Confession of Choice

I was pregnant when I didn't want to be, in the fall of my senior year of college. That year I wasn't on the pill, because of migraines, and other birth control was less reliable, especially when you didn't use it. My roommate Joanne had just had the flu, and at first I thought I had caught it.

I had moved in with two other women I didn't know very well yet, their boyfriends a fixture in our three-bedroom apartment in Baltimore. Taking a full schedule of classes and waitressing downtown, I was so tired I'd come home at night and eat an entire bag of Pepperidge Farm Bordeaux cookies for a sugar high that would power me through homework. I didn't have a boyfriend. I had temporary custody of the family dog, Teddy, a Sheltie mix with soulful eyes. While I ate the crisp, too-sweet cookies and wrote papers at my desk, he would lie on our single bed with his head on the pillow, staring at me balefully. It was bedtime. But I couldn't go to sleep, not with so much work to do. I'd walk into the kitchen and get a glass of water to stay awake.

One night Joanne's boyfriend Dave was in the kitchen, too, when I said, "I am so tired. And so nauseous. I think I caught Jo's flu."

Dave looked at me. We were old friends. "You're nauseous? Have you been throwing up? Do you have a fever?"

"I never throw up," I said wearily. "And hardly ever get fevers. But I feel so sick. What did she do for the nausea?"

Dave said quietly, "Jo didn't have the flu." He looked at me meaningfully. "We took care of it. Do not tell her I told you."

"Of course not." Joanne was private. She and Dave had been together and exclusive for a while. She was a tennis player, always on the go with her books and tennis bag, always upbeat.

"My period is late." Suddenly I felt even more nauseous.

Dave scrunched up his mouth in concern. "You may have the flu, too." He put airquotes around the word 'flu.'

Joanne was wholesome and sweet, and if this had befallen her, the dreaded unwanted pregnancy, well, why should I escape it, being a less wholesome type who flirted with the cute grad students in the subterranean floors of the library, who waited on tables and who drank at the bar after my shift? My co-workers at Rockwell's Restaurant downtown thought *I* was wholesome because I was a college student and because I didn't do lines of coke with them. Everything's relative. Except pregnancy.

Back in the pre-internet times of the 1980s, people used paper telephone books, white pages for alphabetical listings, and yellow pages for businesses in categories. I hauled out the big fat telephone book of yellow pages, and I called a crisis pregnancy center that was in the neighborhood.

The center was the first floor of a Victorian house. I pushed open the heavy wooden door and went into a wallpapered entryway. The place looked homey if not exactly medical. After the friendly woman at the reception desk interviewed me about my last period and sexual activity, and after I peed in a cup for a pregnancy test, she directed me to a living room to wait for my results.

She turned on the television and said I should watch this short video about my options while waiting for the results. "There are some brochures, too," she said, pointing at a corner table. She pushed a videotape into the player, smiled, and left the room, pulling shut the wooden pocket doors.

"How big is your baby now?" a soothing voice onscreen asked, accompanied by images of fetuses at two weeks and so on. Freud wrote that the uncanny, with its sense of eeriness, terror, and dread, is caused by the unfamiliar within the familiar—in the German language origin the unheimlich, or un-homelike, contains within it or springs from the homelike. I sat in a regular living room, with upholstered sofas and chairs, a coffee table, closed curtains that dimmed the room, a carpet, and four walls of utterly conventional floral wallpaper. And yet, in this homey setting, within a couple of minutes I was watching footage of aborted fetuses in trashcans. I stood up from the comfortable sofa. I was alone in this room. I crossed to the corner table and picked up a glossy brochure about adoption. Oh god, I thought, I've come to one of *these* places, anti-abortionists masquerading as neutral help. This was no clinic. I stared at the closed wooden doors, feeling suddenly claustrophobic. The video played on. The wallpapered

living room was the perfect setting for my feeling of horror. Not only was the killer calling from inside the house, but the killer was, potentially, me.

