

Blame

written by Guest Contributor | February 11, 2021



Image: The author, mid 1990s

The man who got me pregnant in the spring of 1994 was a massage therapist named Steve Swetman. He had a carpeted 2-bedroom house in the hills of West Austin, Texas that his parents had bought for him. He showed me his living room, the couch and La-Z-Boy and Papasan circled around the television, which had full cable. His bed was huge, an expanse of mattress.

“It’s an Alaskan King,” he said, brushing my hair away to kiss my neck. “You can’t get one any bigger.”

I spent several nights in that bed having wet but unfulfilling sex, always on my back, fully aroused but never climaxing. He did not care. Apparently, neither did I.

Now I am 50 years old, but I often attempt to articulate this passivity. First, I see myself. I meet Steve Swetman for the first time at Lovejoys, an artsy brewery off of Sixth Street that was meant to be the antithesis of all the cover-band bars. We lean against the wall between the giant angels painted on either end of the mural; he tells me he has a deluxe suite reserved at the Ramada so he and his friends don’t have to drive all the way home after a night at the bars. This shocked me. You could do that? You could rent a suite for hundreds of dollars when you *already* had a place to live? I was a waitress; I rented a cheap but decent house near Central Austin with my best friend and her volatile cat, Cupid. I did not have a car. I rode my bike everywhere or took the city bus.

I go back to the Ramada with him. I am wearing patchwork overalls, a tank top, and Birkenstocks. I have hairy armpits. The suite sparkled with gleaming end tables and shining bar. Beds made smooth, their covers creaseless, with

quilted magazine pillows leaned perfectly against the headboards. A plush throw over the back of the couch. A balcony overlooking Guadalupe Street, a long, rolling line toward the Colorado River, which ran through the middle of the city. This was how the other half lived. I was 24. And I was there.

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We dated and screwed for a few weeks. Without protection. I used it only with men—many of them by then—who brought out a condom.

Few of them ever had. I guess it was my job to do that.

I should have been fired. They should have been fired, too.

For years, I did not get pregnant. I was a bathroom sigher, relieved that my period had arrived. I pictured myself running through a joyous meadow. Free, free, free. Then I inserted a tampon, looked in the mirror, and swore that I would never have unprotected sex again.

Didn't I know what would happen? Willingly fucking without protection when you don't want a child is like waiting in line to have an abortion. I'm sure I did what anti-choicers complain about and told myself it would be okay, because I could always just get an abortion. No problem! Or that chlamydia was okay, because it was totally treatable. No biggie! And sure, crabs were a little embarrassing but really just a routine part of a sexually active life.

After graduating from a 4-year skin-on-skin slut-fest that I called college, I finally convinced myself to take an HIV test. I waited for the results in an Austin social services clinic.

God, please help me. One more time. I squeezed my hands together but kept them in my lap so no one in the waiting room would think I was actually praying. I will never have unprotected sex again. Never never never.

"Your test is negative," the social worker said after she called me back. "You're actually very low risk."

"But I've had so many partners," I said.

"But you don't use needles and neither have any of them. You're what we call 'vanilla.'"

I walked to the bus stop and smiled so hard I hurt my face. *Never never never* morphed into *I'm not that bad I'm not that bad I'm not that bad*. This continuum was short and comfortable, with a bar far too low for me to feel anything like authentic love for myself. But on it I stayed, a self-esteem bottom feeder, having sex without protection and absorbing the guilt that followed.

But good luck and membership in a safe demographic were apparently not enough. I had always, since I was 16 years old, had sex without protection and absorbed the guilt that followed.

My mother had raised me (apparently not too well) as a feminist. In the early 70s, she went door to door with a briefcase of samples of birth control devices. When I was 5, I squished the diaphragm and spun the IUD coil on my index finger. In fourth grade, I wore an E.R.A. tee shirt and stood in front of my class for Show and Tell to inform them that girls could do anything boys could do. I had had therapy, too, plenty of it—but no therapist ever looked at me and said, “You have GOT to stop having sex without protection. Let’s pick this apart. Right now.”

Would that have helped? My best friend had said, once, “You have to use protection! Why don’t you?” And I didn’t know. My choices are cryptic even to me. I do know that I have always been a self-flagellator, a self-shamer, a self-hater, and this habit of mind started when I was a little girl. I remember walking to first grade across my small Iowa hometown, the hood of my parka sealed up tightly around my head, and feeling... bad about myself. Already deflated. As I grew into a teenager and interacted with other people at friends’ houses or school dances or football games or the mall and started having sex, I felt an internal monologue of fear and insecurity and desperation.

