

By PIA HINCKLE • Photos by MARISSA LESHNOV

'I'd Like a Catholic Diaphragm, Please'

Raised with all the freedom of a man, at 19 I faced my first decision as a woman.

After the birth of her third child, my grandmother Angela, a devout Irish Catholic, went to her gynecologist and said she wanted to be fitted with a diaphragm.

"But Mrs. Hinckle, you're a Catholic," he said sternly.

"Yes," she smiled. "I'd like a Catholic diaphragm, please."

Angela always told me she didn't believe that God was a bean counter. And diaphragms—birth control—were beans.

Millie, my other grandmother, was also Catholic. A first-generation Italian American who married a Frenchman who almost broke off their engagement to become a priest. She had soured on the church after the nuns at a Catholic nursing school in San Francisco in the 1930s had turned her away for being "too dark." She happily attended the Episcopalian nursing school instead. She became a surgical nurse on one of Santa Rosa's first open-heart-surgery teams but gave up that career after the first of her four children was born.

When her daughter, my mother, was in college, she helped my mother's friends in need find qualified doctors in Washington State to perform safe abortions before the procedure became widely accessible in California with the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973. Pia, my Italian great-grandmother, a faithful Catholic from the old country, told my mother that in regard to birth control, "God helps those who help themselves."

"The vagina has to breathe," Millie, a lifelong and passionate Republican, would famously say to me and my girl cousins if she noticed anyone wearing underwear beneath their nightgown during sleepovers. When we got older, she educated us all about the importance of birth control and sexual health, ideally within marriage because "Why buy the cow when you get the milk for free?"

My parents were Christmas and Easter Catholics who believed in birth control, or family planning, as it was also known. Abortion in my family was considered a sad last resort, medically, socially, and financially necessary at times. Something that should be legal and a matter left to a woman's own conscience.

I had been using a diaphragm since I was 14, when I first had sex. I had gone to the free city health clinic closest to our house on Castro Street to get one, intent on losing my virginity that summer of 1979 to keep up with my older BFFs, without getting pregnant.

Four years later, I was a college sophomore in New York and having the best sex of my young life with my grad student boyfriend. I remember he complained he could sometimes feel my diaphragm, so, not wanting to displease him, I went on the pill. My mother had been en-

couraging me to do so anyway, saying she'd never trusted diaphragms. I gained weight, developed PMS, and felt generally weird, so I stopped the pill after a few cycles and went back to my trusty diaphragm.

With perfect use, the fail rate on diaphragms was considered to be around 2 percent. When my perfect 27-day cycle ran long in early December 1983, I wrote in my journal, "A week late. It's stress. It's hormones.... I think I'm knocked up, but I can't believe it yet.... Help. I'm even saying my prayers."

Home pregnancy tests were new, hard to find, and expensive. I had to go to the college infirmary. When the nurse showed me the positive result a few days later, I froze while time stopped moving forward and then turned into a countdown. A countdown of the days I had left to choose an abortion. I walked back to my dorm room through the snow with a buzzing in my ears, feeling stunned. I was faced with the first real decision in my life. This was not choosing PBR or Bud, feathered hair or straight, Levi's or Jordache. This was about life. My life. I was 18.

An unplanned pregnancy was pretty much the worst thing that could happen to you as far as my mother and aunts were concerned. They had been in favor of legal abortion for decades. Of course I was going to have one. That's what middle-class women did.

I knew that abortion was considered a sin in the church. So was birth control. And sex before marriage. And living together without being married. No one in my Catholic family paid much attention to any of those beans. I wasn't worried about going to hell—if I did, most of my family would be there.

For all my airs of maturity, I was still a kid. I didn't want to give up my body, college, and my freedom by becoming a teenage parent. I had never even babysat! My boyfriend told me he had

been through an abortion with a previous girlfriend. He said it was my decision and he would support whatever I chose, but we both understood that I wouldn't keep it.

I was the first in my circle of girlfriends to get pregnant. Most of them would in the next few years, and all of them would have abortions. I didn't know where to go for one, but I didn't call my mom or my dad or my little sister. I did what every 1980s pregnant New York college student did—looked at the back page of the *Village Voice*. "Pregnant? We can help."

