The SUN

ESSAYS, MEMOIRS, & TRUE STORIES

Ways To Show Affection

BY VIRGINIA ELIOT | MAY 2006

THE COLD MORNING WIND CLINGS TO MY SKIN like a tangled bedsheet, following me in the door from Lafayette Street and through the metal detector. The heat isn't working in the clinic waiting room. A bronze bust of Margaret Sanger, patron saint of birth control, scrutinizes me from a plaster podium, and a slide show, *Ways to Show Affection without Intercourse,* is projected half on a pull-down screen and half on the cottage-cheese ceiling. There are no empty seats, so I stand among the teenagers, who are still wearing their oversized coats and avoiding eye contact, while a security officer with a shaved head presides over us with a list of names: *Tiphanie, Lindsay, Keisha. You young ladies can go on back now. No, you can't take anyone with you.* The third way to show affection without intercourse is cuddling, but the man I'm with isn't holding my hand. I'm out of place because of my pale skin and my jewelry; he's out of place because of his gray hair.

A little girl with pink plastic barrettes in her lamblike curls squirms impatiently in the lap of her dozing, tattooed guardian. The girl looks me right in the eye, as small children do, and her gaze jumps my heart like a defibrillator. I look away quickly, but her image stays with me, and I am not here in the clinic but leaping from a rubber swing, splashing in a backyard wading pool with a plastic slide, prancing in a daffodil sundress on a wraparound porch with long pine railings. When I was this girl's age, I'd get up at dawn to make parades of tiny objects down the wooden rails: plastic circus animals, alphabet blocks, newly minted pennies, brittle cicada skins plucked off the bark of pecan trees, granite rocks with quartz jewels embedded in them. In my family the women all collect small things, and we like to put them in lines. At my grandmother's house, high on a shelf that held hawk feathers and arrowheads and foreign coins, there stood a glass mother elephant and four baby elephants all in a row, each one's trunk tucked through the curled tail of the next. Sunlight from my grandmother's window reflected off their glass ears, and I took them home with me, one by one, tucked in my palm, careful not to squeeze too hard and break them. The elephants were my grandmother's gifts to me at the end of my visits, my reward for being a good girl.

There are no presents for the little squirming girl, nor for me, here in the first waiting room of the clinic. The windows, small grated diamonds near the ceiling, look out onto a sidewalk pockmarked by blackened chewing-gum buttons ejected from the mouths of smirking adolescents. I try to imagine carefree, bubble-blowing girls in miniskirts, but the only encouraging item in this cold basement holding cell is a ruffle-edged *New Yorker* magazine from last May. Blue xeroxed pamphlets, carelessly folded, lie scattered on the stained industrial carpet and particleboard tables: *My partner / family member / friend is here for an abortion today*, they read. *What should I expect?*

I guess they're allowed to write *abortion* in print. On the phone they say *termination*, and in person they say *procedure*. Paul, whose hand I'm not holding, eyes a pamphlet but doesn't pick it up. Maybe he'll wait until I'm called away. Then maybe he'll read it over and over, until he's memorized what not to say afterward and knows exactly how much bleeding is too much. I could have told him all that myself, in minute detail. I know exactly what to expect.

I don't know whether to say, "I'm sorry," or, "That's wonderful" was Paul's first, whispered, response when I told him I was pregnant. Then *What do you want to do?* Then a gentle *I guess I should come up, huh?* Later he'd say that the *wonderful* part was just because he'd felt sure I'd want it, no matter what.

I just never in a million years thought this would be happening to me, Paul said — as if it were happening to *him*. I sat quivering in Queens, with my plastic cellphone in one hand and the plastic pregnancy test — showing two lines — in the other. I imagined him fiddling with his phone cord, perched on the edge of the navy-sheeted mattress on the floor of his dim Washington, D.C., studio apartment, beside the flimsy folding table that held his alarm clock, a photograph of his mother, and his wedding ring at the bottom of a white paper cup. (I'd known he was divorced from the beginning, but it had taken me weeks to notice the ring. I'd slip it on and off my finger while he shaved.) As it became clear that I was uncertain and willing to consider all the factors, Paul revised his initial line: while he couldn't say no if I wanted to go through with the pregnancy, he wouldn't *lobby* for it either. He didn't want me to do anything I didn't want to do. I would hear no more mention of *wonderful*, not until I e-mailed a girlfriend who made assumptions, wanted to throw a shower, told me she had hand-me-down onesies and tiny socks and a million books for me to read. By the end of her sweet, excited letter, I couldn't stop sobbing.