I picture myself, so meek and passive in my sexuality (sexuality? what was that?), so painstaking in my self-destruction.

And I forgive myself. Sometimes.

Other times I think, gross. How disgusting. And I am not thinking this about moldy food, or a pile of dogshit in the middle of the sidewalk. I am thinking this about myself, the only Self I will ever have.

I cry. Sometimes.

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By the time I learned I was pregnant, Steve Swetman had stopped calling. So I called him.

“It’s yours,” I said.

He drove right over, sat on the couch, clasped his hands.

“My mom. My parents. They can’t find out.”

“They won’t,” I said. “I’m going to have an abortion.”

And then he was in my life again, calling me every day and taking me out and

watching rented movies with me while Cupid sat on top of our television next to the antenna and scowled out the window, orange tail hanging down into the screen.

I made Steve Swetman use a condom, because even though I was already pregnant, I was going to practice being assertive. I suddenly understood that I had to use condoms all the time, every time. Never did I want another uncovered penis near me. I was still numb to my own sexuality—epiphanies can only go so far—but I had what felt like real feelings for Steve Swetman. He was behaving like an attentive boyfriend. And in my time of crisis, too! When I was crying and unhinged all the time! What a win!

I waited tables every night at the Magnolia Café, a 24-hour restaurant where I worked graveyard shifts. I was also a graduate student at The University of Texas at Austin, taking two classes toward a degree I never came close to completing in library and information science. I felt the weight of my recklessness in everything I did. I typed papers for class pregnant, washed my dishes pregnant, did my laundry pregnant, rode my bike pregnant, served omelettes pregnant, showered pregnant, drank beer pregnant, ate breakfast pregnant, ate lunch pregnant, ate dinner pregnant, fell asleep pregnant, woke up pregnant.

It was excruciating.

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A cohort of about 10 women got abortions the same day I did. We had a group information session, changed into gowns, and took a pill; then we waited together on sofas and chairs in a large lounge to be called back one at a time. A woman in her late 40s sat across from me. She had five children.

“My husband says I’m going against God,” she said. “But I just can’t. We can’t have another one.”

I didn’t say, if he were pregnant, he’d go against God, too. She squeezed the hem of her gown in her fist and wiped a tear away. She did not *want* this. She did not *want* an abortion. She believed it was her only choice.

“You’re doing the right thing,” I told her, because she was.

What did not help: the man outside yelling through the walls, “It’s a baby! It’s a baby! It’s a baby!”

Another woman there was my age. We shared salsa recipes. I was surprised by her use of canned tomatoes instead of fresh, and also doomily aware that we were both about to get ABORTIONS. I was not aware of how lucky we were to have access to them and money to pay for them. I wish I could tell you I had been aware of this. Of so much injustice. But I wasn’t.

"It's a baby!" he screamed. "It's a baby!"

"You know it is not a baby, don't you?" Said the clinician, walking me into the procedure room.

"Yes," I said, not knowing this at all, because I felt so very very very very horrible about myself and my life and my decisions that I could not hear what she was telling me, or ask her to explain. I did not believe Screaming Man, but I also did not have the ability—at any moment during those weeks—to make embryo/fetus/baby distinctions because I was instead asking myself why I had done what I had done and attempting to forgive myself. And failing. I was trying so hard to replenish the self-esteem I never had that I did not recall what my mother had told me about abortion when I was in my late teens.

Isn't it the death of something? I asked her. Isn't it extinguishing a life? Killing something?

Maybe, she said. But we cannot make women have babies. What do you want to do, chain them to trees?

I lay on the table and took the mask that the clinician handed to me. Inhaled the gas.

If you ever get an abortion, whether it's because you did not insist on protection, or you did not want another child, or you were too turned on to care, or your birth control didn't work, or a man raped you: I hope you know that getting an abortion is loving yourself. I hope you know that you are doing the absolute and undeniable right thing.

But that day, as I spread my legs and set my feet into the stirrups and heard the whir of the vacuum and sobbed to the nurse about what a mess I was, I did not know any of this. I felt only my Self. And she was a weak little fuck up.

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Afterward, Steve Swetman took me back to his house. I did not want to go. I wanted to go home and sit on my Salvation Army couch and drink wine and listen to Cupid hiss his way through the house and let my best friend make dinner for me, as she had offered to do. I wanted to be in my own bedroom, where my tapestry hung over the windows, the one my mother had bought me when I was 18. I wanted to call her, my mother with whom I had always been impatient and sometimes viscerally mean, my mother who did not ask who or what or where or how could I. She sent me a check. It was in the mail by the time we got off the phone.

