

# A Timely Confession

by [Edward Grossman](#) (July 2022)



*Still Life with Airplane, Noc Vvyne Lim*

*On the eve of the Supreme Court voiding Roe v. Wade, an old man revisits his past.*

**Half a century ago, I boarded** a Pittsburgh to LaGuardia early morning flight. My seat was next to a pretty, rosy-cheeked girl—sorry, a pretty, rosy-cheeked, button-nosed young woman, definitely not Jewish, all the rosier for wearing no makeup. Strangers on Eastern Airlines. I started chatting her up, then, up in the air, when the stewardesses issued potato chips and soda, I accepted while she said no thank you. I estimated maybe 19, maybe 20 years old. Feeling that I was doing well I

asked what she was going to New York for.

"I'm going to get an abortion."

Three seconds my mouth hung open, during which she looked—accusingly?—into my eyes. During which, also, the image of the Madonna and Baby Jesus came to me unbidden, yes, me, a non-believing Jew, an image non-believing men painters kept reproducing in one guise or another. Picasso for example. Gently, cautiously, I asked what happened. But gentleness and caution weren't necessary. Her story tumbled out, and I had no feeling, and 50 years later I have no feeling that she held anything back or made anything up.

My seat mate came from West Virginia across the Pennsylvania border. After graduating high school and while waitressing she'd met this boy, no, this man, this married man, and one thing led to another. She lived at home. Mom knew nothing, dad knew nothing, and when she missed her curse she wasn't surprised by the results of a test she went by herself to get at Morgantown public health. The man said he'd arrange something. But she'd heard stories of non-legal abortions going wrong, very wrong, the only legal abortions in West Virginia being if it was a question of the mother's life. Fortunately, a girlfriend told her of a place in New York City where it was legal, and safe, and no-cost.

So having made her appointment long-distance and been instructed to have nothing to eat for twelve hours ahead of the operation and borrowed the roundtrip economy fare she was on the way. It would be simple—the Planned Parenthood clinic was practically next door to LaGuardia. She'd be in and out and home that day.

Liberal as I was then, I was alarmed.

"Should you be getting back on a plane so quickly?"

"It'll be OK."

"Why don't you stay at my place until tomorrow? I've got an extra room."

"Thank you but no."

"At least I'll go with you and wait and take you back to LaGuardia."

"You don't have to."

"I want to."

"Thank you but no."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"How are you getting to the clinic?"

"Taxi."

"Do you have enough money?"

"Are they expensive?"

I forced two pictures of Andrew Jackson on her, and on the ground, where I noticed her Levis were fully buttoned, I walked her to a cab.

Yes, a full half century it's been. And it's been 43 years since another woman, a Jewish woman, vacuumed a baby or a baby-to-be of my own. Now here we all are except those babies, or those bunches of cells, in a fresh, an iPhoned millennium. What happened to my West Virginian? Did it go OK? How's she doing today if she didn't die with her legs in stirrups or on the flight back or later, much, much later, of an OxyContin event? Has she been happy and healthy, regret-free, a cherished wife, mother, grandmother and Trump voter? Who knows? I just know I've metamorphosed into a wrinkled senior not chatting up rosy-cheeked girls, non-Jewish or Jewish, at

least not with any hope of ushering them into bed.

This flight was 50 years ago. But the other day, with my salt and pepper Van Dyke hidden by my N95 mask, I came across the following chalked on the sidewalk on Van Ness Avenue:

### ***ABORTION IS MURDER***

Yes—in of all places, San Francisco.

According to whoever did the chalking the girl had her child, had him or her murdered. But something not alive, not human, not yet a person can't be killed far less murdered, can it? From her jeans I reckoned it was early, very early, when he or she or it was an embryo. True, an egg no bigger than the period wrapping up this sentence had been let go from an ovary, as eggs were and are monthly unless The Pill is taken, and its genes and those of the man, the married man, had mingled, and something new had come to be, and divided, and divided again, and again, until arrival in her womb resembling a soccer ball, and this new thing had implanted. Although it was early it was now beyond a plasm with creases. I visualized it not yet having turned into a fish, then a pig, or gained the form of a human being with two jelly eyes moving in movements associated with dreaming. Was its brain generating electricity—the medical-legal criterion by which life is judged to be, the absence of which signifies death, or at most pre-life? By that criterion I was alive sitting beside this girl and the baby or the enlarging cluster of cells inside her, and wrinkled, gray and old as I've become I'm alive now too, for how much longer God knows.

