill the toilet with clotted blood and I know.

“What are your thoughts on abortion?” the protesters chorus. Jealous, I think. Weeks later, a friend will have one. Her baby’s heart will stop beating in her body, as they often do this early. One in three pregnancies, the statistic says. In Idaho or Missouri, a physician could only hold her hand and hope that the body would shed the baby on its own. But her doctor will let her choose. A clean cut. She will know what was there and what isn’t. She will grieve a child she knew she wanted, a love she hasn’t yet gotten to feel. I send her flowers and my heart breaks a little more.

What if my grief could be as focused and even? There one day and gone the next. We compare miscarriages as I’ve learned that women do. We are in the same club and I am somehow still alone. Another friend tells me the same thing happened to her a decade ago—a blister pack of pills and a box of condoms failed her first, her body failed her second. It rocked her trust in her body and mind. In her one-bedroom apartment with sharp corners on the coffee table and candles burning on the windowsill she tells me she is grateful.

“At least we didn’t have to decide,” my husband says. He is grateful too.

The first morning that I am both pregnant and not at the same time, I take my son to the aquarium. It’s a plan we’ve had for months, and I have longed to see my child’s face light up while the fish swim by and see my niece grab his hand. The pure joy of being two and experiencing something you weren’t sure was real and knowing that there is magic around you. His little hands press up against the glass as jellyfish swim by and he

gasps. I stuff a pad in my underwear—one in the set I bought for postpartum that I have worn every day since. Life keeps going, even as it is ending.

Spring is coming. I grab my soft belly, I know it is empty and I can't be sure. I hold my child in my arms and he asks to see pictures of when he was in my tummy. I flip through my phone—old ultrasounds and self-timed photos where I carefully positioned my hands on my growing stomach. There is one photo he particularly likes, snapped of his mother and father in front of a newly built crib. We are giving each other a quizzical smile, unsure if the picture has been taken or not. Ready or not! 38 weeks in and ? to go I had captioned it. We were not ready—no one can be. He was born days later. “Can I go back in your tummy, Mommy?” he asks. I tell him no, he is too big, but he will always be my baby. Besides, I tell him, babies in their Mommies’ bellies can’t eat ice cream or play soccer or dress up like superheroes. He agrees that being on his own is better. He is so sure that he knows. I hope I can be like him someday.



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