

Hot Tea and Termination

Even before I started doing it, I knew more about sex than most kids my age. I had studied the illustrated books about ‘where babies come from’; sat mesmerized through a primary school video of the uterus shedding its lining; and imbibed hours of break-time chatter about how to find the hole where tampons go.

Before having sex for the first time, I consulted widely about the contraceptive pill and studied graphic imagery of the various sexually-transmitted infections to look out for. Finally, I escorted my 17-year-old boyfriend to the local supermarket where we would decide together, one Sunday afternoon, which brand of condoms was most appropriate. Afterwards, I remember washing the neat bloodstain from my underwear and feeling satisfied about how well I had managed this momentous life event.

During my undergraduate, I led the student HIV movement and spent many hours teaching embarrassed first-years about sexual health in uncensored detail. Each presentation would culminate in a ‘demonstration’ in which I, and my trusty wooden dildo, Big Mike, would illustrate the proper method for putting on a condom. In our small town, I quickly became known as the girl who spoke with outrageous openness about sex to anyone who would listen. Big Mike and I made the front page of our local newspaper. The issue was promptly banned from front-of-shop, only to sell out behind the counter.

For the seven years I dated my ‘High School Sweetheart’, we used condoms every single time, and I was evangelical about it. When that relationship ended, I continued to have a series of monogamous partners with whom I insisted on sexual responsibility. Talk of sex and sexuality — its politics, pleasures, injustices, and dangers — remained prevalent in my conversations with friends, colleagues, and even new acquaintances.

Which is why it was so *unexpected* for someone like me to have an ‘unexpected pregnancy’.

I fell pregnant 8 months after returning to South Africa, having completed a PHD at Oxford. Unwilling to do long distance, I had just ended an 18-month relationship. After some weeks of mourning, I crafted a new agenda to ‘embrace single life in a new city’: I began work on a book about nightclub cultures, partied often, swiped right on Tinder, and ultimately learned a lot through the concerted decision to embark on multiple and overlapping intimate relationships.

Some of these were light and playful. Others moved from one intellectual pillow-talk to the next. There were music festival hookups in the dirt, characterized by reckless urgency. There were dinner dates and casual drinks. And there were slow Sunday mornings after long nights of recounting childhoods with strangers. Some men called too much. Others not enough. I, with my newfound ‘self-love’ and sexual liberation, strove not to make my happiness dependent on any of them. Not always successfully.

Although the condoms had stayed, I’d been off the pill for a few months while I transferred to a new medical aid. My menstrual cycle was therefore understandably irregular. Nevertheless, a late period sparked an all-too-familiar ritual. Here, I become impatient about

bleeding, take a paranoid stroll down to the pharmacy, and do yet another pregnancy test. Throughout my sexually-active life, I had peed on many sticks: in workplace cubicles, roadside toilets, friends' bathrooms, and once alongside a boyfriend who sat on the edge of my bathtub. Every test had come back negative. This test, again, was just to give me peace of mind.

I placed the stick on the sunny garden table at my Johannesburg apartment. My housemate sat alongside me, painting pebbles. In a whirlwind of design inspiration, she was transforming small stones into artificial cacti, soon to be displayed on our bookshelf. Resting on a sheet of paint-spotted newspaper, the pregnancy test processed my pee.

When the tiny screen flashed 'pregnant', I was paralyzed by disbelief. It took two more tests before I called my mom. Later I thought it beautiful that, in the process of deciding not to become a mother, I had turned to my own for support. She, who so badly wanted motherhood that she had adopted me 28 years before.

Blood tests confirmed that I was somewhere between 4 to 6 weeks pregnant. I deduced three possible 'sperm sources'. Some might call them 'fathers' of the pip-sized embryo floating inside me. One of these men was the son of a minister and a conflicted Christian. This news would no doubt serve to compound the guilt he already felt for having slept with me, numerous times, outside of marriage. The other was a long-term friend and enthusiastic polyamorist. Talk of being a 'would-be father' would not only ruin our beautifully uncomplicated arrangement, but also his optimistic hopes for a life of love without responsibility. Finally, there was the charismatic alpha-male with a heart of gold: a heart that he made very clear belonged to his ex-girlfriend. A pregnancy announcement to him might read as a desperate plea for commitment.