Say tomorrow a brain hemorrhage puts me in the ICU comatose and ventilated. When nothing has been recorded in two electroencephalograms done 24 hours apart it'll be legal for the hospital and the doctors and the nurses to unhook me, either to harvest organs, free up space, or both. When our brains yield a flat EEG twice in 24 hours the doctors, lawyers

and judges consider us dead. Perfectly flat—the slightest wavelet and the D.A. may indict the hospital, the doctors and the nurses. Their lawyers and experts may claim the wavelets are just artifacts, meaningless, but it'll be up to a jury to decide. That's at the end of things. Applying the same rule at the beginning would mean that five weeks after sperm invades egg there's life. Granted, rhythmless electricity, disorganized. But so is the kind prohibiting unhooking.

Electricity or no electricity, rhythmical or not, the year after I offered the girl a place for the night seven of the nine men in black on the Supreme Court—eight whites and one Negro, sorry, African-American, sorry, black, sorry, Black—decided that in light of a privacy right emanating from the Constitution all women in all states could get an abortion for any reason any time in the first trimester. Until then it had only been kosher in a few states including New York. If the girl and her lover, her cheating lover, had waited for *Roe v. Wade* to be adjudicated we'd never have met.

Why did seven white men and one Black man strain themselves to find a right to, arguably, terminate a human life?

Justice used to be represented in the figure of a blindfolded young woman holding a pair of scales. Nothing like money, pull, political correctness or the zeitgeist entered into her verdicts. A commendable blindness—or was it? Wikipedia and other up-to-date resources I've looked at hint that the middle-aged and old persons with penises who green-lighted abortion nation-wide weren't disinterested, not perfectly. How could they be? Several kept young mistresses, William Douglas openly, and while not all were kind, Douglas especially not, all had wives and daughters and granddaughters and daughters-in-law claiming increased respect and empathy in a new age of Women's Liberation. The man writing the opinion, Harry Blackmun, known for reading the Constitution unimaginatively, picked by Richard Nixon for that reason, had had a staffer's girlfriend bleed to death from an illegal abortion. It was

forgivable if he let the blindfold slip.

Anyway, whatever seven of the nine judges had in mind, it was seven years after the girl on the plane and I met that another female, married, Jewish, got rid of what in spite of taking care she and I had started on its, on her or on his journey to or of life. This was a 20-something mother of a little boy. Yes, a Jewish woman. I'd accepted her invitation to a home-cooked meal because she and her Jewish husband were separated and divorce papers had been filed. One thing led to another. Resistance? None—a post-patriarchal, post-monotheistic person in touch with herself, knowing what she needed, gifted in the kitchen, gifted in bed, climaxing again and again and yet again, toes curling, eyes rolling like a doll's eyes, gasping, then laughing while the kid slept in a room down the hall.

I'd pictured a joint future. But this romance lasted just one winter, until despite the care we took she sensed what had happened, and quickly, following a test, not bothering to discuss it with me, chose to have it aspirated. Nothing to discuss. Multi-orgasmic, yes, but not irresponsible. She wasn't about to give her son who'd spat at me a brother or sister conceived in adultery. Nor would she want the divorce court judge to find out that while married she'd had a lover, brought the lover home, cooked for the lover and gotten pregnant by him. Grounds for denying custody. Abortion the responsible, rational thing, and by quickly resorting to it she did herself and her son and me a favor. Why then did I cry, not God forbid in her presence or that of anybody else, cry just once for myself and for the cancelled kid, be it a girl or a boy?

