In Black and White

MARGARET WHITFORD

I learn of my mother's abortions through a Connecticut weekly.

My sister-in-law, a reporter for the paper, wrote the article to commemorate the thirty-first anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. She based the story on interviews she had conducted with several women willing to discuss their experiences, including my then eighty-one-year-old mother.

My jaws clench. A wave of exhaustion threatens my concentration. I consider retreating into sleep.

My mother had four abortions: three in Vienna during the Second World War, and a fourth in Philadelphia in 1952, after she had settled there. Four sounds like a lot. Four times my mother chose not to be a mother.

My mother explains that she initially disclosed her abortions in response to a routine medical questionnaire. "When I broke my leg, I had to announce what surgeries I'd had and I wrote them all down. If someone wants to think I'm a sinful bitch, I don't give a damn."

Sinful doesn't resonate with me—I don't view my mother's abortions as sins. *Bitch* hits home, though, because of what I read as her callousness. I exhale slowly. My feelings a closed fist.

My sister-in-law knew all the women she interviewed personally, and some, like her great-aunt and cousin, intimately, but still my mother stands out—as both a doctor and a woman, as a Latvian and an American citizen, as someone exceptionally candid. More tolerant attitudes prevailed in the Austria my mother knew. "You didn't have to keep it like a deadly secret. It was your private business. It was wartime, for Christ's sake."

The reference to her private business grated. If she had wanted to keep her abortions private, why tell a reporter, even if that reporter was her daughter-in-law?

Her disclosures reminded me of all I still did not understand about her, despite the stories she had told me about her childhood and experiences during the war. I knew of her escape to Austria, just before the Soviets' second occupation of Latvia. I knew of her strategies to evade capture—surviving with false identity papers claiming Austrian citizenship—when the Soviets sought to find and deport all those who had fled their rule. My mother had rendered these accounts as if she were a character in her own drama. I wanted the backstory, not the scripted lines.

Though not treated as a crime in Vienna, abortions carried other risks. As a medical student, my mother had access to medical expertise, but not to anesthesia and antibiotics because they were not readily available.

One of her abortions turned septic; some of the placenta had remained in her uterus. "I bled and bled and bled and bled. I had extremely high fever and bone-wracking chills. The thing is you get euphoric. I was in bed and thinking of the old Romans who would get into the bathtub and open their veins."

She had a convulsion, prompting her roommate to search Vienna for medical help. "She got a professor of gynecology, who was my lover too, and she hustled him over—he was not the father. He induced the placenta, and when I delivered the placenta, the bleeding stopped."

I quit reading then, or perhaps I continued on, but I'd lost my focus beyond: "A professor of gynecology, who was my lover too. He was not the father."

I did not talk to my mother about her interview, not until years later. I buried both the article and my questions in the rigid container created by my judgment.

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My mother had four abortions and I had two miscarriages, the second at ten weeks.

The surgical response to a failed pregnancy is essentially the same as that required in a surgical abortion. The distinctions are irrelevant to everyone except the woman involved.

Unlike my mother, I struggled to become pregnant even with treatments for infertility. My first miscarriage happened so quickly that I thought it was a late period until my doctor told me otherwise. I didn't feel the loss because I'd not had time to recognize the gift.

When I became pregnant a second time, I felt sure I would carry the baby to term. Instead of following conventional wisdom and waiting until after the first trimester to share our news, I wanted to tell friends and family. The moment I loved best occurred just before I said the words, "I'm pregnant," knowing I held a secret belonging to me alone, not even my husband, Tom, having the same claim, not yet.

We chose names: Christina and Daniel. I pictured a girl with my chestnut hair and Tom's blue eyes, his dense eyelashes. I made her intelligent and brave, qualities we would nurture. I gave her Tom's athletic strength and grace, my ear for languages. I wondered if she would be a serious child, as Tom and I each had been, or more playful. When she smiled, would I recognize my husband in her grin? In the timbre of her laughter, whom might I hear?