Roe was barely a decade old, and abortion clinics were being picketed and bombed; doctors who performed abortions were being outed and attacked. But not in New York City. My boyfriend offered to pay most of the \$300 fee, which was much more than I made in a month at my part-time campus job in the biology lab.

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Author Pia Hinckle near her
home in San Francisco.



I was going to classes, working, and trying to write papers before the winter break, but I was out of my body. Meanwhile, the clock was ticking. I decided I wanted to get this over with as soon as possible. I called a clinic from the slimline phone in my boyfriend's apartment off 61st and Lexington. Crazy Eddie was going crazy on the TV in the other room. I felt sick to my stomach after I hung up. I was to show up early on Friday morning, having had nothing to eat or drink since the night before. I would skip classes that day.

The doors were heavily barred, and there was bulletproof glass separating the reception area from the dank, off-off-white waiting room. No one was smiling. I considered the forms that I and the other women of various ages and races were filling out. Date of last menstrual period. Age. Emergency contact. Religious preference. Any previous reaction to anesthesia? Hell, I had never had any anesthesia. I had never had any kind of medical procedure other than my wisdom teeth being pulled the summer before.

I remember being cold, shivering naked under the thin cloth gown while I kept my socks on. The doctor explained the procedure in a tired voice. The nurse held my hand warmly after I got positioned in the stirrups, feeling exposed. "Look at me, Pia. It will be over soon." I winced at the IV being placed and the sudden whoosh of cold rushing through my veins. I started to count backward from 10 as instructed and then came to in what seemed like just a few minutes as I was wheeled into recovery. Nurses carefully supported me and the other women as we dizzily limped to lounge chairs where we rested further. We each got a bag with extra pads and pain meds and were cautioned about excessive bleeding, cramping, and signs of infection. I almost threw up as my boyfriend walked me to catch a cab.

I spent the weekend recovering at his apartment. The bleeding and cramps subsided, and then I only felt relief. Disaster averted. I picked up my college life where I had left off—partying, finishing finals—and then flew home for winter break.

I had scheduled a follow-up exam with my San Francisco gynecologist as recommended. When I mentioned I had an appointment to my mother, she wanted to know why. She slammed on the brakes at the intersection of Masonic and Oak when I told her that I had had an abortion in New York.

"What?" She looked at me wide-eyed, scared and shocked. It was a week after my 19th birthday.

The physician's assistant got a puzzled look on her face as she checked me and the size of my uterus. "Hmm. That's weird. Let me get the doctor," she said.

"What?" My mind ran around in circles being chased by a bad feeling. My gynecologist came in and felt too. "Hmm. It does feel enlarged. There could be a complication of some kind. Let's get you an ultrasound," he said. "Sometimes if tissue is left behind, the uterus doesn't fully close. No cramping? No bleeding?" No. I felt great. I had just gotten back from a skiing trip in Tahoe with my friends.

The ultrasound tech at the Catholic hospital was cheerful. I was intrigued by this amazing technology. I lay there on the table with my flat belly covered in cold goo and watched, fascinated, as she started her survey and a ghost image appeared on the black screen. "OK. Oh, here we are. I see you're about 11 weeks gestation. Look, you can see the little fingers here." The sonar-blip heartbeat sound shattered me. I stopped looking and retreated deep inside myself. I didn't hear anything else until "You can get dressed now."

I fell to the ground in the tiny dressing room, sobbing on the cold linoleum with my jeans around my ankles. All this time, I was still pregnant? How? I'd had an abortion! I was shaking with shock. A nurse handed me a box of Kleenex under the door. When I came out, she looked confused and sad that this wasn't happy news.

I don't remember the ride home with my mom, but I do remember her face, grim. I lay on my single bed in the converted-closet bedroom I had in my mother's apartment that she shared with her new boyfriend. I felt like a vessel, not like a person anymore. All this time, it had been feeding off me. My mind was in disbelief. I whiplashed between numbness and weeping. I considered what seemed impossible: having a baby.