I rehearsed what the conversation might look like if I were to disclose the news to each member of this unlikely trio: "I'm pregnant. It might be yours. But also, it might not be. I'm having an abortion. I just thought you should know". Unsurprisingly, I decided I did not want this talk. Certainly not three times.

I know that there are some women who have had to wrestle deeply with the choice to terminate a pregnancy. For some it has felt like deciding between two equally impossible options. Some have had to brace themselves for difficult conversations with their partners or parents. Some have equivocated every second preceding the procedure, and battled with guilt and regret afterwards. And of course there are those that have had to access abortion illegally, at great financial cost, in secret, or alone.

None of these things were true of me. I never felt like I was deciding between two options. From the instant I saw the words 'pregnant' appear on the stick, I knew, unreservedly, that I would end the pregnancy. That surety has been unwavering to this day. And where I sought support, I got it, in bucket loads.

Nevertheless, my abortion was characterized by an ocean of doubts, fears, and questions. The fact that someone like me, who was characteristically conscientious about sex, was facing an unplanned pregnancy was at best ironic, and at worst humiliating. After a lifetime of

monogamy, I had (in some cruel twist of fate) fallen pregnant during my time of reclaimed youthful experimentation. Was this pregnancy a “slut-shaming message” from the universe? How dare I think that I could behave this way?

I worried about carrying the abortion into future relationships. Was this one of those uncomfortable confidences we were expected to share before getting ‘too serious’? Did it belong with the pile of stuff like: ‘I have a kid’, ‘I have HPV’, ‘I’m depressed’, ‘I was once engaged’, ‘I’m a virgin’, or ‘I only have one testicle’? If I ever decided to have a child, would I reflect on this week differently?

After a string of tales about chewable foreskins and suburban housewives who sleep with their gardeners, my gynecologist prescribed me two small pills and ten times the amount of pain-killers. The first pill would cut off nutrients to the embryo. The second would induce miscarriage. I should expect to bleed and vomit. Heavily.

For a few days, I stayed on my parents’ couch with a hot water bottle over my abdomen. Two of the possible ‘embryo dads’ texted pictures of themselves at a toga party, unaware. My own father ensured that I had a regular supply of hot tea. On day two, he sat down next to me and said: “When I was a student, I dated a young woman on and off. She fell pregnant with another man’s child and I drove her to Lesotho to get an abortion. On the way back, she cried in the back of the truck. I’ve never told anyone that before”.

Over the course of that week, I wore sanitary pads the size of nappies and passed blood clots the size of small tomatoes. I was given a set of typed instructions about how to manage pain and avoid infection. At the bottom was a short list of book titles recommended for processing grief, including *‘Unspeakable Losses: Healing from Miscarriage, Abortion, and Other Pregnancy Loss’*.

But I didn’t feel loss, nor grief. Only nausea and overwhelming relief. All I wanted to know was how soon I could get back on the pill, back to the gym, back to my life. Two weeks later, at a beautiful dinner date, I would be wondering how soon I could safely have sex again.

What was wrong with me? Was I emotionally stunted? How could I even be thinking about sex (whore)! Was this event truly ‘unspeakable’? Would I, for the first time in my life, feel too ashamed to speak about sex and its myriad consequences — both wonderful and difficult? For every one of the small number of friends I told, I felt uncharacteristically afraid of their judgement. Not only of the abortion, but also of my emotional response (or lack thereof).

Nine months later, I’m now in a nourishing relationship with the man from that ‘beautiful date’, in which I, emboldened by the anonymity of disclosing to a stranger, spilled all the details of my “termination”.

I learnt that an abortion might make you feel unbearable loss and conflict. Or it might not. Both are okay. Every woman on earth has had to deal with an unintended pregnancy, whether as a prospect, or a reality. And when I (despite years of feminist rallying), felt shame, I had to learn a new depth of self-acceptance. It turns out that ‘exercising my reproductive choices’ didn’t really feel like a march to the government office, or a painstaking drama. Instead it felt

like pebble-painted cacti, a cup of tea, a joke about foreskins, a hot water bottle, a head over the toilet bowl, a fresh way to love myself.