My doctor followed my progress with blood tests. At ten weeks, I arrived for an ultrasound, my last appointment before being transferred to an obstetrician. I knew the exam room well by then, having made monthly visits during my treatments, hoping each time I'd get pregnant. And, finally, it had happened. All that had irritated me earlier—the fluorescent lights overhead, the flimsy paper gown, the not-at-all-restful green of the walls—seemed to me now benevolent.

I lay on the metal table, waiting for my doctor, for once not impatient, just excited. I wondered if I could get a copy of our baby's first photograph for Tom. An embryo at ten weeks is about the size of a strawberry, a fragile fruit with an infinitesimal beating heart.

As the exam began, I watched the monitor for that tiny dark form within the mottled gray of my uterus. I saw nothing. The doctor continued to move the probe around. I realize now that she was searching for some activity, the flicker of a heartbeat, but I didn't understand at the time. She withdrew the instrument and told me to get dressed and meet her in her office. I fumbled with my clothes, my hands numb.

As clearly as she could, she explained I had miscarried. She wondered if I had felt something was wrong. "Did you feel like you weren't pregnant anymore?" I didn't know how to answer her. Whatever changes I'd felt, I had attributed to the normal trajectory of pregnancy. Another miscarriage wasn't in my field of vision; I'd never considered the possibility.

I drifted outside, disoriented by the weather's perfection. Earlier, I'd reveled in the deep-blue sky, the lush trees, the warm air without any humidity, what had seemed an exquisite interval between summer and fall. Now I found the light too strong, the air filled with noise, the trees merely indifferent spectators.

I wanted to slip unnoticed into my office, but our quarters were intimate, our numbers too few for anonymity.

"How did it go?" asked a colleague.

Hearing her question, I wished I hadn't told her I was pregnant, because now I had to tell her I wasn't.

"Not well," I stammered; my expression revealed the rest.

Then I closed my office door and slumped into my chair. *Tom,* I thought. *I must call Tom.*

His phone barely rang once.

"Well?" he asked, and I had to tell him. I don't remember my words, except their brevity.

"I'm okay, just very disappointed," I finally said.

Years later, Tom told me he had sat at his desk crying.

When Tom was about five, his parents brought him to a church dinner, after which the adults had a meeting scheduled. Following the communal meal, the children were sent outside to play in the summer evening. Night fell and still the children continued their games. Tom was running, his arms extended like Superman. In the darkness, he ran directly into a brick wall he hadn't seen, hitting his head and breaking both arms.

The miscarriage was like that.

We stopped the infertility treatments shortly thereafter, though we held on to the vain hope that I'd become pregnant without medical intervention. That never happened and we chose not to pursue adoption.

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Six years later, I talk to my mother about her abortions. I decide I need to approach my mother directly about this topic, rather than rely on my sister-in-law's interview. I tape our conversation.

November, mid-morning, a time when my mother usually has more energy. She sits in Massachusetts and I sit several states away in Pennsylvania. Her voice, in the past so clear and vibrant, has grown weaker. Emphysema and age have diminished the once luscious sound. That change reminds me that I am running out of time.

I ask her about her thoughts on abortion, and she surprises me by returning to the environment she'd encountered in the 1950s after her arrival in the United States, some of which she had addressed in the interview with my sister-in-law: "There was no talk. It was against the law, and you were persecuted if you had evidence of an illegal abortion." As a doctor, she helped treat women who had undergone botched procedures—women traumatized first by what was frequently a catastrophic medical outcome and subsequently by law enforcement's responses.

In contrast, her abortions in Vienna were performed by doctors at home. Despite that expertise, her third abortion resulted in life-threatening complications.

I imagine my mother lying gravely ill in the drafty apartment she shares with her roommate, Marga. It is frigid winter and the apartment has no heat. A place of high ceilings and tall windows, worn wooden floors, rooms imbued with a barren elegance. She huddles in bed under a Persian rug, recently dragged from the floor, its once vibrant reds now faded. The weight creates a temporary illusion of warmth, but the dusty, rough carpet fails to stop her trembling. When her fevers return, she casts the rug aside, and for a moment, she feels free.

