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Conception: A Personal History

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Abstract

November 19 is Remembrance Day in Gettysburg, the day that Lincoln dedicated part of the battlefield as a cemetery for the Civil War dead in 1863. That year in July the dead lay on the battlefield, on the farmers' fields planted with crops and in the summer-green woods where they had taken positions behind boulders and tree trunks. Some lay covered with dirt, and others just lay bare to the weather. When land for a cemetery was set aside, the townspeople moved the dead to proper graves.

As a citizen of Gettysburg more than a century later, I carry no responsibilities as burdensome as moving thousands of dead bodies for burial. My children and I climb the steep trail of Round Top, scaling the hill's crowning boulders and dropping down behind them, pushing leaves off of low plaques to learn which soldiers fought where. We acquaint ourselves with the town's history—I was impressed to hear that the main building on the Gettysburg College campus had been a Civil War hospital. Later I realized that nearly every building standing in 1863 had been, of necessity, a hospital, too. A colleague who commuted here from Maryland once asked, "How can you live in that town? You're living on the most blood-soaked piece of ground in America." But this place doesn't feel blood-soaked. The former hospital buildings are bed-and-breakfasts, or dormitories, or offices. The battlefields roll out like velvet, their hems bordered with silent cannons and marble monuments. Although there was so much death, to my mind it's safely tucked into the past. [*excerpt*]

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Conception

A Personal History

November 19 is Remembrance Day in Gettysburg, the day that Lincoln dedicated part of the battlefield as a cemetery for the Civil War dead in 1863. That year in July the dead lay on the battlefield, on the farmers' fields planted with crops and in the summer-green woods where they had taken positions behind boulders and tree trunks. Some lay covered with dirt, and others just lay bare to the weather. When land for a cemetery was set aside, the townspeople moved the dead to proper graves.

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Along the sidewalks in the tourist end of town, the Ghostwalk guides would beg to differ. A woman in a hoopskirt holds up an oil lantern as tourists gather in the fall darkness, shivering in their jackets. Swinging by in the car to pick up my daughter from a football game or dance, I see

them heading up the hill in a mob to summon up the local ghosts. As the Ghosts of Gettysburg Web site says of the men killed here, “Their presence on earth was silenced forever by death. *Or maybe not . . .*”

I had ghosts of my own.

On November 19 there is a wreath-laying ceremony at the cemetery. I prefer to visit on Memorial Day, when the town’s children march in a parade to lay garden flowers on the soldiers’ graves. That’s the sort of charm a small town has. One is expected, of course, to have garden flowers. Thanks to the previous homeowners’ planting of perennials, we can usually manage a straggly bunch. And Captain Trickey, who owned our house before the previous owners, had planted climbing roses on the south side of the garage that persist in blooming small scarlet flowers, despite our neglect.

My husband and I didn’t attend the wreath-laying ceremony in 2002, thus missing a recitation of the famous address: “Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty . . .” Though the opening words have been heard so often that their literal meaning can glide right by, it is odd to think that in the nineteenth century Americans commonly marked time from 1776—thus a mortgage document in my family is dated the “Eighty-Third year of the Sovereignty and Independence of the United States of America,” or 1859. As a country, we were tethered to a different point of origin.

My husband and I, busy with work and children, did not often attend community events, and on this night we stayed home as usual and put our two children to bed. Then we sat outside on the breezeway. As of the next weekend we would be thrust into the extended family arena—Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, and the dedication of a memorial boulder. Sometimes before these occasions we went a little crazy—sat out on the breezeway in plastic Adirondack chairs, drank too much wine, and smoked a few cigarettes. We used to smoke. We didn’t anymore. We used to drink too much almost routinely, playing poker with friends, throwing parties at which every scrap of food in our apartment was eaten, the last slices of bread made into toast at 3 a.m. Sitting out there on our breezeway too late, wearing winter coats and indulging in old habits, recalled the old “us,” the ones who lived in beat-up apartments and traveled overland to Guatemala and moved every year and didn’t know what would happen next. November 19 was the first night like that in a while, when we felt

romantic, so I remembered the date. That night, without intending to, we conceived our third child.