The woman pulled open the doors and came back in. “Your test is positive, honey, and so you’re about five weeks along,” she said, smiling. I sucked in my breath and held still, absorbing the blow. “Not good news?” she said.

I shook my head. “I have to go.” She pressed a brochure into my hand.

This predicament had no happy answer for me. It was the middle of fall semester. I calculated that I would be seven months pregnant at graduation. I didn’t want to have a baby. I wanted to be financially self-sufficient. While I’d done plenty of babysitting as a teenager, the usual job for girls, I didn’t want kids. I wouldn’t have a feeling of wanting them for another nine years.

My early cultural training had prepared me for motherhood, of course. Title IX wasn’t even passed until I was ten years old. The era of girls playing soccer was years away. I took ballet and piano, the expected lessons. Younger, I’d played with baby dolls. I loved baby dolls, loved cradling my favorite one, who wore a pink gingham dress and white bloomers. She had blond plastic hair and blue eyes that closed when I tipped her backwards. She came with a little pink suitcase I loved, packed with a plastic bottle, a blanket, and extra outfits. Everything I needed for my baby. “You’re a good little mommy,” adults would say approvingly as I held my doll.

Later I would play with dolls that looked like girls, Sasha dolls, with hard plastic bodies in straight lines and sensible dresses and overalls. They resembled an early version of American Girl dolls. Playing with one of them, I was not the doll’s mom. The doll was a figure of me. I was the girl playing in the woods, carrying a rucksack, wearing a bandanna in my hair. This moment of girlhood, after learning to read but before puberty, is often women’s favorite time of life. Girls feel their power in these years. I remember climbing trees and swimming and playing baseball. I read hard books, like *Lord of the Flies* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*, taking in the cruelty of people and the world. My mother read Ms. Magazine, and I read it, too. I remember the photo of a woman dead from an illegal abortion. This was Gerri Santoro, dead in 1973, just after Roe v. Wade had been decided. The photo was black and white, the blood under her body black. Her nakedness scared me, the photo shockingly intimate, shot from behind as she is in child’s

pose, a white towel under her clotted with blood. There is a bed next to her, the mattress bare. The setting is a bedroom, but something is wrong. There is no comfort there, and she is dead.

Around age twelve I came crashing down. Swinging across a ladder of bars at a playground, I lost my grip and fell face down, breaking my arm. Playing softball at school, I caught the ball wrong and broke my thumb. Running up the slide at school, I fell off it and took a chunk out of my knee. I fell off a pogo stick and sprained my wrist. I fell and fell, and I was twelve, with my body becoming unfamiliar, unheimlich. I didn't know how to use it anymore.

My last dolls were Barbies, with breast lumps and feet that were weirdly, permanently arched to fit into tiny plastic high heels. I loved those Barbies with their bright clothes and hot pink shoes that sort of snapped into place on their feet. Playing with Barbies, they were the aspirational figure of me, the sexually attractive creature who would attract a man like Barbie's doll of a boyfriend, Ken—so that we could make a baby and I could return to the original fantasy of being a mom, somehow merging it with the Barbie fantasy.

When I was starting to bud with breasts and hips, a department store saleswoman appraised me in a dress I was trying and said, "You have such a cute little figure." I notice the word little. You're a good little mommy. You have such a cute little figure. I was supposed to be small. I was supposed to fit the role. In the teen years people would look at my body and say things about it, as if I were a public commodity. I would try everything in response. Smile. Say thank you. Ignore it. Flirt back. Have sex with them. Give them the finger. In the first spring of college, walking back to the dorm in pants and a t-shirt, boys shouted at me from an upstairs window, "Show us your legs! Why aren't you wearing shorts?" I gave them the finger. And I laughed, too. Both things, defiance and compliance, at once. I'm a feisty girl but I have a sense of humor. I would try to embrace both my independence and the male gaze that put me in my place as a pretty girl, no more.