I asked my mom, "Was this meant to be? Is that why this fetus is still here? Still growing?"

"I guess you could keep it if you wanted," my mom said, fingering the baby carriage on her old silver charm bracelet that I was wearing. "Millie and I could raise it, and you could finish school." The "it" said it all. I hadn't given any thought until that moment about what kind of parent I wanted to be or how I wanted to raise a child. I felt that I was in this pregnancy alone, as if there had been a not-so-immaculate conception. I assumed I would be a single parent. I wanted to be with a partner—married. And then baby, if baby. I thought that if I went through with the pregnancy and gave birth, I would be too attached to give the baby up for adoption.

Having a child at 19 seemed an impossibility. Who did that? Not me, presumably destined for greatness, unsure of even wanting a family. I had been living like a man—I was aggressive in my views and desires, I went after the men I wanted to want me; I kept up with the boys, held my own or bested them at their own games of strength, chicken, drinking, pool, and one-upmanship. I was sharp of wit and tongue. I thought I was fearless.

Now I found myself a woman.

A pregnant woman.

The most vulnerable state of all.

All my short life I had said Yes to everything:

Yes to cigarettes, plucked from the gutter at age 9;

Yes to marijuana Holly stole from Mountain Girl's stash at her dad's house and rolled into joints that we sold on Castro Street for \$1 at age 11;

Yes to losing my virginity with the summer yard boy at my grandparents' house—whose name I can't even remember now—couldn't wait to be rid of it and get in the Game;

Yes to drinking, early and always;

Yes to LSD for *Rocky Horror* at the Strand;

Yes to cocaine whenever offered;

Yes to mushrooms in Golden Gate Park—yes, I'd like to sell them for you, can you pay me in trade?;

Yes to jumping off the cliff at Cherry Creek at Camp Mather to show how brave I was (I was really scared);

Yes to working at the California Academy of Sciences and scuba cleaning the Fish Roundabout and feeding speared live shrimp to the chambered nautili, depressed in their tiny tanks;

Yes to all this that had come my way, and much, much more.

*If becoming
a mother changes
your life forever,
then surely
the decision not
to become one
changes you
as well.*

I decided to say no.

No, I don't want this fetus to keep growing inside me.

No, I don't want to become a mother now. This young. This way.

No, I don't want to make this choice.

It was much harder to find a place willing to do an abortion after 12 weeks, even if it was legal. I was right on the edge. If I was going to terminate this pregnancy, I had to do it immediately. I called my boyfriend and told him the unbelievable news. He was offering to fly out to be with me when my mother grabbed the phone out of my hand and screamed that this was all his fault. I'd never heard her yell like that at anyone—not even my dad. I told him not to come. Later I heard my mom call my dad and tell him what was going on. I slept.

My gynecologist arranged for an abortion at the not-Catholic hospital where my three future children would be born. The procedure happened not at a depressing clinic but in a real operating room, just a floor below the maternity ward and nursery. The doctor was kind to me, smiled and put his hand on my forehead and told me not to worry as I counted back from 10. After recovery, he assured me that there was no question that my pregnancy was no more. He said that it may have been that because I'd had the abortion so early, around six weeks, they'd simply missed the fetus.

I was relieved, but I wanted to see the report. The words "Fetal hind-



Hinckle at her San Francisco home with Toby, her late father Warren Hinckle's last surviving basset hound.

quarters” pierced me with the knowledge that a future baby had been growing and was no more. I was cocooned in still, black deadness.

Dad invited me to lunch. Alone. This had never happened before. He always had an entourage or someone to meet wherever we went. We met at Jack’s, an old-school San Francisco restaurant and bar on Sacramento Street that opened soon after the gold rush. He was on time. Also something that had never happened before. I ate frog legs for the first time. He had rabbit. We shared a bottle of red wine.

He wanted to know how I was doing. Another first. “You gotta take care of yourself, Box.” He looked me in the eye, clearly worried. “Do you want to stay home longer? I’ll cover it if you want to change your ticket. You can be a little late going back to New York.”

