

Contents

Acknowledgements		vii
Introduction		ix
Chapter 1	Personal Parallel Journeys	1
Chapter 2	How Did We Get Here?	15
Chapter 3	Bad Guys/ Good Guys: Abortionists Up Close	28
Chapter 4	Leaving, On A Jet Plane	42
Chapter 5	Husbands And Lovers	55
Chapter 6	Life, Interrupted	68
Chapter 7	Speaking Out	82
Chapter 8	Lifelines: Networks Yesterday and Today	94
Chapter 9	Physicians Who Risked Everything— And Some Who Still Do	108
Chapter 10	What's God Got To Do With It?	122
Chapter 11	Family Lore	136
Chapter 12	A Look Into The Future	150

Personal Parallel Journeys

I went blindfolded and terror-stricken, as if to an execution. My indomitable friend Trish went eagerly, though with apprehension, to a stark, white room and a waiting physician.

Trish and I were headed, in different years and on different coasts, into the domain of the illegal abortionist before *Roe v. Wade*. This was where desperate women went to seek help in ending an unwanted pregnancy. Often as not, we had unsuccessfully tried one or another of the do-it-yourself methods rumored to work: douches, terrible-tasting herbal drinks, falling down stairs, inserting various instruments (knitting needles or at times, yes, coat hangers were the most common.) Rumors about these self-help plans were circulated in secret, but the results could become very public when the method failed, as was too often the case. The woman seeking an abortion started her day much as Trish and I started ours. At the end of the day she might be blissfully un-pregnant, possibly hospitalized and in pain, and occasionally dead. Trish and I lived to tell the tale, but of course we told it to no one for decades. Illegal abortion stories were too filled with guilt, shame and horror to tell, and we were too busy trying to stuff the whole experience down below our conscious memory even to consider bringing it to light.

One early conversation with my friend Trish Hooper changed all that for me. “You had an abortion back then?” she asked. “Well, of course I did, too. We just didn’t talk about it. Nobody did. And nobody today understands how grim those days were.” The stories of our very

2 *Perilous Times*

different but similarly traumatizing abortions in the days before *Roe v. Wade* often bookended Trish and my conversations about public affairs and private concerns. And it often ended with one of us saying, “We really ought to write this down. No one will remember, no one will understand.” Then one day Trish died, and I found myself saying, “Who will remember? Who will understand?”

For some women today, understanding those old days is easy. They may not remember them as traumatic, personal experiences; women born in the U.S. after the late 1950s never lived through a time when abortion was illegal. But an increasing number of them are experiencing the same hardships that women knew before *Roe v. Wade*: desperate to end an unwanted pregnancy, agonizing over an endless variety of reasons not to bring an unwanted child into the world, they are discovering they may have little choice. Take the case of the 37-year-old, widowed mother of four who, in 2009, became pregnant despite having taken multiple precautions. She lived in a state where abortion is heavily restricted and no clinic was within a day’s travel. Her immediate fear was that her pregnancy would become too advanced before she was able to obtain a safe procedure, and that fear led her to a potential solution many activists believe is already common: the do-it-yourself medical abortion. A friend helped her secure misoprostol, a drug commonly used for gastric ulcers, which she believed would cause her to abort the fetus. Lacking proper information and care, she soon was bleeding heavily, in pain and now seriously afraid. The woman drove 300 miles to a hospital emergency room in another state, where a surgical procedure ended both the pregnancy and the bleeding problem. “She told me it had been the scariest week of her life,” said the physician who shared this story. “The decision to end the pregnancy had been painful and hard, because she loved her children and was even hoping eventually to marry the man who had impregnated her. But for all of their sakes she felt she could not have another baby at that time. She said she would make the same decision again, but would try very hard to find a better way to end the pregnancy.”

It was a story not unlike that of feminist author/activist Carol Downer years earlier. Downer was the mother of four children and in the process of getting a divorce from their father when she realized she was pregnant. It was some 10 years before the passage of *Roe v. Wade*.

“The actual process of deciding to have an abortion was pure hell,” Downer says. “I spent weeks talking to friends, counselors—my husband would even have been willing to get back together. I was just under horrific pressure to make a decision. One moment I would say ‘I love my kids—I could welcome another child into the world’ and the next morning I’d wake up and look at what a hardship it would be for me and the kids. We were very broke.