The pain that had gripped her abdomen has receded, or perhaps, she's only grown accustomed to it. Her body so weakened by the loss of blood she feels hollow inside. She thinks she is going to die. She will not finish medical school, nor go to the United States, nor marry the Southerner a fortune teller had predicted for her long ago.

My mother might have died then and I would never have been born, gone before she could even form an idea of me.

The professor of gynecology Marga called managed to stop the bleeding, but he didn't address the infection. "He didn't do anything whatsoever," my mother told me.

"Why not?" I asked.

"I don't know. It was before penicillin. There wasn't much he could do." Penicillin had been discovered by then, but it wasn't available in postwar Vienna.

The doctor's response disturbs me. Had he already seen so much suffering in the war that my mother's death would have been merely one more to add to the ledger? Or perhaps his unresponsiveness resulted from a personal history my mother and he shared.

The infection eventually subsided and my mother gradually recovered. Marga, who worked at a well-stocked American officers' club in Vienna, brought hot dogs home to her day after day, the protein critical to regaining her strength.

My mother imposed an emotional hierarchy on her abortions that placed the three in Vienna in one category and her fourth in another. Her pregnancies in Vienna occurred when contraception wasn't available and with men she described as casual lovers: "I didn't intend to marry the father and I certainly didn't want any child by him and not in wartime." She assured me that once she had terminated these pregnancies, she thought no more about them. I believe her, but I suspect the abortions had a cumulative effect, each one deadening her to the next.

"The only abortion which I sometimes regretted . . . my future husband's baby, whom I intended to marry later, and did marry."

Until this conversation, I had not understood that my mother's fourth abortion involved a baby conceived with my father. I also hadn't grasped that my father had assisted my mother in terminating the pregnancy. The article stated this. I'd read the words but had not absorbed their meaning.

"Do you mind talking about this?" I asked.

"Well, I was very upset that it appeared in the article, you know. Because I didn't think my name would be mentioned, that Daddy's name would be mentioned."

At the time of my sister-in-law's interview, my mother lived in a socially conservative Texas town; George W. Bush was president. President Bush's anti-abortion stance infuriated her, especially its roots in evangelical Christianity and what she saw as the latter's attempts to subjugate women's rights to control their own bodies. "It's usually the men who decide it," she told me, "and evangelicals." Outrage prompted my mother to reveal her abortion history to my sister-in-law, and her anger may have blinded her to some of the consequences of participating in the interview.

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I return to the recording I made of my discussion with my mother. I've already transcribed our conversation but am concerned I missed something, some nuance. I fidget in my chair, and when I get to the passages describing my mother's fourth abortion, a story I now know by heart, I start grinding my teeth. I notice how my voice falters, how I stumble over my questions. "I guess I'm meaning because . . . I want to go back in time a little bit . . . what, what. . . ?"

I try to explore the moment she discovers she's pregnant with my father's child, that interval between knowing and deciding. I look for hesitation, some emotional struggle over her response to this pregnancy, whose circumstances differ so from those she encountered in Vienna. Abortion then seemed like the only sane choice, but not in this instance. I want her to tell me she had doubts, that she thought about having this baby, that abortion—something that would require my father's active participation—was a fraught choice. I want her to be different, not the woman who turned away from the possibility of this child without considering the alternative. I want to warn her that her choice to terminate this pregnancy will have repercussions that will reverberate in ways she cannot anticipate.

As for my father's reaction, I know nothing of his deliberations or feelings, except what my mother told me. He said he'd marry her and have the child.

I have a photograph of him from his medical school yearbook taken around that time. He wears a tan jacket, white shirt, and striped tie. His unlined face reveals the faintest of creases at the corners of his mouth. I notice his strong nose, his dark eyes that narrow when he grins, though he does not smile in this photograph. His lips are full without being overly sensual. There is something both resolute and hopeful in his gaze. Perhaps these two qualities—confidence and optimism—pushed him toward wanting that baby.