How the fuck did this happen, anyway? Paul asked, and I explained to this man nearly twice my age — to this graying, ankle-aching, shoe-tree-using man — all the reasons why withdrawal isn't enough. But by *this*, he meant a lot more than conception.

He said he was still all tangled up in his failed marriage. And I told him, *I don't want to talk about Alice right now.* And he said, *I know, but—* And I said, *You don't.* And he said, *It's not about her. It's about us.* And I said, *Please stop.* And he did.

When he came up, he said, *No matter what, I'm glad it's you* — glad I was the one carrying his child. I wouldn't let him hold my hand. I wouldn't let him touch me at all.

Paul never gave a lot of thought to birth control. Alice couldn't have children. There were cramps when they were still dating. She curled up in pain at his feet in a movie-theater aisle, then again on the floorboard of his car. Her periods left her bedridden for days. After they were married, the doctors told her she had to have surgery. Paul put fatherhood out of his mind. By the time he and I were drinking Belgian beer together at the Pharmacy Bar, he thought it was too late for him, that he'd missed his chance; hell, he might even be shooting blanks. We sat in the dark, smoky interior and looked out a frosty window at the neon music notes and stiletto heels on the streetlight poles, and I said I wanted a baby. It was our first date, and he hadn't yet taught me that Belgian beer has almost as much alcohol as wine. I said I'd wanted a baby ever since I'd gotten pregnant as a teenager and had to save for three months before I could afford the abortion.

In the third waiting room, on the second floor, I sit next to a light-brown-skinned girl whose head comes to my shoulder if I sit up straight. Her curly ponytail is dyed red, but the hair slicked down to her scalp is chestnut, and her earring, a bent-gold script *Tiphanie*, climbs halfway up her pierced ear. My eye slides down to the medical-history form in her lap. *Year of birth: 1989.* I don't need to do the math; my fourteen-year-old brother was born in 1990. *Number of pregnancies (including today): 3.* She's got fake nails, a tiny orange

sunset reflecting on an aqua ocean at the tip of each finger. *Number of live births: 0. Number of miscarriages: 0. Number of abortions: 2.* I'm both horrified and relieved; she's even worse than me, and she's only fifteen. When I was fifteen, I still had a couple of glass elephants left, the ones my little brother hadn't broken. I scribble in *2* for my number of pregnancies and hand in my form before anyone sees.

What I know: Pregnancy makes your skin clear up. Pregnancy makes your nipples throb painfully in the cold, through three layers of clothes. Pregnancy makes you burp and curl up in a fetal position. Pregnancy makes you yearn for small things, safe places, saviors you know won't come.

Over the year we were together, Paul and I spent many hours curled between the navy blue sheets in his one-room apartment on the eighth floor of the Imperial. He played me lonely indie-pop records by artists I'd never heard of, fed me lavender-flavored sorbet with a tiny silver spoon, and told me about Alice, whom he could seldom manage to call his ex-wife: When Alice was my age, she tried to cover her breasts when they made love. When Alice was upset, she went to a Mexican bar by herself. When Alice was ready, *she* asked *him* to marry her. When, ten years later, Alice wouldn't let him touch her anymore, she asked him for the divorce. He told me about their vacations in Belgium, their dinner parties, their fights, and his infidelities. He told me she would never forgive him. He described their old apartment in detail, pointed it out to me every time we passed it on the way to the liquor store. One night I sat in his lap on a bench beside the Potomac, and he told me he loved me, but that there would be no more great loves for him.

I told Paul about Jude, the boy I'd fallen in love with at fourteen and had left school to be with at eighteen. Jude, who called me his *bodhisattva*, his *angel*, his *pearl*. Jude, who told me I was everything he'd ever wanted, until it turned out I wasn't. His beloved bodhisattva went off to college and casually enlightened someone else.

I tried to make it better, but all the bad things that happened after that could be traced back to my betrayal. We'd wanted a rooftop garden in Crete, but after my fall from grace, Jude took me instead to the white dunes of Santa Monica, California, where I lost my last glass elephant, the one with the chip in its trunk and no one left to cling to. We hitchhiked down endless interstates, through the desert and the plains and the rain. In St. Louis, Missouri, my first love punched me in the jaw, and I fell in slow motion in a field of wheat and prickly thistles next to a shopping mall. By then we both knew I was pregnant. Jude ran away, horrified by what he'd done, and I chased him through the fields screaming, *Come back!* When I caught up to him, he was kneeling with his face in his hands. I held him and said I was so sorry for having made him this way. Jude finally left me sitting in a D.C. Metro station, bleeding clots the size of plums, two days after the abortion we'd paid for with money our cardboard sign had said would be for food.