“I had gone to work in a typing pool when I separated from my husband. A woman there who had a lot more information than I referred me to a doctor on Central Avenue in Los Angeles.” The neighborhood was unfamiliar, one known more for high crime than sterile clinics. “I got my husband to go with me. I went to the address my co-worker had given me, and was led into a small room by a woman in a white uniform. She disappeared and the doctor—I presume he was a doctor—came in. I had had four kids, and was familiar with it all: the table, the stirrups, and he seemed to know what he was doing. It began to be incredibly painful, though, far outstripping delivery pain, and it went on and on. When he finished he said to call in three days and gave me a phone number. I had left the kids with my grandmother, and when I got home I just fell into bed. I remember waking up, and I could hear the birds chirping and was just so glad to be alive. After three days I called the number he had given me. He said, ‘I packed your uterus to prevent hemorrhaging, and you must now pull it out...’”

Downer survived that experience—one of the most painful of her young life—with no permanent damage. Would she make the same decision again? “Unquestionably!” She was soon deeply involved in the women’s liberation movement, embarked upon a distinguished career as an author, an immigration lawyer and founder of the Federation of Feminist Women’s Health Centers—and she did indeed later welcome two more children of her own into the world. Her concern today is that women could again endanger themselves for lack of access to safe abortion.

Trish Hooper was an activist for a long list of progressive causes, the author of a memoir titled *I’m 87 and You’re Not* and for many years the writer of articulate, impeccably crafted letters to editors of publications ranging from the *New York Times* to the *San Francisco Chronicle* to *Time Magazine*. When she died, the opinion section of

the *Chronicle* carried a full-page testimony to her wit and wisdom, with a sampling of letters including this one:

“My views on abortion had never been formed one way or another, when on a day way back in 1946—to my horror and my dismay—I realized I was pregnant. Abortion? That was a word overheard; a procedure not understood; an act not allowed by law, difficult to come by and physically dangerous. Whispers told about the devastation to your psyche, your mind, your heart, your body. But you knew that no matter what you’d have to go through, you’d go through that hell, take all the risks, to be unpregnant again. That has always been true, generation after generation.

“What I hadn’t expected was this: the enormous gratitude, the relief, the fact that the world was turning again in the sun, once the procedure had been completed, and by an understanding doctor. During those long dark years before abortions became legal and safe, in 1973, unplanned pregnancies often ended in butcheries, with young and older women maimed, many dead. This will happen again, of course...”

When unplanned pregnancy happened to Trish she was a young, vivacious, beautiful 19-year-old, in love with the handsome Naval officer-to-be whom she would soon marry. She had grown up in a prominent San Francisco family, gifted intellectually and athletically; among other things, she was an accomplished horsewoman. Much later, she wrote about what followed the discovery that she was pregnant:

“After a week or three of frantic emotions, trying this and that with no success I finally decided to try riding. I called the St. Francis Riding Academy which was out near Geary and about 26th, I think. Grandfather kept a big old tough gelding there with a really rough mouth and a disposition which rivaled father’s when he was angry. He kept his big western saddle there too. I often rode with him, on an English saddle, and I never had the same horse but usually a good ride. That day, I asked the man in charge to get my grandfather’s horse ready for me with English saddle. He tried to steer me onto something gentler, but I stuck to my choice, hung up and drove out to the stables. The big horse was waiting, chewing on his bridle, shifting from foot to foot, already with spittle on his mouth. He hadn’t been ridden for a while and clearly didn’t want me on his back, but there I was. We finally got out of the stable and onto the street with the horse awkwardly side

stepping down the road. After some trouble getting across the busy intersection into the park, away we went. My idea was to ride as fast as possible and fall off at a good place where surely I would be knocked out of being pregnant. We careened down towards the bay and as we passed the waterfall across the road I pulled the big horse up abruptly. He reared and down I went, hitting the ground hard. The horse, with his reins still in my hand, stood trembling, overheated and about as scared as I was.