The first ghost was my dead sister-in-law, Kathryn. Her cancer diagnosis had come soon after we moved to Gettysburg. To say “dead sister-in-law” or even “cancer diagnosis” sounds unacceptably final. “Cancer diagnosis” had once seemed the beginning of a story—a story she began to write as a memoir—that included revelation and recovery. Then the narrative shut down, and the conception of it changed. Diagnosis equaled death sentence. During that fall after she died in June 2002 I was numb. There was the kitchen phone I would use to call her, the chair I sat in while we talked, the basket filled with printouts about clinics and medicines. There was the calendar that used to look bright white, the pages significant with tests and visits. That fall the calendar sat dead on the counter, a grayish bureaucratic instrument, telling me what to do.

Her widower asked me whether I had dreamed of her. “I dreamed,” he said, “that she was in a school for the dead, learning all sorts of spiritual things, and so excited to tell me.” Sometimes she appeared to me in my mind, and spoke to me in the old way: “Never undervalue the water vegetables,” she had said once, meaning that we should eat cucumbers and iceberg lettuce because they held a lot of water, even though they were not the vibrantly colored superstar vegetables like carrots and spinach. Unimportant sentences like that sounded in my ear and then, alone in my house while the children attended school, I would lapse into a reverie of remembrance.

That fall I felt full of death, which is to say, empty. I felt dead inside, scoured out. Sitting at the kitchen table attempting to work, I would rouse myself from paralysis and almost run out of the house to do errands, or go to my brightly-lit campus office full of paperwork and e-mail. At work I performed exactly as required, because that fall I was being evaluated. I clicked down the hallways in heels, clicked my ballpoint pen at meetings, wore red lipstick, and taught classes while colleagues observed me stalking in front of the blackboard authoritatively, eliciting comments from the most reluctant of students. But when I turned off the office lights and went home, the deadness returned. I was only a perfect shell.

“Little Miss Perfect,” our neighbor had sneered at me in childhood. Her children had messy hair, unwiped noses, frayed elastic. I always played the

princess in our ad hoc performances. Ballet, my chosen sport, aspired to perfection without visible effort or cost. While the rainbow tutu itches, the satin toe shoes hurt, one must dance as if blissful. The high compliments: *she makes it look easy*, or *grace under pressure*. I wanted those compliments, still want them. That fall I was empty. I was nothing but an appearance, an apparition of a self.

In a small town, one is always visible. We lived “in town.” When a new neighbor moved in from “the mountain,” a rural area on the slopes of nearby South Mountain, she remarked, “Now that I live in town, I won’t be able to hang laundry in my pajamas.” We had lived in the anonymity of cities, a version of privacy. In a small town, one is seen and remarked upon, whether raking leaves, buying a candy bar at the convenience store, or taking a walk on Saturday morning. When I got pregnant by accident during the mournful November of 2002, one of my first thoughts was how it would look: how sloppy, how embarrassing. And at my age, with two children already, and both of them in school. My life was fine. Or, rather, it *had* been. The square in the indicator window of the home pregnancy test was supposed to remain white. On a December night, when a pink plus sign glowed into place, I couldn’t believe it.

Conceived in oblivion, conceived of as a mistake.

Both of my children had suffered problems at birth. My daughter aspirated meconium, couldn’t breathe, nearly died. My son had a hole in his heart. I had Polaroids of both in neonatal intensive care. They turned out fine, unscathed, healthy, without consequence. We were so lucky. Why would I chance it again?