I picture my parents on a summer afternoon. They find themselves free and want to leave the hospital where they both work, not worrying about a destination. The car's windows are down, green flashes on either side as they travel a tree-lined road. The air entering the car feels fresh. Summer's humidity, typical of Philadelphia, has yet to arrive.

My father hums "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," the Civil War song celebrating a soldier's triumphant return, and a favorite melody. When

he gets to "hurrah, hurrah," he sings the words and taps the steering wheel in time. He can't help himself. He feels invincible. He is graduating from one of the top medical schools in the country, despite his mother's admonition to be satisfied with an engineering degree and not aspire to more. And he's won this accomplished and beautiful woman sitting beside him. He'll marry her. He's sure.

My mother breathes deeply, hoping the clean air will calm her. She clenches and unclenches her hands in her lap. She's gone over what she needs to say, marshaled her arguments about this being her decision alone, about the timing being all wrong. She wants to get this over with, in the car, where she doesn't have to look in her future husband's eyes.

She fixes her gaze on the road ahead and announces, "I'm pregnant, but I am not going to have the baby."

My father turns toward her for an instant, a quickening in his chest. "Let's get married now," he says. What is there to think about? He loves her and she's pregnant with their child.

My mother told me once that she could never marry a man she could not envision as the father of her children. She expects to marry my father. She wants to have children with him—children are part of her life's plan—but she is not prepared to have this child at this time.

I return to the past looking for some argument my father might have made to change her mind, but I cannot find one. "Nobody is going to marry me because I am pregnant," she told him. "A matter of principle," she said. "No shotgun marriage."

I wonder whose judgment concerned her. I can imagine my paternal grandmother, who never warmed to my mother, suggesting she had coerced my father into marriage by becoming pregnant. That criticism would have stung, even if my mother knew it lacked any foundation. There were others, too, who would have celebrated a perceived misstep—the nurses who resented her for being a doctor, for not being American. In the operating room, they would gossip, "We don't need displaced people here. Why should we be giving anything to her?"

She had arrived at the threshold of securing so much she had wanted—a career as a doctor, when she hadn't believed it would be possible in the United States, and marriage to a man she loved whose talent and ambition drew her to commit to a shared future. She believed an ill-timed pregnancy posed a threat.

They decide to meet in between their shifts at the hospital. When they find an empty procedure room, my father turns on the light, flooding the space in a

harsh glare. The room smells of disinfectant. The walls are empty and painted a flat institutional white. Because the space must be ready for use, the exam table is already draped. My mother doesn't put on a hospital gown; she only removes her skirt and underpants. She lies on the metal table, bends her knees, places her heels in the metal footrests, eager for this to be over.

Would my father have numbed her cervix or were they in too much of a hurry? They probably skipped this step. My mother had a high threshold for pain; the abortions she'd had in Vienna had proceeded without anesthesia. "They were very painful," she told me, "but all right."

My father dilated my mother's cervix to induce premature labor and a miscarriage. His approach did not succeed. Over the course of several days, my mother bled some, but the pregnancy continued. Did reticence make my father less effective? Perhaps he could not make the transition from lover to trained clinician.

He may have felt relief, recognizing that he'd not wanted the abortion. He'd accommodated my mother because he believed the choice ultimately belonged to her. She would have sacrificed more—her professional aspirations, even something of her sense of self—had she proceeded with the pregnancy.

My father repeated his proposal that they marry and have the child, but my mother remained adamant. Even though unsuccessful and relatively benign, she feared their first attempt had damaged the embryo. When she did not miscarry, my parents agreed to make a second attempt. In the procedure room again, they arm themselves against feeling. This is a medical problem to be solved, nothing more or less. This is not the time to engage in any self-doubt. Proceeding requires this kind of single-mindedness.

My father performed both dilation and curettage, a procedure to remove tissue from inside my mother's uterus. And still, the pregnancy continued.

My mother wakes up every morning, her waist feeling thicker, her body sluggish. As her anxiety grows, she has trouble concentrating. She wants only one thing now: not to be pregnant.

