

Thirty-seven years ago, it was 1962. A city bus on a wet afternoon. The familiar aroma of used gasoline lulled these anxious riders into rest. The stops and starts rocked them—little bundles of privacy looking through dark windows at endlessly familiar, dark, wet streets.

There was a sheen of shadow to that particular sociality, an etiquette for public transport, standing up to give elders a seat.

Anonymous shopping, schlepping. Wet tabloids in weary laps. Here and there a tender mother-daughter conversation. Galoshes.

“Why does that man have no legs?”

“Shhh. Don’t point.”

Eva’s mother’s damp, tired burdens. Their bus was inching home now, home to President Kennedy, men in space.

“Mommy, something happened in school.”

“What was it? Tell me.”

For the rest of her life, Eva’s youth would loom before her, retrospectively. Every rainy day would recall these childhood rainy days with her overworked mother on creaky, overcrowded buses, crawling down their avenue.

“Can you take me there?” (Pointing at an ordinary object of international significance like the UN.)

Their conflicts.

A war, several consumer revolutions, and some presidents later, as a seventeen-year-old freethinker, Eva got off the same humbling

bus on a similarly rainy Saturday morning to get an IUD. It was the 1970s, the last gasp of consciousness. High school girls were wild horses then—black beauties in pea coats, long straight hair, and looming hips under painters pants. Someone right before them had abolished the dress code. Now those restraints were history, not just forgotten but unimaginable. Sex had become more than an option. It was an obligation and a responsibility. It was who you were. To be a virgin was to not be.

The rain fell into her pockets, flooding the street where the public health clinic sat in a Puerto Rican neighborhood called Chelsea. The girls at school openly told one another about this place, but all went there alone. No boyfriend accompaniment. No chum. It was widely understood to be a solitary endeavor rather than a secret. So white Eva waited on line with Latin guys in frayed army jackets fearful of the clap. Big Afros, they cupped cigarettes in the hallways, acne red from the cold. Transistor radios played. Everyone smoked inside then, ears matching red from another brutal, lonely fall. As required, Eva went while menstruating so that her cervix would be dilated and the Dalkon Shield easier to implant.

“Take out your Tampax and wait for the doctor,” the receptionist said, also Puerto Rican. She left Eva in that emblematic cubicle that the sick can never escape and the well only recall on sight.

At that time the clinic seemed worn but never dangerous. It needed paint and was crowded, like the rest of the city. Later, people born in the suburbs would move to Manhattan. There they would re-create the culture of gated communities, trading freedom for security. The social contract would expire, and this clinic’s budget would be slashed, its hours reduced. Finally, as gentrification scattered its constituency, the building was closed down entirely

and not replaced. The services were never duplicated. The specter of AIDS overrode everyone's anxiety about syphilis. Many former clients died, poised vaguely in someone else's memory. But on that drippy day this future was unpredictable. If Eva had asked the others on line what kind of future they expected, most of her fellow New Yorkers would have predicted *more of the same* or *some improvement*. That about sums up the innocent seventies.

Following instructions, our gal carefully wrapped her Tampax in Kleenex and took out a waterlogged copy of Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, required reading for senior English. As the time passed, Eva began to worry that she might start to bleed.

Twenty minutes later the anxiety was unbearable, then finally justified, as the inevitable bleeding did occur—clots falling off the walls of her young, spotless uterus.

Eva knew what was happening to her was wrong; it was a sign of powerlessness. But she did not stand up to it. Instead, she tightened her vaginal muscles, crossed her legs, and wished the blood would sit quietly inside, not seep out onto the white-papered examination table. Fifteen more minutes reading about Nicholas Stavrogin and misguided Russian revolutionaries, and Eva started blotting her vagina with tissues, hoping to absorb the pooling blood. Everything about the situation was undeserved, and yet she went along with it. She knew what would be right, but knowing and doing are two different things. She was afraid of being a problem.