During the black, early winter evenings, we kept finding things Kathryn had given us. They were souvenirs from her travels in search of healing, to see an acupuncturist in the Canary Islands or a doctor in Bonn who injected chemicals at tumor sites. We found tiny stoppered flagons of Penhaligon’s perfumes from England, a rope of pink pearls and a length of silk printed with butterflies from China, and—from an ashram in midstate New York, from a healing ceremony—a brown string bracelet I used to wear so as to be sure to think of her every day. Some nights when I took it off and laid it on the bedside table I felt free, as if from a welcome but too-long embrace. I found a red-faced Swiss watch misplaced for years, a counterfeit Prada bag that—when I wasn’t enthusiastic enough—she had assured me was the

“best class of counterfeit available.” Now she was gone. One day we would find the last gift.

Being a reasonable person, only if I had become pregnant on the day of her death would I have allowed myself to say aloud a far-out idea like “transmigration of souls.” No, now it was six months later. Outside, the cropped cornfields had gone brown. We were thousands of miles from her death place, in Germany. I didn’t feel that my unexpected pregnancy was part of her narrative. But then later I couldn’t separate the two. Someone in the family had died; someone new was going to be born.

The second ghost rose like the full December moon over the woods, appearing suddenly to stare me in the face. It wasn’t a person, but a promise from the past.

I had promised myself I wouldn’t have an abortion. Again. In the fall of senior year in college I’d become pregnant. The night it happened my best friend from high school had come to visit, confided that she was in love with me, and tried to kiss me. I fled my one-room apartment, and her, for the most heterosexual site possible: a frat boy’s bed. When I saw him on campus later, I felt disgusted with myself. Why couldn’t I have talked to my friend instead? When I told her I was pregnant, she came to see me again. The Baltimore sidewalks glinted under an Indian summer sun as we walked for blocks, talking and shouting. She grabbed my arm to stop me. “Abortion is a sin,” she said intently. She was Catholic. Her moralism made me furious, with the fury of a child brought up in the Episcopal Church who had never quite believed that Jesus rose from his tomb, and whose family quit going because the minister was having an affair. Church was full of promises and lies. And she was full of self-righteousness, throwing sin at me as if her being gay was just fine with the Catholic Church. “You will never have to worry about getting pregnant when you don’t want to,” I snapped, not shutting her up, but shutting up her argument’s power over me. “You will never have to feel this way.” I wanted no future of child support payments and custodial visits with the frat boy. Neither did I like the image of myself in a black graduation robe, seven months pregnant.

From time to time I have imagined how old that child would be. I have regretted my unwillingness to face difficulty. Yet almost exactly nineteen years later, another November, I felt cowardly again. Why should I be at the mercy of my fertility, at the mercy of a stupid mistake?

My usual doctor didn't handle obstetrics anymore, so I got the young guy. After a pale nurse whispered to him that I wasn't sure about the baby, he turned his big blue eyes on me. "Then I suggest you visit the Tender Care Pregnancy Center," he said. "Do you know of it?"

Sure, I knew the pink-and-blue-painted sign, the dingy-looking place over a lamp shop on the outskirts of town. It looked just like the Emergency Pregnancy Center, or whatever it was I had found in the Yellow Pages and called in a panic in college, the place that sounded benign and showed me a film of fetuses in trashcans. But maybe I was wrong. "What sort of place is that?"

He leaned forward, looked at me earnestly. "They'll talk you out of having an abortion."

I felt cold. No longer a college girl who could be pushed around, who would watch that whole film without bolting as if good manners mattered most, I was an English professor. "Then why would you refer me there, when I'm not sure I want to continue this pregnancy?"

We had a silent face-off. He sighed and turned to the nurse. "Have the receptionist set her up at York to talk to Dr. x. Say she wants to talk about options."

At the checkout desk, a woman placed the call. "We have a forty-year-old, pregnant, wants to discuss options," she said loudly into the phone. Just then an acquaintance came up behind us to pay her bill. I gave my husband a desperate look. "She's pregnant—not sure about it," the receptionist bellowed.