Wrapped in navy blue sheets, Paul and I cried together for these and other things we thought had ruined us. We mourned all that we had lost. We rarely forgave ourselves, but held one another gently, careful not to break what was already cracked. Paul took *fuck me* out of my bedroom vocabulary. He taught me to be in love without the *madly*, to make love without the violence. He ran his hands over my body like a blind man reading Braille, every bone and curve. I said, *You touch me the way I've wanted to touch people all my life.*

A frowning red-haired woman with a Russian accent and a pin on her chest that says SONOGRAPHER digs deep into my pillowy stomach with the ultrasound wand, then exclaims, *I don't see well*, and orders me to take off everything below my waist. She slips a neon blue condom over the ten-inch vaginal ultrasound wand and pushes it inside me, follows arrows on a screen, explores my hollows, snaps photographs of my fetus from different angles, presses too hard, and finally commands, *Get dressed.* As I struggle with my boot, I ask how far along I am. She writes the answer to my question on a form I can't see and says, *The counselor will tell you. Are you ready?* I'm still trying to get my laces through the holes.

I was two months along in Santa Fe, New Mexico, walking slower and slower behind Jude in the endless heat, consumed by nausea. A bubble that wouldn't pop crept up the back of my throat. There was nothing to eat, but my breasts were still getting bigger by the day. Jude and I lay side by side in our filthy, one-person tent, and he told me, *I have no pity left for you.* I asked if he had ever pitied me, and he said, *I used to love you.* In Amarillo, Texas, he threw a pile of small bills at me (the *emergency fund*, we called it, because I couldn't say *abortion* yet) and left me crying on the side of the road. In Oklahoma City he told me he hoped I'd lead a miserable life and that every man I ever loved would cheat on me. I don't remember where we were when he stared up at the stars and said, *If you keep this baby and then come after me later, when I've set up the life I want to have with the woman I'll love, and you try to get me to pay child support, I'll never forgive you.*

Each time I saw my naked body in a mirror at a truck-stop shower, I gasped, amazed at the changes. When Jude and I would hang around in Barnes & Noble bookstores near the suburban intersections where we begged, I'd sneak *What to Expect When You're Expecting* from the shelf. The cover illustration of a mother rocking her baby made me feel ashamed, and I never found out what to expect. I slipped her back on her shelf and settled into a chair, surrounded by my pack and clothing roll and sleeping bag, and read thick Russian novels all day long in the air conditioning. Once, I looked up from a copy of *Crime and Punishment* I had no intention of buying to find an employee holding a ten-dollar bill out to me. *One of our customers wanted me to give you this*, he said. In another town, a bookstore employee told us we had to leave, that we weren't welcome there anymore.

At night, after Jude said cruel things to me, he cried because he realized what he had done, and he reached for me, and I comforted him, and he took me. I thought of my grandmother, who'd shot herself in the face when I was eleven because my grandfather was going to leave her, and I wondered if I could ever be so brave. Jude held down my wrists, and I told him he was *amazing*, he was *incredible*, he was the *best*. My father's hands had shaken when he'd come to tell me the news about my grandmother, and I'd carried a glass elephant around with me for days before the funeral. Jude rolled me over and took me against the pavement beneath an overpass, and I said,

Fuck me, and I said, *Harder*, and the tears streamed down my face, and shards of broken beer bottles dug into my breasts.

I had asked for this, and I liked that it hurt, because I thought it meant something. Nothing meant anything to me anymore, except the baby I couldn't have and the childhood I had lost. I thought my pain, my sacrifice, my submission, my devotion, even my nausea might prove something somehow, might fix something. I was determined to reconstruct my broken fairy tale with Jude, to glue the pieces back together. I had no other choice. I'd shattered every other relationship when I'd taken off with him. I was alone and pregnant, shadowing a man who despised me for having betrayed him, with no hope for the future, my past just another lost cause.

There are multiple floors and many waiting rooms in the clinic, perhaps for the doctors' security, or just because there are so many stages for the women to pass through: the medical history, the blood test, the ultrasound. I meet the counselor, who assures me that I'll be fine afterward. I sign a sheet of paper saying it's my choice. In the fourth waiting room I sit in a folding chair for hours wearing a cloth hospital gown. It could have been worse. I could have been asked to wear an oversized blue napkin secured with a plastic cord around the waist, like the skinny, doe-eyed girl beside me. I wonder how they decide who gets the crinkly paper gowns and who gets the cloth. I'm grateful for mine, with the purple flowers on white, the real ties, and especially the knee-length coverage.