An eternal moment later only one more Kleenex remained, so she jammed it up there. Fifty-three minutes and finally the white physician got to her now—a bloody, shamed adolescent girl with diminished, bloody thighs.

“Hello, Doctor,” she smiled, trying to protect herself.

“Open up.” He blandly inserted a metal speculum. “You’re crazy to be doing this—it can make you sterile. Okay, relax.”

The threat and promise of sterility had long plagued her. Nathalie, Eva’s mother, had taken her six-year-old daughter on a tour of infected kindergartners’ bedsides to purposefully catch chicken pox *now* instead of *later, during pregnancy*. Deliberate fertility was the Holy Grail, and the pock scar on her forehead, a mark of Nathalie’s responsible parenting. The goal of girlhood was to prepare for her future reproductivity.

Eva carried that particular intrauterine device inside her body for three years and then had it removed. Miraculously, no infection, no perforation, no pelvic inflammatory disease, no tragedy ensued. Now the Dalkon Shield is illegal and Eva is forty.

Forty is neither good nor bad, but it is filled with meaning. Again she found herself waiting too long in a suffocating examination room. This one, though, was cleaner, pinker, and more metallic, more expensive. Now more vulnerable in so many ways, Eva waited, dreading the common dread of the dreary institutional demise that accompanies disease. The only thing she found attractive about those four walls was their unfamiliarity.

Let it stay that way.

She feared moving into that life, inhabiting forever the boring aesthetic that assaults the dying. Dying would be bad enough on its own without all of that ugly wallpaper.

Forty-year-old Eva’s shirt was off, her paper vest draped like a napkin over an elephant. She sat on the table debating a six-month-old issue of *House Beautiful* that lay torn on the mouse-gray carpeting. Perhaps technically she was still fertile. But her mind was not

reproductive. Her hips hurt and she feared the physical pain, the financial deprivation, the daily revelation of potential children's unfolding loneliness. She was just beginning to admit her suspicions of children, watching them more closely on the street. The struggle to love justice was so hard in this era, the barriers so intense. Why have children, who could grow up to hurt others or simply stand by and let it happen?

Of course she'd considered it. That deliberation was part of citizenship.

To have children included an obligation to purchase terrible products that alter the soul. There were more of these objects than she even knew: toys with soundtracks that would never be quiet, vulnerable sons and daughters glued to hypnotic machines and then carrying miniature ones in their little palms while crossing the street. But without these possessions her child might suffer and feel inadequate. Which death is better? Nowadays anything eccentric is wrong—there is no social space for singularity. How could Eva impose the pain of individuality on children she adores? And yet what is the point of creating more conformity that will eventually turn on her, even in her own house? If they get rid of rent stabilization, will she even have a house? Can children be raised to be better than their historic moment? Not in this historic moment. Hence, no children.

So many years later and the receptionist at the front desk was still Puerto Rican, but so, too, was the female lab technician, as newly stipulated by law. One of the victories of subsequent feminism. There now had to be a woman in the room so that the male doctor could not molest unnoticed.

“Good morning, my name is Alicia and I am....”

“Alicia,” Eva delighted, revived by a frisson of justice. “You look great.”

“Oh, hi. How weird.”

“It’s okay.” Eva’s heart filled with sunshine. This was how it was supposed to go—goodwill and its deserved reward. “I helped you fight your landlord and now you’re helping me. It’s great. How’s your family?”

“My boyfriend’s okay and my son is doing very well. He’s in third grade. Do you have a lump?”

Yay, old-fashioned New Yorkers. Finding strength in the casual. Worshipping at the altar of the matter-of-fact reality that we live in front of each other, so there is no reason to hide.

“I think I have a little thickening, some kind of mass in my breast. My lover found it. I never would have found it. Did your landlord sell the building?”

Alicia wrote down *thickening* and was *whatever* about the lover. Eva felt glad that she trusted her. More mutual-aid-society citizenship.