“There was very little traffic because of gas rationing, but a car with two men in it stopped and offered to help. I was firm and polite, and asked them to hoist me back up. Covered with dirt and aching all over, I turned the horse around, thanked the two men, and headed home. I don’t remember much about getting back. I knew I was a total mess. The men at the stables wanted me to call home and have someone come for me, but I refused.” Trish drove home, carrying her scrapes and bruises with her.

“Mother took one look at me and put her hand over her mouth and called the doctor. I told her I’d fallen off because I had a sudden dreadful pain on my right side and probably had appendicitis. She called someone she knew, a nice Jewish doctor who shooed mother out of the room. He sat down next to me on the bed and immediately asked, ‘Do you think you’re pregnant?’ I said yes, and burst into tears both of shame and of relief. After a moment, he said, ‘Do you love him? Do you want children?’

“I said yes to both questions. He then gave me the routine examination, said yes, I was about 5 or 6 weeks along and he would remove my appendix the next morning. I asked him how much he felt he had to tell my mother. I remember that he just looked down at me for a moment or two, took a deep breath and said he hoped my appendix wouldn’t give me any problem.

“Mother drove me to the hospital. She must have known, but neither of us said anything of any importance. John had already left for Officer’s Training in Maryland. I never told him. My relief, and my gratitude for the doctor who could have lost his license, cannot be overstated. I was not interested in that ‘thing’ which was causing me to rethink my entire life.” But rethinking, Trish wrote many years later, led to the marriage, family and active life she might otherwise have never known.

My own experience, ten years after Trish Hooper's wild ride through Golden Gate Park, was a continent away and frighteningly different. I would have flung myself off of a dozen horses had I been able to find them. I was 23, three years out of college, still new to the big city of Atlanta, totally inexperienced in matters of sex and ways of the world, and unbelievably naïve. I was working in what seemed the ultimate glamour job, doing oil industry public relations that involved things like setting up conferences in fancy resort areas and then hanging out to write press releases in between the cocktail parties and banquets. The events were favorite pastimes, under the guise of industry business—and some productive work did indeed get done—of rich and powerful corporate executives. It was a heady time.

I had grown up in a close-knit family in the central Virginia town of Ashland, which still maintains the highway sign noting it is The Center of the Universe. Throughout the 1940s and '50s, doors were left unlocked, the pace was slow, life was good and everybody in town knew the business of everyone else. My father was president of Randolph-Macon College and my mother the perennial chairwoman of almost every happening at Duncan Memorial Methodist Church. By the time I finished college and set out for Atlanta, Ashland had begun to shed its provincialism but not its pride; a scandal in the Moreland family would have been problematic to a daunting degree. Pregnancy before marriage? No matter the circumstances, I would have jumped off a bridge before even discussing such a thing with my upright parents.

The man was married, widely influential in social, business and political circles and in a position to wield substantial power over my life. He was known as a womanizer—to everyone, it seems, but me. I had learned to handle mild flirtation but knew nothing about self-defense. I was single and hard-working, intoxicated with freedom and the limitless possibilities ahead. I had a full and exciting life, a promising future in my chosen field of writing/public relations and every intention of soon settling down to the wife-and-mother role then essentially the sole accepted and universal American-girl dream. For these and a long list of other reasons, not least of which was my proper, church-going family a few states to the north, there was no way in the world I could consider having a baby.

I drank paregoric, hurled myself against walls and did, for a while, all the other terrible things rumored to end a pregnancy. Many of the most dangerous I had fortunately not yet heard of—the drugs and potions that caused permanent sterility or worse—but everybody knew about the coat-hanger. I have no idea how I managed not to kill myself with the coat-hanger. Finally, thoroughly terrified, I decided that I could not do it myself.

I turned first to my trusted physician. He suggested immediately that I find a way to marry. If not the father, he said, then someone else. Barring that possibility, he said he could direct me to a discreet, out-of-state place where I could go at minimal cost, have the baby and put it up for adoption. It would only be six or eight months out of my life, he said, with a wave of his hand. Losing half a year of my life, having to live a lie for the rest of time and never mind the shame and grief that would still befall my family—the prospect held no attraction that my 23-year-old mind could discern.

