

## A CRONE SPEAKS

### *Ann Evans*

I'm a Crone, a woman who has been around the block a few times, come to terms with my wrinkles, who now feels a kind of power and insight which I didn't have when I was young. And it is time for me to speak up.

Another Crone, a former feminist activist, says that she's not going to agitate and march to preserve Roe v. Wade. "It's up to the younger women," she says. "I can't have children any more. This is their problem now."

But do the younger women know what they are losing? I don't see them protesting. They're apathetic, haven't thought this thing through.

Sex happens. Let's start there. My 92 year old mother lights up like a Christmas tree when the cute, male physical therapist comes into the room. My boss's 87 year old mother has a new boyfriend and sounds like my 23 year old daughter when talking about it. Nature has assured that the sex drive is strong enough to cause us to procreate through feast and famine, drought and plenty. Sex is with us all our lives. We get carried away sometimes, on the kitchen table, in the corn field, in the uncomfortable back seats of cars. Maybe some of us have iron discipline, but the majority of us are merely humans who crave the bonds which sexual union brings. We are willing to sacrifice a lot for these bonds.

Do the science: sex means pregnancy sometimes.

Let me tell you about one abortion in the days before Roe v. Wade.

The reasons for the abortion are irrelevant. It might have been my 11<sup>th</sup> child, or I might have been ill, or going through a divorce, or I might have been raped, or I might have been 13 years old, or I just might have thought I'd be a miserable parent, unable to care for a child properly, or -- I might have gotten carried away in a corn field or on the kitchen table. There are as many reasons to terminate a pregnancy as there are women who get pregnant. Each one is different. No matter the intricacy of rules, there will be thousands of cases which don't fit within the rules.

I wasn't a virgin. I had had sex one time, sort of, with a hardware salesman who was visiting from Tennessee. I knew so little about sex at that time that I didn't even know what an erection was. I stared at it with my jaw dropping as he sheathed himself with a condom, saying matter-of-factly, "If you get pregnant you'll come down to Memphis and we'll get married." He was bloodless and without passion. I was too confused by this baffling experience, including the prospect of marriage (!!!!???), and too deeply committed to the sex act to call it off.

I guess my jaw-dropping amazement, and my complete inexperience in mind, heart and body, turned him off because he left for Memphis the next day and I never heard from him again.

My next boyfriend was an acrobatic lover, and I probably got pregnant when we had sex in the bathtub in his room at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City. The pleasure involved in making love in a bathtub was minimal, compared to the pain in the knees, the fear of drowning.

He left for Europe and after a few weeks I started getting sick for no apparent reason. I thought I had mononucleosis. I hadn't ever heard of morning sickness, but things fell into place when a friend inquired if maybe I could be pregnant. I went to the doctor, the rabbit died, and now what? My boyfriend was traveling in Europe. I had no idea where he was, only a "c/o American Express" address. Travelers in those days would visit the American Express offices in each city they visited and pick up their mail. Maybe. What would he say, IF I could find him? Would he want to get married? Would I want to get married? That seemed like the right thing to do. I had only a limited time to decide, and decided to wait a short time to see if the letter I had written got through to him. I would marry him and have the baby if that's what he wanted, though I couldn't imagine how we could be parents, how we could support a household.

His letter came back. "Hi! I'm in Innsbruck. Sorry. Can't help you out. I don't know when I'll be back in the U.S. My parents want me back right away but I'm having too much fun. Be careful."

I read the letter over and over again to suck in the supportive chaff between the careless lines. "Be careful" was a big one. "Sorry."

I would not give my child to total strangers to raise, knowing that I could never find out how well the child was being cared for. This child was my responsibility and I would not just throw it into the world without my love to shield it. Adoption, in other words, was not an option. This pregnancy was my problem, the result of my own mistakes, and I had to figure out how to deal with it. On the off-chance that there was a Hell, it would be I who was going there.

Either care for the baby, or don't have it. Those were the choices, as I saw them.

A friend recommended a gnarled and worldly female gynecologist in New York, who said to me, "I'll tell you how you can do this, but I want you to remember one thing. Just a casual mention of the fact that I have recommended you could cost me my license, could ruin my life."

That was a heavy load for a sick, hurting, pregnant, ignorant, confused person.

A friend gave me a bulging envelope filled with the \$400 for the procedure, slipping it to me at a dinner gathering. To give you an idea of how much money \$400 was in those days, rent in a New York City one-bedroom was \$88. This \$400 would be the equivalent of maybe \$5,000 today. Let's say that's too much, that it would be only \$2,500, or \$1,000. Where would I have gotten that money were it not for my friends? I couldn't pretend that I could pay it back at any foreseeable point. I had just finished my freshman year in college and had no resources of my own, and by the time I was in a position to pay this back, this would be just a rough, bad memory. My boyfriend was in a worse financial position than I was, and less responsible. Not the sort of person I would choose to raise my baby.