He spoke of women and their burden, of men and their helplessness in the face of pregnancy; free will; the church; and choice. The church had only come out against birth control a couple of decades ago. Abortion was as old as time.

It was the first time I was alone with my father. He was supportive—he wanted me to keep on with my passions, the marine sciences, whatever I wanted. And he was sad—not a happy decision for anyone involved, he said.

Fetal hindquarters followed me everywhere. I tried to drown them in vodka, smother them in coke, smoke them up in a little taste of heroin, lose them in impulse sex with my girlfriends and my boyfriends’ friends.

No matter what I did, I felt nothing.

A couple of months later, I wrote in my journal:

ABORTION. I got rid of something that would have been a baby if I had kept it. A baby that was made out of making love with someone I love who loves me. I got rid of the biological product of love (and lust).

Lust Love

Kill Baby

Did I kill a baby? Did I kill my body?

I killed part of myself that will never be again.

An abortion is not a good time. I know there are women who say it meant less to them than getting their teeth cleaned, but that was not the case for me. Maybe it would have been different if the first abortion had been effective. Instead I was forced to make this terrible choice twice. It marks you, as I suppose it should. If becoming a mother changes your life and you forever, then surely the decision not to become one changes you as well.

But back in the early ’80s, in my circle, abortion was looked upon mostly as a rite of passage. Once word about mine was out, friends, aunts, other female relatives, and acquaintances of all faiths, backgrounds, and finances fessed up. Millie talked about the women she had helped find a trusted doctor in Mexico before abortion became legal, even one of her son’s girlfriends. My mom revealed the abortion she’d had when I was about seven. Her pregnancy with my sister had been complicated and required surgery at five months to remove a massive tumor. Her postpartum depression had been so serious that she’d needed help from a cousin to take care of me and my sister for a time. She couldn’t bear the stress of another child with my unreliable and unfaithful dad.

Postpartum depression was just being recognized at the time; post-abortion depression wasn’t even mentioned. People were just beginning to talk openly about anxiety and depression. There was still a lot of shame and scorn involved in seeking treatment for mental health conditions. Psychotherapy was barely mainstream. After an abortion, you were expected to be relieved and maybe a little sad, and then to get over it. After my second abortion, I could barely get out of bed. I didn’t care about anything. I lay in my darkened room listening to the Psychedelic Furs. There were no tears. I felt nothing, no matter what I did. The anxiety and panic attacks came later and lasted for years. I didn’t know what was wrong with me, and it didn’t occur to me to ask anyone. It wasn’t until I gave birth to my first child 13 years later and experienced postpartum depression that I understood what had happened: how sensitive I was to pregnancy hormones and what they did to my mental state.

When I became pregnant with my first child, the timing couldn’t have been worse. I had been married less than a year and had just started a job as the business editor at my city’s afternoon daily. My health insurance hadn’t even kicked in. My husband was working as a temp and wasn’t sure what he wanted to do with his life. I was the main wage earner. We lived in a one-bedroom apartment. We hadn’t even said out loud that we were trying to become pregnant, but we were not being very careful, and we were having the most delicious baby-possible sex.

When we held the home pregnancy test in our hands, we both cried, joyful and terrified. I wanted this baby, and so did he. Nothing else mattered. We would figure out all the rest and somehow make it work. To be pregnant and have it be welcome and not a dreadful and terrible discovery was such a healing relief. This felt like the most creative thing I had ever done—growing a person. It didn’t even compare to writing.

I often think of my sacrifice of that first unborn child spirit—I’ve always imagined a her—and all that she allowed me. I think of her in gratitude. Her spirit was not ready to come into this world. She forgave me. And ultimately I forgave me. I believe she shepherded my three children to me later, when I was ready enough to become a parent.

I had said no because I was young and wanted to be free and didn’t think another road was possible. And I’m grateful that I could. ■

Pia Hinckle is a San Francisco writer and editor. She is a coauthor of The Court That Tamed the West: From the Gold Rush to the Tech Boom. This essay is adapted from Pia & the Elephant, her memoir in progress about growing up in the limelight of her father, Warren Hinckle, a buccaneer editor and epic drinker.