I told the man who had impregnated me. He seemed hardly bothered. Later on, his indifferent attitude and cavalier stance would fuel my rage, but only much later on; at the time I felt only fear. He told me to talk to a woman who worked in his same building, assuring me that she could tell me what to do. Only *much* later would it occur to me to wonder how many times he had played out this scene. Our encounter would today be easily classified workplace rape; in those days leading up to the Women's Liberation movement any such accusation or protest would have been laughingly dismissed.

I had casually known the woman to whom I was referred. She was sexy and sophisticated in a worldly-wise way I suspected I would never be; and I was right in that, at least. I told her I had a friend who needed an abortion. She wrote down a number on a slip of paper, told me to call and ask for Barney, said not to worry. It'll cost \$100, she said. My salary at the time was \$190 a month and my savings account totaled about \$27. I went back to the man involved, who said he'd have the \$100 for me the next day—that afternoon, if I needed. What I needed was a lot more than money; but empathy, compassion and a sterile abortion were nowhere available at the time. I went to a pay phone and dialed the number.

A woman answered the phone. "Sure," she said, "he's right here." Barney came on the line and asked me who knew.

“Nobody,” I said.

“OK,” he said, “can you get \$100?”

“I have it.”

Barney said to be in front of the Loews Grand Theater on Peachtree Street at noon the next day, a Saturday. “Alone,” he said. “If it looks like anyone might be watching or following you, the deal is off and there will be no second chance.”

I stood in front of the Loews Grand Theater that day in the icy February rain, as alone as I had ever been in my life, waiting for a black 1952 Buick sedan. Barney pulled up, quickly reached back and opened the rear door, and pulled off as soon as I was halfway in. He handed me a musty, blue-flowered bandana, folded into a blindfold.

“Tie this around your eyes,” he said, “and sit in the middle of the seat. Have you got the money?”

“Yes.”

The atmosphere of the car suggested it might have been closed up in damp, mildewed spaces; there were a few, sad peanut hulls on the floor. As I tied the bandana—as loosely as I thought I could get by with—around my eyes it felt as if I were transporting myself into some stale, foreign never-never land.

For the next twenty minutes we drove in silence around the city, slowly doubling back from one block to another, working our way toward a part of the city I seldom visited but nevertheless knew fairly well. A co-worker lived in that part of town, and Atlanta at the time was not the sprawling metropolis it would soon become. We entered an area of faceless pre-fabricated houses that had been hastily put up for returning GIs a decade earlier. I had twisted the blindfold slightly when I tied it on, leaving plenty of space on the right side to enable me to sneak glances and keep track of where we were headed. Those houses have long since fallen down or been bulldozed, but I could drive you to the exact spot any day, now more than fifty years later. Even at the time I noted the irony of driving eastward out Moreland Avenue. When we got into the neighborhood which was our destination, Barney spent another good five or ten minutes slowly circling, sometimes stopping briefly by an empty field where he could see across to an adjacent block. It would have been hard to tail him, but if anyone were trying, Barney was darn well going to find out.

Eventually we pulled into the carport of a small, dreary, gray ranch-style vinyl siding house and Barney said I could take off the blindfold. Those were the first words he had spoken since “Have you got the money?”

The carport door led into a drab, dingy kitchen, where the woman stood. Steamy and overheated, it smelled like last night’s fried food and boiled greens. She took the money. Barney disappeared. The woman pointed me into a small room that led off a short, dark hallway just beyond the kitchen, told me to put my coat on the chair and remove my panties, Barney would be here right away. In the room was a wooden table similar to the one in my parents’ kitchen. There were two chairs and another, smaller table on which there was a pitcher of water alongside a basin, some paper cups and a small stack of towels. The room had faded wallpaper with rows of brownish designs that looked like stalks of wheat.

Barney entered, minus his overcoat. He could have been anyone’s bad caricature of a greasy-haired and down-at-the-heels salesman. He had on a white shirt and red striped tie, both pretty much the worse for wear. Had I not been hypnotically bound into it myself, the entire scene would have seemed something so like a bad B movie as to be funny. It was not funny at the time. Barney said to lie on my back on the table. This won’t hurt, he said. I felt something being inserted into my vagina, something smaller than a tampon. It was over in a matter of minutes. Barney said to put my panties back on and he’d be in the car. I wondered later if he had bothered to wash his hands, before or after.