In time each girl, whether in blue paper or white cloth, gives up on the idea that her wait will be short and puts some of her street clothes back on. I wrap myself up in my long wool coat and twist my grandmother's cashmere scarf like a vine around my neck. It's only the brown paper slippers on my feet, the red-striped ID bracelet on my wrist, and the frantic look on my face that give me away.

Tiphanie has put on her gray sweat pants, but has pulled them only halfway up her thighs. Her purple-flowered gown balloons out, and she can't sit still. She complains to the desk nurse about how slowly things are moving, and everyone hears the nurse tell Tiphanie, *Doctors have to eat lunch too*, and, *There's no need to get an attitude.*

I haven't eaten in seventeen hours. I haven't had anything to drink, not even water, since midnight. These are the rules you have to follow if you want to be put to sleep. I wonder whether fifteen-year-old Tiphanie was awake her first time too, whether she knows better now. She pretends to have an attitude, but her eyebrows give her away: thinly tweezed arches that betray anxiety and sadness each time she glances around the room, like lines sketched by a master cartoonist. Everyone here wears this same expression.

What I know: Pregnancy is a lot like hunger. It sits at the bottom of your stomach and controls your every thought. You try to distract yourself from it, but nothing works for long. Children on the street look like fresh-baked bread; babies in their mothers' arms, the sweetest pastries. You stop and stare, and the back of your throat gets hot with desire. You lie in bed at night and think of suckling infants when you touch yourself.

One April morning last year, before the seventeen-year cicadas ambushed the capital, I had Paul drop me off near the National Mall. I got out and followed the pink-shirted masses to the starting spot for the march, where I was plastered in SAVE ROE stickers and handed a royal blue cardboard KEEP ABORTION LEGAL sign. Paul had sent me off with a kiss on the cheek and an apology: *It's not that I don't feel this issue.*

We were a million strong without him — the largest march in American history, some said (the evening news disagreed) — streaming down Pennsylvania Avenue chanting:

Pro-life men have got to go! When you get pregnant, let me know!

Five, six, seven, eight, we're the ones who ovulate!

"Right to life," that's a lie! You don't care if women die!

My body! My choice!

My body! My choice!

My body! My choice!

I screamed until my mouth went dry and my eyes grew wet and I could barely see the sea of bodies surrounding me: the women my age, the grandmothers waving wire coat hangers and chanting, *Never again*, the mothers proudly pushing their daughters in strollers — and on the sidelines the counter- protesters with their blown-up photographs of blown-up fetuses, the black-cloaked, downward-looking women with placards hanging around their necks like chains: I REGRET MY ABORTION — 1978.

Jude told me once, as we were walking along the highway with dust on our faces, that in Japan, after women have abortions, they buy sleeping-baby-Buddha statues and take them to shrines and pray for their unborn. Other visitors to the shrine leave gifts for the *nebutoke* — the souls with no connections, no mothers, no siblings to link up with like glass elephants in a line.

After my first, I logged on to an online abortion-information board and told scared teenagers exactly what to expect, from the hum of the vacuum aspirator to the two weeks without sit-down baths. It was the least I could do. I told them it was a very simple operation. I told them it was their choice. I got e-mails from strangers who called me a *whore who couldn't keep her legs closed*, a *baby-killer*, a *monster*.

What I know: When you're pregnant and your stomach churns, you want everyone on the street to hear the rumbling, which is suddenly so meaningful. You never took the time to listen to it before, but now it's as if you alone held a secret: the body is more than flesh. You want to proclaim your secret to the world, to wear a sign around your neck, partly because you're proud, but partly because you hope people will take pity on you, shackled with this weight that is all of yourself and more. The world goes on around you. Outside it may be snowing, but you are separate, listening to the howls of your body, which before were masked by the endless chatter in your head. You are listening to your heartbeat, searching for an echo. You want nothing more than to be perfectly quiet and to hear everything, to feel everything. Even your morning sickness makes you proud. You are more consumed by your condition than by the desire to remedy it.