Steve Swetman had offered to pay for it.

Don't worry, I said. My mom is.

Did I call her? Did I tell Steve Swetman to take me home? No, because well-socialized women like me prefer the fantasy of the attentive boyfriend, especially if we're distraught. And I was. I had just had an abortion because I was a joke of a woman and a feminist, and what I thought would repair me was a white, doughy frat boy.

He settled me into his Alaskan King and then went to get food from Olive Garden. I tried to eat in bed, but Steve Swetman didn't have a tray to put the food on and the containers were bendy and I spilled Alfredo sauce on his 800-count Egyptian sheets. I moved to the bar between his kitchen and dining room and tried to eat there, but the cheese was like plastic and the pasta shells undercooked and his ceiling light fixture so tentacle-y and gold and ugly. I started to cry. I hated fucking Olive Garden. Why had I said this was okay? Why was I here?

I still couldn't sleep despite the pain pills, so just before midnight, I asked him to drive me home. He said sure—probably suppressing a whoop—and when he dropped me off, I limped up the gravel driveway and across our tiny porch and opened the door. The house was quiet. My best friend had left a note on my pillow, saying that she had gone to her boyfriend's for the night but to call any time. She had left a note on the couch that morning, too, telling me she loved me.

I changed my pad for the hundredth time and got into my bed, burrowed under the covers, and looked at the ceiling. I turned out the light and closed my eyes, then felt a presence at my shoulder and opened them. There was Cupid, my best friend's cat. Right beside me. Orange and huge, with a wide face.

I held out my hand. He did not run away. He started to purr. I scratched his head and put my fingers gently on his throat to feel the vibration in the darkness.

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Two days after the procedure, I had to go to class. I rode my bike to campus and sat through the 90-minute lecture. When I stood to leave, I cramped up. I used the restroom, changed my pad, walked out to the parking lot. It was a breezy spring day. Cars on the I-35 pounded by in the distance. I stood at the bike rack, my pelvis throbbing, so tired and demoralized I thought I might pass out. I felt no ambivalence about the loss of the embryo. That emptiness brought me peace. What I felt was fury. Here I was riding my bike on a pad the size of a compacted diaper, working all night long, not sleeping well, unable to focus and trying constantly to keep from feeling like the submissive idiot I knew I was. Telling myself horrible things about myself. I might have been a little suicidal. I'm not sure.

And where was Steve Swetman? Sailing. Water skiing. Giving massages. Having his bills and maroon Ford Explorer paid for. Right before the abortion, when

we had pulled into the clinic, he turned off the ignition and told me how his friends had responded when he told them he got a girl pregnant.

“Say it’s not yours.”

“Split. She could change her mind and have the baby.”

“She’s not asking you to pay for it, is she?”

I didn’t have a trophy in my purse, but if I had, I would have presented it to Steve Swetman, so grateful that he had ignored his friends’ advice. What a man! I took his hand and thanked him. Awarded him honors for being adequate.

Then he disappeared, because the abortion was over.

For him.

Fuck that! Fuck you, Steve Swetman! You will suffer, you oblivious sperm-spewing piece of shit. You will come pick me up and make my life easier and know my pain and misery! I left the bike rack and went to the pay phone just inside the building where I’d had class.

“I need a ride home.”

“I’m with my buddy.”

“I’m bleeding and cramping and I don’t think I can ride my bike right now.”

“Just a second.”

Muffled voices in the background. Rage in my throat.

“Right now?”

“Yeah.”

And then I let him have it. My words of wrath and revenge like raging wildfire:

“Look.” I cleared my throat. “You need to help me.”

A group of wispy undergraduates walked past me out the door. Did they have unprotected sex, too? Did they curse themselves so naturally that it was like taking a breath?

He showed up with his friend, put my bike in the back of his Explorer, and drove me home. They talked in the front seat while I sat in the back and looked out the window. Smashing Pumpkins played in the tape deck. I hated that band. The windows were down the whole way. Austin, the skinny city, passed by in a blur.

He dropped me off and I never saw him again.

I walked my bike into the house. My best friend came out of her bedroom.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I just made salsa.”

Cupid was behind our house somewhere, killing birds. I had to be at work in an hour. I leaned my bike against the wall in my bedroom, ate chips and salsa, and changed into my jeans and Magnolia Café tee shirt. Before I left, I went into the bathroom to check my pad. The blood was still coming, shedding with the passing of time.



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