On the way out, I noticed the volumes of children's Bible stories on waiting room tables. How had I ended up living here? Central Pennsylvania was a backwards place, closing its schools for the first day of hunting season. Years before, in San Francisco, I had worked on a screenplay about abortion in Pennsylvania, about smuggling minors across state lines to circumvent the parental consent law. Pennsylvania had a twenty-four-hour rule, whereby after visiting a clinic and deciding to have an abortion, you must wait twenty-four hours before having the procedure, and the closest clinic was an hour's drive. The local schools taught abstinence, not birth control. In recently reported statistics for the county, two girls under age fifteen got pregnant; one ended her pregnancy, and one had a baby. Thirty-seven girls ages fifteen to seventeen got pregnant, and thirty-three of them had babies. The Gettysburg high school has a daycare center.

It was as if I had moved backward in time.

The doctor had made me feel ashamed. My appointment had been for a pregnancy visit, so I had assumed our conversation about my ambivalence would be just the initial part of a full exam. “He didn’t even examine me,” I said to my husband. “I said I wasn’t sure and then he couldn’t even treat me like a human being.” Over the next week I became angry. The only obstetrical practice in our town of eight thousand wanted to refer me to antiabortionists. The local hospital did not perform abortions, and the local branch of Planned Parenthood not only performed no medical procedures in their office, but claimed to know nothing about where an abortion might be obtained. They said they had never heard of medical abortion, the RU-486 pill that had made so many news headlines. Dr. x in York was an hour away, and who knew what her attitude would be?

The next day, watching minivans cruise up to the elementary school, I scrutinized the mothers, who appeared more grown-up than I felt, with highlighted hair, gold jewelry sets, and coordinated outfits. Had any of them ever gotten pregnant by accident? Had any of them, I wondered, had an abortion? There were, in a recent year in the county, 346 reported pregnancies in women aged thirty and over. Six of those pregnancies were aborted. For a county of eighty-six thousand people, that’s not a lot of abortions. Those mothers in their minivans steered expertly, wore red sweaters to the Christmas bake sale. They didn’t look as if they made mistakes.

Over the next month I made appointments for abortions and then cancelled them, became suffused with happiness when it seemed I was miscarrying at two months, watched numbly the ultrasound movie of a pulsing lima bean, and became resigned to the fact that if I broke my promise I would not forgive myself. I could have my happy planned family, and now that the children were in school, my easier life, my time to write, my summer vacation without chasing a toddler around the pool. But to break a promise like that augured secret corrosion, an interior crumbling with the knowledge that no promise need be kept.

In Baltimore nineteen years before, the medical team had assembled in a white room. They had dispensed a Tylenol for pain. A nurse flicked her eyes up at me, her eyes dark brown above a white surgical mask. Surgical masks give the eyes a look of alarm, of seriousness. 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, which were my chief experiences with pain until then. The violence 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.*

I was too weak to get up. But I told myself that I would be stronger, that if ever I became pregnant again I would have the baby, no matter what. Even then, being young, unmarried, and short on cash, I knew I had the resources (a desire for children someday, education, a supportive family) to raise a child. I had let myself down, catered to a lesser version of me than I wanted to be. Now I felt weak again. But I had never taken back the promise (as I had others).

When my back hurt recently, x-rays showed arthritis on the midspine, indicative not of an overall degenerative process but of an injury that caused bone spurs to grow. A serious injury more than ten years ago, the doctor said. He pointed at the translucent shapes, ghostly barnacles on vertebrae. Had I been in a car accident or fallen down stairs?