As he drove me back to the Loew’s Grand, Barney said I should expect to start bleeding within a few hours. That was the extent of our conversation, but the trip back took only a fraction of the time spent driving out.

Barney was right about the bleeding. I told my roommates I was having some really bad cramps, and thought I’d stay in bed on Sunday. Monday morning I was still bleeding heavily and more than a little frightened. I called my physician and said I needed to see him right away. I told his receptionist that I had been ice skating and had a bad fall. When I got to the waiting room I was surrounded by confident-looking young women, a few visibly pregnant and wreathed in smiles. What must it be like, I wondered, to have such self assurance—and

control? Would they know what to do if their pregnancy were not a blessing but a horror? I felt, for my own part, that I must have a scarlet 'A' on my forehead. The receptionist handed me some forms to fill out and said, "didn't you just see the doctor last week?" It sounded like an accusation.

The doctor said, "Who did this to you?" "Nobody," I said, "I just went ice skating and had a bad fall." After a few moments of uncomfortable probing, verbally, emotionally and physically, he said, "You are one of the lucky ones." He gave me a prescription to fill and told me to come back in a month, sooner if I had problems.

And it turned out to be true, I was one of the lucky ones. I lived to marry in a long white gown, and to raise three children who every day of their lives have brought me enough joy to overshadow any memory of bad times before or since. Except this memory does not go away... and I still mourn for those who were not among the lucky ones.

There were two other options open to women desperate to end an unwanted pregnancy beyond Trish's experience with a courageous—some would say foolish—physician and mine with a back alley butcher. She could go to another country, or she could attempt to do it herself. Women with money and resources chose the former; women without such advantages often took the latter route. Many did not survive. It is the likelihood of a return to these choices that fuels the fight for reproductive rights still raging in the U.S. As access to safe, legal procedures becomes more and more difficult, women with resources will find competent physicians; the disadvantaged will find back-alley abortionists or risk injury or death by trying to end a pregnancy themselves. Or they will bear a child they cannot support, whose own life is likely to be harsh.

The saddest of these stories will never be fully told; snippets and sketches and rumors are all we have. A 67-year-old woman from Texas told me, "There was a girl in my high school senior class. One day she was simply gone. It was called 'a tragic death from accidental poisoning;' but her best friend knew she had been pregnant." An acquaintance of mine e-mailed, "My co-worker in Cleveland died suddenly in a private hospital, in 1971. Her family was in New Jersey; they called me because I was her immediate boss in a large department store. The cause of death was listed as 'sepsis.' A doctor friend explained that sepsis could come from a lot of things, but in young women it was very

often the result of a botched abortion. I would have given anything to have been able to tell that family what happened to her. But knowing the whole story might very well have hurt more than it helped.”

Dorothy, a friend of mine who was also close to Trish, did not want her real name used because she never shared this story with her children. It is, though, an example of some of the happier outcomes experienced by more fortunate women.

In the mid-1960s, Dorothy and her husband Dick were settled into a new home in a northern California city with their four young children. He was already a prominent researcher; she was a stay-at-home mom. Both were deeply committed to helping those less fortunate, and Dorothy was already launched into causes in the areas of education, minority and women’s rights that would be the focus of her entire life. When they discovered she was pregnant again, they felt the added stress would be dangerous. “We already had our family,” she says. “There was no way we were going to go through with this pregnancy.”

Abortion at the time was “a little bit legal in California,” Dorothy says. “You had to have two psychiatrists determine that you might be suicidal if you didn’t get an abortion.” This option was chosen by others, Dorothy knew, but “Dick had learned about the potential issues that could arise, and the circumstances under which my medical records might be opened.” They decided to ask, in strictest confidence, a very good friend who was a physician. “So we asked him over, saying we just wanted to talk with him. After we told him the situation, we asked where I might go that would be medically safe. He said, without the slightest pause, ‘Oh, you could go to the same person my wife went to.’ That was the end of any fear I had.”