But the smiling submissiveness of the conventional female role clashed with my other role, of college student headed for writing career. My mother always told me, Get your own credit cards. She was a successful lawyer, after having been a housewife and mother for ten years, and she loved her career. It was tricky trying

to fit it all together—the having of children and the pursuit of a career—and she had followed a traditional path of getting married and having children. Then, in the early 70s, she'd followed her long-held desire to go to law school. She was one of very few women in her graduating law school class. Now it was the 80s, and women of my socioeconomic class were expected to attend college and pursue careers. We were supposed to get married, too, but not to give up our hard-won accomplishments. We would not be typing our husband's dissertation while in labor, as my mother did. We should be typing our own dissertations while in labor.

Senior year in college, I was on the usual path to establishing a career and then consider having children—make your own money, get your own credit cards. And there were so many interesting things to do with one's life that I didn't see kids as necessary to mine. I had made my way at a university that had gone coed only ten years before. Only thirty percent of the undergraduate students were women. Seventy percent were men. Most of my professors were men. Most of the books we read were by men. Some days in the dining hall, I'd be the only woman in sight. We called that experience of being the only woman Feeling the Ratio, FTR for short. I'd slide my breakfast tray along the rails, asking for pancakes, surrounded by men. But I'd succeeded there, though I was shy, learning to speak up in class or at least to be able to speak when called on. I was on track to make it in a man's world, in a male-dominated university I had chosen specifically because it seemed representative of the world I'd enter after college and I wanted to be ready. Although I'd originally planned to attend a women's college, when I'd gotten accepted, that option suddenly felt like a false utopia. Eighteen-year-old me was arrogant enough to believe I was all grown up, not in need of four years of education that would help me speak up and claim authority. No, instead I chose what I judged to be the real world, and struggled with shyness.

When intelligent sentences came out of my mouth, professors were surprised. My intelligence was usually expressed only in writing. There are so many girls like this, quiet, obedient girls who write intelligent paragraphs. I teach these girls now, and I say 'girls' with my student Kate Delaney in mind, who titled her nonfiction thesis, "Quiet Girl." These girls, as they call themselves, these young women, hand in work on time except when they are in crisis because of a death or a sexual assault or an anxiety that suddenly imprisons them. They can't breathe. I understand

these women. I feel their struggles, forty years after my own. I call on them. I make them speak, so they can practice, and because I know they have plenty to say. They have done all the reading. They have taken notes. They're wide awake. And yet something is preventing them from jumping in to the discussion to venture their well-formed opinions in a setting where all opinions are welcome—the half-assed, the hunch, the partly considered, the weird, the off-topic. Their pens, their hands above the keyboard, are in the air, waiting to record the words of others.

That November of my senior year, the vision of myself in a graduation robe that belled out in front with a seven-months-along pregnancy filled me with shame. I had messed up. Drank too much, had sex with a dull-witted frat boy I'd known for a while. My diaphragm was back in my apartment, tucked in its pink plastic case. What a regrettable night. For me, graduation meant success and freedom and a wide open door to the future. When graduation approached, I would cut off my long brown hair, rejecting that feminine ideal. I would graduate with short hair and a plan to move to a faraway city and start my real life. I imagined my gender to be irrelevant. My female college students imagine the same.

But my gender meant everything. I was pregnant. The dull-witted frat boy was not. His hangover was long gone.

One morning I hurried, with my mother, past screaming protesters outside Planned Parenthood. I think I hurry past that part in my memory because it was so disturbing. But my mother tells me now that it was scary, that we had to walk a gauntlet through two lines of protesters that stretched half a block from parking lot to the front door. They were yelling, and shaking big signs in our faces. "I thought," my mother recalled recently, "they were going to physically attack us."

I had the power to decide what to do. They wanted that power, over my body. But it was mine, the power and the decision and the pain. My mother and I sat together in the waiting room, one pair among many, because everyone needed someone to drive them home after.