Finally, at four months pregnant and alone in her apartment, my mother miscarried and delivered a dead fetus. She believed that the miscarriage resulted from the second attempt at abortion, despite the time that elapsed between the two events.

At sixteen weeks, a fetus weighs three to four ounces and is about four to five inches long, the skin is translucent, the skull sufficiently developed that the eyes

are positioned forward, faint eyelashes and brows are visible. Tiny bones in the ears are in place, making it likely that the fetus can hear his mother's voice in utero.

When she told my father, he asked, "What was it?"

"A boy."

"That's a shame," he responded, "because now you'll only have girls."

My parents never talked about the pregnancy again.

They married about a year later. Seven months after their wedding, my mother conceived me. My sister followed sixteen months after my birth, and then, in quick succession, my two brothers.

I do not know when in the pregnancy my parents made their second attempt at abortion, nor how much time passed between that procedure and my mother's miscarriage. The longer I thought about this last abortion, the more I wanted answers to these questions. I hoped that by gathering all the details I would be able to construct a story that made sense to me. I imagined information would give me greater control over my own reaction. *If I know exactly what happened*, I reasoned, *I'll no longer struggle with the mystery.*

In retrospect, I realize that I wanted to re-enter that procedure room with my mother and freeze the frame, as you might in editing a film. *Are you sure*? I wanted to ask. *You've already tried to end this pregnancy once and it didn't work. Perhaps it's a sign. The baby you have conceived wants to be born.*

Several months after my mother's and my first conversation about abortion, I asked to speak to her again. She agreed to talk, yet when I posed my first question, she snapped, "I don't know what else I can tell you." My hand tightened on the phone, but I suppressed the frustration I felt and ended the call.

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I asked my mother how she recovered from her fourth abortion, "My stomach was totally flat again. I felt greatly relieved, greatly relieved, because I was working as a doctor. I certainly wanted to terminate the pregnancy." She didn't allow herself to feel anything else at that point, her ability to suppress her emotions long established.

She went on to say, "The sadness about the killed, the dead fetus, was a dead baby practically, it was a late abortion, it was a late delivery, that only started years later."

I notice her struggle for clarity, the words she used—*killed*, *dead*, *late abortion*, *late delivery*. Each word an assault.

During our conversation, I repeatedly asked for confirmation that my father had performed the abortion, even though I knew this to be true. I will always yearn for a different answer, one that would have spared my father—spared both my parents—by placing another physician in that procedure room, a doctor whose sole concern was patient care.

I never had the chance to speak to my father about any of this, although, in truth, I'm not sure how I would have approached him on the subject. By the time I learned of the termination of my parents' first pregnancy, my father had been dead for twenty-five years.

The timing of the abortion haunts me, as it eventually haunted my mother. Here, too, I wish for another story, one that ended in the procedure room a few weeks into the pregnancy, the abortion complete then.

When I asked my mother if her last abortion made her feel differently about abortion in general, she said, "No, it didn't. The only thing is, let's say, to have a baby by a father whom you love. I'm against abortion in that case." So what am I to make of that? Her response suggests she wishes she had made a different choice. Had my parents decided to continue that pregnancy, they would have been spared the consequences of its termination, but there would have been other sacrifices.

My mother's fourth abortion "left a deep scar, a really deep scar" on her soul, she told me. It led her to imagine her child. And in her imagining, she recognized whom she had lost.

"I sometimes wonder, if that baby would have lived, it was a boy, what he would have been like."

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I miscarried too soon to know the sex of our child, but in my reverie, she is our daughter, and my mother's only granddaughter. She would have been born in the spring when forsythia splashes the woods in color, green buds emerge, the light lingers. Everything speaks of beginnings.

Though I never told my mother, I also daydream sometimes about the older brother I might have had. I miss him and all he might have meant to our family.

My mother made the choice to terminate her pregnancy, so her loss may be more complex than mine. That does not mean her regret is more intense, just different. Or, maybe not so different. We both grieve for someone who does not exist.