When we were dating, Paul and I lay in bed one night and tried out names on one another — mostly girls' names. *What do you think of Sophia? How about Audrey?* We both hated Brittany and Caitlyn and anything that ended in an *i*. He loved the French names, but I couldn't pronounce them. We pretended this had nothing to do with wanting children. When I said I thought he'd make a good father, he said, *Yeah, I would have been.*

How old will I be when you're ready to have those beautiful babies of yours? he asked once, but he always stopped shy of breaking up with me, despite his guilt about our seventeen-year age difference, despite his inability to let go of Alice. He didn't yell or make demands; he cooked me dinner and made me French-press coffee every morning. When I moved from Washington to New York City, he brought a fresh bag of Ethiopian beans up to Astoria with him every other weekend, and a can of *pirouline* cookies, and Belgian beer. It snowed the night before my appointment at the clinic, and I got stuck on the subway after work. When I got home, he was waiting for me at my door with animal crackers in his bag and flakes on his lashes.

Jude brought me Tropical Skittles while I waited for my first abortion. After we'd saved up enough money, I still had to wait two more weeks: from the day we arrived in a town with a clinic to the earliest date I could get an appointment. I waited in a tent in the woods. I waited through the barking of unseen dogs, the interstate noise, and the wavy August heat. I waited in a patch of trees adorned with brittle brown cicada skins, their little hollow claws latched to the bark or the underside of leaves, hanging upside down, defying gravity with emptiness.

I searched the trees every morning, plucked the gutted cicadas off gently, and lined them up, row after row, on fallen branches. At night Jude and I would stumble out of our tent to pee in the moonlight, and each morning I'd find the branches knocked over, the exoskeletons trampled and crushed. And I'd start again, organizing the dead remnants of things, listening to my baby, and waiting for them to take it away.

t was on the subway, on my daily commute between 46th Street in Astoria and 8th Street in Manhattan, soon after I'd made my appointment for the termination, that something changed in me. Probably I saw a child. (I saw

I children everywhere, whether they were actually there or not.) On the R train I realized for the first time that the decision really was my own. That I had options. That I did not always have to be the one things *happened to*. With the first pregnancy I'd known from the moment the two lines appeared in the plastic window that I could not keep it. I was a mess, and I did what I had to do. What I wanted was never a factor. But on the screeching subway that January morning three years later, on the way to my full-time job, with my health-insurance card in my wallet, I let myself consider the other option. I saw myself in a small-town apartment, my mother and me taking turns rocking my daughter, just as my mother and my grandmother had taken turns rocking me. I saw myself happy there, and very much in love. And it was no longer clear which choice was the selfish one. There were still many things I was unsure of, but of my desire to have a child, *someday*, I was certain.

There are twelve of us left sitting in our hospital gowns with our arms crossed over our stomachs. The pitiful, outdated television in the corner is turned up much too loud. A blue plaque on the TV proclaims that Dr. and Mrs. Thomas Lexington's generous donation is responsible for my throbbing headache. *Pokémon*, a Japanese cartoon, comes on. Most of the girls waiting here are still children, but the cartoon feels out of place. We pretend to read *EveryWoman* magazines and flyers about the morning-after pill. We do not speak.

Tiphanie's turn comes and goes. She reappears in her street clothes and announces to no one in particular, *It's like, it was nothing. It's like, I'm totally fine.* She takes her curly red ponytail and sunset nails and disappears into the elevator. I wonder how long it will be before she's back again.

Eventually it's down to just two of us. I've been waiting six hours. The game show *Fear Factor* is on. A young woman is lying in a box in a cave, and they're dumping live snakes on her. If she freaks out and gets up before the clock runs out, she loses her chance at fifty thousand dollars. *It's getting a little tight around my neck,* she says. I can't sit anymore, so I walk in slow circles around the room, in my coat and gown and paper slippers. *Are you OK?* the game-show host asks the contestant. *Tell me if you want to stop.* I start to cry, and a nurse touches my shoulder and reassures me: I've made it this far; it won't be much longer. *It's getting tight.* The other girl gets called back. Now it's only me. *We can pull them off. We can get you out right now.* Paul's still down there in that cold basement with the pamphlets, where people come and go, letting the air in off the street. *Do you want to stop?* I'm sweating and my heart is kicking and I turn the television off. My decision is already made.

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Correspondence

WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR ▸

Thank you for printing Virginia Eliot's essay "Ways to Show Affection" in your May 2006 issue. It is important that women's abortion stories be heard, and that women be encouraged to share them.

I have worked at an abortion clinic in a fairly progressive state for the past two years. We provide compassionate care and nonjudgmental, accurate information about abortion to our clients. Contrary to what some may believe, these clients are of every race, religion, political persuasion, age, and economic category. It is precisely this fact that compels me to provide the care I do. As a woman who partners with men, I could easily find myself in the same situation. I just hope that if I ever do have an unwanted pregnancy, the choice of abortion will still be available.

Name Withheld

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