Then I remembered—the train derailment. After college graduation, outside Philadelphia. I had been sitting in the last car, which turned over on its side and got dragged. Though the seats wrenched off their metal moorings, and suitcases fell on us from the racks, and a woman from across the aisle flew into my lap so hard she cracked the window with her forehead, I was fine, I thought. We all were. When the train screamed finally to a halt, all of us passengers in the last car joined hands, picking our way single file along the slanted floor through dust and smoke, then crawled out one by one through a broken window, squeezing through the space between the tipped car and the ground. The next day I was surprised to catch sight of purple bruises up and down my back—I laughed at my unsightly purple butt. Getting on another train the next day, I cried in gulps and my hands shook as the conductor took my ticket. But then it was over. I had walked away. Only, I hadn't. I had carried the accident with me, in

my spine, for almost twenty years. While the doctor explained the x-ray, I thought, wonderingly, *Goddamn*, you really *can't* escape your past.

I had carried my abortion with me, too, a decision in itself that reflected so much else carried from the past, the conception of who I was and what I would become, and of how that would be made manifest. I was not the *kind of person* who would be pregnant at her college graduation. My father's photograph of me shows my hair cut newly short under the mortarboard, a dreamy happiness on my face as I held the rolled-up diploma. I was happy, free to move on, work full-time, earn money, apply to and attend graduate school, where I would meet my future husband. But it turns out that in all that forward motion—as I cut off the past like my long hair, moved to the middle of the country and then the west, determined to follow every chance, have no regrets—there was, all along, an inner derailment, a refusal to move on without remembering.

When I arrived at Gettysburg College, people were still talking about the Peterson case. Brian Peterson, a Gettysburg College freshman, had gotten his girlfriend, a University of Delaware freshman, pregnant the previous fall. They had told no one, and when she went into labor on November 12, 1996, he drove from Gettysburg to Newark, Delaware, where the couple checked in to the Comfort Inn, and she delivered a baby boy. He stuffed the baby into a trash bag and discarded him in the hotel dumpster, where he was discovered dead two days later. Peterson was serving a seventeen-month prison sentence in Delaware. Brian Peterson was a nice kid, professors said, and they wished they had known he was in trouble. Peterson's high school soccer coach was quoted in the Delaware *News Journal* as saying that Peterson must have told prosecutors the truth during the investigation, because "that's the kind of person he is." In the newspapers and on campus, people said, how awful that Peterson and his girlfriend had killed their baby, how unimaginable. But couldn't it be imagined? We all knew that secret mess and the nightmarish feeling of the day of reckoning arriving for which one is unprepared ("He died suddenly, but not unprepared," one of my ancestor's gravestones reads, a hopeful sentiment).

My students have written of their pregnancy troubles, after the fact. One wrote of leaving school for a semester to have her baby, conceived with the long-time boyfriend she loved. She had a healthy baby boy. Pressured by her boyfriend's parents, they gave up the baby for adoption, and in the moment of handing him over in the hospital corridor, she realized her

heart was broken. And it was, I thought, but didn't say. Gazing at her bland blondness, reading her concluding words that she wanted "everything to go back to normal," I knew that wish, and that it would and would not be granted. In the semester I got pregnant, a student wrote of taking his girlfriend to get an abortion (I took notes—where? how?—while laughing grimly at myself). They felt sure about the decision, but sad. Their baby was due in August, too, just like mine. So now, when I carry my baby, Benjamin, heavy on my hip, sometimes I think of my student, and that his baby would be the same age. How he'll carry that decision with him for the rest of his life.

Supposedly a Confederate soldier in rags skulks among the boulders of Devil's Den, where blood ran in creeks along the rocks. In various Gettysburg houses, shadows flicker on the walls, stairs creak, doors won't stay shut. Moans come from a field where a North Carolina brigade was buried in a long trench, as they fell in their marching line, and the grass, it is said, grows greener there. On campus, sentinels still watch the battle from the cupola of Pennsylvania Hall, and in the basement, surgeons perform amputations. On Little Round Top a Confederate officer on horseback picks his way downhill on moonlit summer nights. Whether the past is real and alive in this way I do not know. Our conceptions haunt us, idea-ghosts made visible, demanding to be claimed.