“Yeah, now we got a management company. It’s okay, I just started here a week ago. Medical technician. I like it.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yeah, that data entry was getting tired.”

“You get benefits?” Eva asked. That’s what New Yorkers discussed these days instead of talking about the weather. It was native cosmopolitan dialect of the urban indigenous in an era where unions and their health plans were something belonging to lucky grandparents or elderly neighbors who happened to come to this country at the right time.

“A lot. Too bad that law clinic closed. It was a good place.”

Back to the truth. Forget about thickening breasts; this was the real danger. Eva hadn't fought hard enough and she knew it. Every day brought a realization of one more thing she should have done to keep it open. "Yes," Eva mumbled, ashamed.

"That's a shame." Alicia nodded. They both knew.

The door opened just then and an older man walked in, thinking deeply about something else.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Pollack. This is Alicia."

Oh no, Eva worried. *He thinks nothing happens in a room before he comes into it. Bad sign.*

"Let's see what you've got here."

Dr. Pollack handed her X-rays to Alicia, who placed them on the light wall. Eva could tell that he was a somewhat religious Jew, despite lack of head covering. It was the way he didn't look at her, and that timbre of speech—quick, deliberate, profoundly questioning within a very rigid framework. He was exactly the kind of person that Eva did not trust.

There were, after all, good Jews and bad Jews. It had always been that way. Roy Cohn was bad, Ethel Rosenberg was good. Henry Kissinger and Ed Koch were bad. Noam Chomsky and Amy Goodman were good. Hannah Ahrendt? Excellent. Ariel Sharon? Terrible. This would always be. Unions were good, and landlords were bad. Groucho was good. Lenny Bruce, good. Philip Roth started out good but ended up self-absorbed and crotchety. Jews who believed in a Zionist destiny and biblical right to the land of Israel? Bad. Jews who hoped that a multicultural, socialist Jewish state could avert inevitable future Holocausts? Well ... hard to picture. Walter Benjamin? Great. Eva loved him. Emma Goldman? Superb. Andrew Goodman, the murdered freedom rider? A

forgotten hero. The Jewish Defense League. The Lubavitchers, the neo-conservatives who opposed affirmative action? All horrible.

On some level it boiled down to religion, didn't it? Did fundamentalists of any stripe have anything good to add really? It was delusion after all. A hallucination to see oneself as God's chosen. A crackpot wish with terrible consequences. And now this guy, this religious one, had her fate in his hands.

Thirty years before, when most photographs were as black-and-white as the TV, an Israeli cousin had come to visit them in New York. What kind of Jew was this? He wasn't religious and he didn't care about the poor. Was there a third option? This guy wore gold chains and an open shirt and looked like an Italian. He went to singles bars. His main interest was agriculture. He was a racist. A racist.

"The religious? They're worse than the Arabs," he said at his first New York dinner table, a place where no racist word had ever been uttered. "The Arabs, you kill them like flies, but the religious have twelve children. Hey, let's turn on the game."

He watched hockey. Hockey! The emblematic *goyishe* activity. Hit each other with sticks? Jews couldn't even follow the rules.

Young Eva was shocked. Who talks about other people like that? She'd never seen such a thing. It was wrong. Arabs were not flies. She was outraged. Now she was worried about the religious, and about the Israelis. But even with two more hesitations, she wasn't at all alone. Many others felt the same way.

Today, though, sitting in the examination room, everything was different. Her opinions on these ancient subjects were all nostalgic. No one who cared about those precise things back then still cared about them now. The ones who were still alive didn't even remem-

ber caring. Caring about these subjects was an old sock. There was no more family. None of the standards of the former family had any authority now. There was only this religious doctor, and she was at his mercy. The secular liberal no longer existed. Israel was a nightmare. She had no family. And here was this Dr. Pollack, not only religious, but also a male breast doctor.

“Okay, lie down.”

“Hello, Doctor.”