It was one of those spaces where time stops, like an emergency room, an airport gate area when the flight is delayed, a jury selection room. Everyone has their story, their hopes, their despair. If we say these aloud, we can find in each other our common pain, and this is what I would learn in the years to come through

speaking and writing my most troubling secrets. In a courtroom recently, we potential jurors were asked to stand up and confess whether we or anyone close to us had ever been convicted of a crime. "Including DUI," the prosecutor said, sweeping his sharp eyes over the fifty of us. One by one, about half of us stood, holding up our numbered placards. The court reporter took it all down. There was one DUI after another. "Yourself or someone else?" the prosecutor asked. "How long ago? In this county or elsewhere?" My father had gotten a DUI. One woman's son had been convicted of felony sexual assault. Another woman's son was an accomplice in armed robbery. Multiple people mentioned brothers who had been "in and out of prison" for an array of crimes. "This is taking longer than I thought," the prosecutor said. We were, apparently, a sorry lot. I felt for us, for all of us with our long, upsetting histories of entanglement with the law.

In Baltimore, when I was twenty-one years old and pregnant, the medical team at Planned Parenthood assembled in a white room. They had given me a Tylenol for pain. A nurse flicked her eyes up at me, her eyes dark brown above a white surgical mask. All of the eyes fixed on me. The nurse held my hand while they revved up a machine. The machine stood like an upright vacuum next to the table. I lay on an exam table as if for a pelvic exam but for the presence of the masked team and the sound, a vacuum with a loud underwhine. I clutched the nurse's hand hard. "One minute," she said kindly, matter-of-factly, telling me how long the pain would last. I counted. It hurt, worse than any period or breaking a bone. The pain of it shocked me, left me limp.

In the recovery room I lay white and slack as an old flower. My head lolled to one side then the other as I saw the other silent women in their beds, covered with white sheets. The old aphorism echoed*, You made your bed, now lie in it.*

Raised Protestant, I felt the pain was deserved, for my irresponsibility. My mother had brought me a new nightdown. Later, after I stopped bleeding, I could wear this pretty white gown and feel new again. The date was November 6, 1983. I did not regret having an abortion. It was a serious decision, and I took it seriously. Having an abortion did not affect my fertility, and I would go on to have three children, when I was ready for them, when I wanted them, when I could make the necessary sacrifices to take care of them and still take care of myself.

On medical forms in the next years, I confessed my abortion when asked. But after I had my first child, I stopped. What doctor could tell how many times I'd been pregnant? Why subject myself to their judgment, over and over? This week I walked past my local Planned Parenthood, in my neighborhood in Harrisburg. Harrisburg is one of two cities in Pennsylvania with buffer laws; protesters must keep their distance from the door. So they fanned out along the sidewalk's outer edge. A young white woman handed me a brochure about abortion being murder. "Thank you," I said. "This will help me write a piece for a reproductive freedom event I'm attending, because I am pro-choice."

"What does that mean to you?" she asked, wanting to engage me in a debate.

"It means," I said, shouting over my shoulder as I walked on by, "that it's my body, my choice. My uterus is not your business. It is not the government's business. Trust women to make their own choice, and don't harass them."

A white-haired woman spoke up from her lawn chair. "We're not harassing them," she said.

"It is a hard decision to make, and you are harassing them with your very presence," I said, feeling furious. I was grateful that in my life, every time I'd been pregnant, I—not the government—had made the decision about what was best for me. To quote a New York Times letter to the editor, "A pregnant woman in the United States is currently more likely to die in childbirth than she is to die of breast cancer should she get it."* I had been able to choose, every time, whether or not to take the risk of childbirth. And there is, in my experience, no lonelier feeling than being in labor. Being in excruciating pain but being unable to have pain relief because it made my blood pressure drop too low. Having a doctor yell at me that if I didn't push my baby out in the next two minutes they would run to the OR for a C-section. I birthed three babies, and didn't die.

On the sidewalk in front of Planned Parenthood that day, I had the last word because I kept walking. But it was only a momentary satisfaction. I would-- on the subject of women's right to choose--never have the last word.

*April 25, 2018, letter from Barbara Wallace.