

Tab. III.



Adriaan van de Spiegel, 1578-1625, *Development of the Fetus*, Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine.

First Choice

ANONYMOUS

When I was 19 years old, I fell crazily in love with a hometown girl. This was very surprising for both of us, as we had been acquainted since childhood but had never really noticed each other until a certain amount of maturing of mind and body took place. A second surprise, maybe inevitable in retrospect, came along a few months after we began spending virtually every possible hour in each others' arms. She called me from the university she was attending a few hours away and told me she was fairly certain she was pregnant.

Well, I had thought about this issue in the abstract and we had made some admittedly lackluster attempts at contraception, but here it was for real. We obviously weren't ready for this; we were teenaged undergraduates barely beginning to find out who and what we were, both together and apart. And now there was this big and frightening problem that could not be denied. We could hardly even talk about it, but we tried. She told me she had waited as long as possible before telling me her menstrual period was late, not only out of hope that she was mistaken, but because she was fearful of my reaction. And, yes, I didn't know how to react. So I just asked her what she wanted to do.

"I have an appointment for a pregnancy test at the health center, and then if it's true, we have to get an abortion," she said with certainty. Even today, I remember her exact use of the word *we*. But what she said made sense to me; there was really no question that we were anywhere near ready to become parents. I told her I'd be there whenever and whatever she wanted. I loved her; and even if I didn't, there was no question of walking away, for I felt responsible for her—our—plight.

The test was positive; her resolve fell to pieces. I drove up to visit her and we spent a weekend crying together. She became immobilized by some combination of grief and fear, and I frantically took on the responsibility of finding someplace to get an abortion. What I quickly learned was that even though abortion was legal and she lived in a sophisticated university town with a surplus of doctors and hospitals and even countercultural "free" clinics, there was no place we could go locally. It seemed no doctor wanted to be singled out as an "abortionist." The best they could do, we were told, was to refer us to a clinic in the metropolitan area a couple of hours away. So we made the earliest appointment we could get, two weeks away, and waited.

The waiting was the worst, at least for me. I felt helpless, watching her fall apart as psychological denial fell away. She said her body began to tell her something was going on. She was strongly maternal even at 18 years of age, and felt or imagined she felt her body "humming." She asked me, a biology student, about embryology and fetal development, and I did some research and

told her some of what I learned, although it didn't seem to help her confusion. What was growing inside her was still smaller than a tadpole and similar in shape, I told her. I also learned, and relayed to her, that many very early pregnancies ended spontaneously, and for awhile we harbored the feeble hope that we might be saved by nature, but soon there was no denying we would have to take action. She still remained convinced that we were doing the right thing, but that didn't appear to lessen her ambivalence and certainly didn't stop her from feeling frightened and severely conflicted.

On the appointed day, we drove into the inner city, getting lost on the freeways and then finding the clinic in a seedy area I had never been to before. We were the only Caucasians in the packed waiting room and I was the only male. I recall wondering, "Where do all the white people go? Where are the men?" I was young and dumb but even then I knew that not only nonwhite people had to deal with this kind of problem. And it seemed strange that none of these women had their men with them, as I was also aware that it was unlikely any of these women had become pregnant alone.

My lover just sat immobile. By then she had gone into a kind of psychological autopilot and seemed calm when they called her name. I let go of her hand, watched her walk through the door out of the waiting room, and then just sat with all the other women. I listened to a couple of older women mock my clothing and beach sandals, in voices loud enough that I'm sure they knew I could hear them. But I didn't care; to my eye, they had some pretty silly attire on themselves, like pink hair curlers and such. In any event, I had other worries, for it was only while I was waiting alone that paranoia took over and I was sure that something terrible would happen to my beloved. Not only would she be harmed or killed, but everyone would know why, and it would be my fault, and I'd never get over the guilt.

Of course, she came through it physically unharmed, albeit worn out by all the emotional trauma. I'll never forget the agony of driving home in my old van with her laying in the back, crying tears that I knew I couldn't stop. That trauma would continue for some time as we struggled to figure out what it all meant, if anything. She seemed to react mostly on an emotional level, feeling ill-defined guilt about having had an abortion, about not telling her mother, about our sexual irresponsibility. I tended to feel more analytical, and even though I attempted to share my supposedly rational, hopefully helpful insights with her, it was clear that we were speaking different languages even in the midst of shared love and confusion.

That itself broadened into a lesson that came to me only over time. She and I had shared equally in the genesis of her pregnancy—perhaps my role had even been greater, for, driven by love and hormones and sex roles, I had probably been more aggressive in initiating our sexual relationship. But the real burden of deciding what to do about the consequences, of feeling the full brunt of our actions and of doing something about it, then fell to her. I made the practical arrangements and paid the fee, but those were things she could and would have taken care of if I hadn't been around, and I never harbored any illusion that I was carrying even half of the load.

This all happened over two decades ago. I have been firmly pro-choice ever since. I've seen more than enough women go through similar scenarios, with or without the man involved, to know our experience was closer to universal than unique. In even the closest couple, the burden of choice and consequence is

mostly, if not all, the woman's. I could have done anything ranging from disappearing to being more supportive than I was and she would still have been left facing largely the same choices. I believe most—but maybe not all—women would choose to have a supportive partner around if possible, but most certainly they would not want someone else, particularly a stranger, telling them what to do, either in person or in the guise of laws and restrictions.

1998 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in this country after a century of failed attempts at prohibition, which cost countless women their health or even their lives and did little if anything to end the practice of abortion. I have very vague memories of reading about this decision in the newspapers while I was still in high school, but it was all about an abstract and somewhat frightening concept that had nothing to do with my life—yet. Since *Roe*, of course, a kind of war has raged about abortion, with all manner of sneaky attempts by so-called “right-to-lifers” to restrict abortion using mandatory parental consent laws aimed at pregnant teens, blocks on funding of abortion for poor women, and so on. None of these tactics have or could work, for history has shown that women will find an abortion if they are determined to have one, often at great risk. And the greatest risk now may be that in the future there might not be enough doctors around willing and able to provide abortion—either because they have been frightened off by terror tactics, or because they are too young to remember what kind of carnage results when women are forced to find illegal, unsafe abortions.

As for me and my first love, I shudder to think about what choices we might have faced had no doctors been allowed to provide an abortion at that time. If two middle-class white kids had to scramble to find a safe abortion, what would other less fortunate people resort to? So in at least some respects we were lucky—we had the money, and she was old enough (by a few arbitrary months)—not to have to get permission from anyone (in fact, when she later told her mother about it she wound up regretting doing so, for it only caused her mother pain). There was no “waiting period” or mandatory viewing of “educational” propaganda; those would have only amounted to financial and emotional harassment and I'm pretty sure would have done nothing to change her decisions. We felt frightened and frustrated enough as it was. Things could have been a lot better, but they could have been much, much worse. This was no easy matter for the young people involved. It was a wrenching, unplanned initiation into adulthood for both of us. Anyone who thinks such things should be made even harder is misguided, or simply cruel.