Within days, Dorothy and Dick had completed arrangements to fly to San Diego, where they joined a small group of women, most accompanied by husbands or boyfriends, all having pre-arranged to make the trip. “We were picked up by a taxi that had been fitted with extra seats,” she says, “and were driven across the border to Tijuana. The clinic itself was clean and nice, and I felt very safe. We didn’t know what to expect—but then, I had not expected my doctor friend to have the names, phone numbers and everything else we needed. The cost was \$500, which was a *lot* of money in those days; only people with money were able to do this.”

Sometimes, as detailed in a later chapter, the experience of accompanying a wife or girlfriend who was having an abortion was almost as traumatizing for the man involved. Not so for Dorothy's husband Dick and the other men in their border-crossing expedition. "You know the 'Longest Bar in the World,' at the Tijuana Mexicali Beer Hall?" Dorothy asks. "They waited for us there. Even though I was never fearful or in pain, the experience was very hard and very stressful for me. But for the men? I don't think they suffered a bit."

The men at the Long Bar may not have suffered, and the cavalier Romeo behind my own horror story all those years ago certainly never showed even a minimal sign of remorse. But others did. They stood shivering on street corners, forbidden to accompany their wives or lovers into the realm of the abortionist, wondering if they would ever see their lovers alive again. They worked nights and weekends to pay off exorbitant fees charged by abortionists who operated outside all laws or regulations. You will meet some of them in later chapters as this tale continues.

And as for the women? There were many, many fortunate women like Dorothy a few decades ago who, for reasons ranging from serious to imperative, were able to end an unwanted pregnancy in relative safety. Because continuing the pregnancy would damage their families, ruin their careers or be destructive in many other ways, they quietly arranged for sterile procedures to be done in secret by trusted physician friends, or they traveled to carefully researched facilities in other countries. Women without money or resources followed other, dangerous paths.

Over and over again, while collecting stories and comments for this book I have heard from physicians, activists and thoughtful, often extraordinary women, "It's going to happen again. It's already happening." Denial of access, restrictive and punitive state laws and the lack of physicians willing or able to perform abortions have brought about situations in many states not unlike the days before 1973. Progress in education and contraception, seen by many as key to reducing the need for abortion, is uneven. And sadly, unwanted pregnancy still happens.

It happened to Rachel in 2009. "There just wasn't anybody within 100 miles who would perform an abortion," she told me. "My regular doctor said he could not help, he did not perform abortions. Even

though I was barely six weeks. The more I searched for a clinic, the more I got referred to sites that sounded likely but then turned out to be what I call tricksters. When I called on the phone, they would initially sound pleasant and sympathetic. Several did not want to talk beyond an introduction and said I would have to come in to the clinic to get more information; others, when I said I was not interested in adoption or prenatal care information, would turn unfriendly very quickly. One actually said, ‘You do realize you are talking about killing a human being?’ I didn’t see it that way. I thought of it as a bunch of cells that could become a human being, maybe. But for now it was a part of me that I had come to terms with losing. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t thought it all through, and it made me mad that this girl acted like she knew better.

“I knew of a drug that my boyfriend said he could get, so that’s what we decided to do. I just thought there was no way I could go through with this pregnancy. I don’t know exactly how he got the drug, but I trusted him. Pretty soon after I took it I did start bleeding, but it never did quite stop. I went back to my regular doctor, and he sent me to the emergency room at the county hospital, where they admitted me and did a D&C. As it all turned out I was fine, and not pregnant any more. One nurse at the hospital was very sympathetic, though she told me they all knew what I had done. Another used those same words about how I had ‘killed my baby.’ It made me mad all over again.”

Rachel has plenty of company in her anger. In state after state, as restrictions are piled on restrictions, women feel deprived of a constitutional right by those whose religious or political views are at odds with that right. Abortion providers, worn down by restrictions layered on top of restrictions and often fearful for themselves and their families, wonder how long they can keep doing what they were trained to do as a part of comprehensive women’s health care. One told me, “On days I volunteer at the clinic, something I still love to do, it’s hard not to wake up angry.” I asked if she worried about people like my 1956 abortionist getting back into the business because legal options in so many states are becoming fewer and fewer. She said, “I hope not. I hope to God not.”