Anyway, when the Jewish wife and mother did the reasonable thing, I cried. I made sure never to see or speak with her again, only hearing that she and the husband reconciled, and she quickly become pregnant. Why did I take her choice so hard? Maybe due to my being agnostic, not atheist, to lacking the self-confidence to be of the view there was no God, or God

was dead. That said I had no use for the Messiah business, the Chosen People business, the God-sticking-a-finger-in-human affairs business, not to mention the dietary restrictions. Pig? Lobster? I enjoyed them. Which isn't to say I was a self-hater, a Jewish anti-Semite. Many of my friends were bareheaded Jews, and many of my heroes—if not Ted Williams or Vladimir Nabokov then Sandy Koufax, Richard Feynman, Groucho Marx, Arthur Rubenstein, Vera Nabokov, up to a point Freud. Yes, that was me, a bareheaded, non-believing Jew, mixing flesh and dairy, violating the Sabbath, never proselytizing for his unbelief, never apologetic, who'd never considered himself superior to believers and who as a rule, not invariably but as a rule, found Jewish women unsexy compared with non-Jewish.

Half-educated as I was in Jewish matters I knew that in the so-called Old Testament the penalty for breaking the seventh commandment is death. Abortion? When it came to abortion I knew vaguely that the sages weren't unanimous. They agree it's only permitted to save the mother, but does that mean only to save her life, or her well-being? Disagreements on that. In any case the rabbis agree that until the kid is born, until she or he takes a first breath, she or he isn't due full protection. So lays down Maimonides, the 12th century philosopher, astronomer, Talmud commentator and M.D. who knew nothing of EEGs. All this I'd vaguely known, and it didn't matter.

Even if she weren't married, even if she were divorced, probably I wouldn't have tried to convince this Jew not to do it, because for a man to sentimentalize, to moralize, is too easy. He's not the one accepting the discomforts, running the dangers and incurring the costs of pregnancy and motherhood. Serious discomforts—nausea and vomiting and weight gain and ungainliness and labor. Major dangers—now as then bearing a child riskier than abortion even for a middle-class or upper-class white. Lifelong costs—the stretch marks, the fallen

breasts, the discolored nipples, the careers placed on hold if not killed.

To repeat—half a century since that Eastern flight, Eastern long since gone, and 43 years since a baby or baby-to-be of mine was terminated. A half-century during which agnostic that I am I've occasionally wondered if either of these babies, or babies-to-be, girl or boy, could've been the Messiah. Unlikely but not inconceivable. Also, if by not preventing, by not even trying to prevent the second abortion, I'd shamed myself. It would've taken a braver, a controlling, a dominant and not such a liberal Jewish man. Yes, liberal. Of all the numberless groups and subgroups in the U.S. the most religiously, the most zealously pro-choice by far are bareheaded, lobster-eating, university-graduated Jews. They, we, hold it to be self-evident that women own an unalienable right to do what they choose with their bodies just like men. A right to be fully in the world, make careers, discover and unleash and express their sexual genius which once discovered and unleashed and expressed leaves men in the shade.

Admittedly the last isn't a constitutional right but a natural one which nobody—no government, no church, no judge—should have the power to delimit. There are Moslems who practice clitorrectomy. If abortion were re-criminalized wouldn't it unintentionally if not intentionally mutilate women in the same way? And so I chose not to stick my nose in when the Jewish woman made her choice, and never breathed a word to any of the non-Jewish and Jewish women I went on to be with here, there, everywhere. Owing to its showing me in a favorable light I did tell a handful the story of the girl on the plane but nothing of the other.

To repeat the question—might either baby have redeemed the world if she or he had lived? Probably not. And who knows? Though women unlike men aren't sissies, the girl on the plane might've cried with relief and/or grief on the flight back, and even the multi-orgasmic Jewish wife after she did what she

did.

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**Edward Grossman's** work has appeared in New English Review, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Harvard Magazine, Quillette, Washington Post, American Spectator, New Republic, Harper's, the Atlantic, Commentary, Jewish Chronicle (London), Les Temps Modernes (Paris), Dagens Nyheter (Stockholm), and Maariv (Tel Aviv).

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