A friend took me to the abortion doctor's office in a row house in West New York. There were calm, bored, ordinary people in the waiting room, reading LIFE

magazine or staring into space. From the gender, age and moods of these patients, they were not waiting for abortions. I was the doctor's money-making sideline.

The receptionist (the doctor's wife) told my friend that I would be "about half an hour."

"I'll just wait outside in the car then," he assured me, squeezing my arm.

I was finally called into the doctor's office. He took the envelope stuffed with cash, and explained to me that I would feel "some cramping." He set me up on the gynecologist's table, pulled out his instruments and inserted one of them to inflict the greatest pain I have ever felt. It felt like he was carving me with a large knife. I couldn't sense exactly what sort of maneuver was going on down there because the intense pain spread from the focal point into the entire area, and obviously, I couldn't see anything. I involuntarily moaned.

"Stop doing that!" He looked up sharply from between my legs. "We can't have the people in the waiting room hear you."

The doctor's wife came to put her hand on my forehead, "I know it hurts, but you must be quiet."

I looked at her in stunned panic. There was no way to get whatever was inflicting this agony out of me without canceling my decision not to have this child. I couldn't speak, couldn't express any thoughts. The agony was overwhelming.

"Poor thing," she said, stroking my forehead. "Shhhhh. We're not allowed to give you an anesthetic. I'm sorry."

I was angry that nobody had informed me beforehand of the pain. "Some cramping," did not touch the garment of what I was feeling. How long would I have to endure this? The doctor's "This won't take long," did nothing to reassure me.

I knew this doctor, too, was also in danger of losing his license, of having both his life, and his wife's life, ruined. Given the risk they were taking to resolve my horrible problem, I forgave them for raking in 400 extra bananas here and there between their patients' flus and headaches.

I have never surpassed the physical domination which was necessary to keep quiet while this torture continued.

Finally the doctor dropped the instrument of torture with a clank into a metal container which he passed to his wife, who slipped out the door with a smile. "There. It's all over." He wasn't a bad man. He was just ordinary. An ordinary doctor. I never wanted to lay eyes on him again.

The wife came back, sympathetic and motherly, and said, "Now you have to rest. Come with me." She took me into a side room, showed me the couch, closed the door, and disappeared. There was now no pain. There was bleeding, shock, astonishment, fear, confusion. The room was dark and I was too stunned to find the light switch. How long was I to stay here? My friend was waiting in the car on the street. I had to get out of here as soon as possible.

The place was silent, all visible doors closed. I had no watch. The doctor's wife had told me to "rest," but I couldn't rest. I was worried, angry, stunned, relieved it was over, confused, hurt that my boyfriend hadn't let me know where to find him,

yearning to see him. There was no thought of the baby. I never for one instant, then or thereafter, second-guessed my decision.

When the doctor's wife finally came back I was sitting nervously on the couch. "Did you get some sleep?" she asked.

"I couldn't sleep."

"Oh. You were supposed to rest." She ushered me to the door.

My friend scrambled to open the back door of the car for me. "Get in. Lie down. I was about to go inside to find out what was happening. How was it?"

I told him a little bit.

"Are you okay? You look terrible."

"I want something sweet," I said, and he got me Twinkies at a deli.

He told me later that he was worried I would die in his back seat, leaving him to explain what had happened.

If I had had the wisdom of my present years, I might have decided to tell my parents, but I was not close to my parents, and felt there would be a destructive cataclysm in my home if they found out. Instead, I spent the night at a friend's house, falling into the bed the instant I got there, and waking late the next morning. I don't know if her parents knew why I looked so awful and slept so long. They must have known something, and, even today, I am grateful to them for their tact and support.

In the following few days, the bleeding was profuse. The original gynecologist was in New York, and any local doctor would inquire, and I would have to explain. So I just bled.

I was nineteen and in good health, so I recovered.

Neither I nor the several friends who had helped me ever mentioned this experience again. It was not worth discussion.

Human life is human life, and the arguments about abortion are very difficult to reconcile -- apparently a lot more difficult than the decisions taken in killing grown men and women in prison death chambers, or knowingly, heedlessly killing civilians and children in our wars. I am not a Christian, but Jesus does not appear to me to be saying that we should sanctimoniously snuff out all the bad guys, or anybody at all, without thinking twice, without regret.

By the time a pregnancy is confirmed, the hormones bonding the mother to the baby have already begun to kick in. Abortion decisions are likely to be made with nuanced regret and humility. There is no way this is ever easy.

Every once in a while I do a mental calculation to figure out how old that child would be. I have an inner place dedicated to its spirit, honoring the person who never was. Some world views think this spirit will be expressing itself elsewhere by now. It is sad, but I was a grown-up and took responsibility for what I had foolishly, and so very ignorantly, done. I am glad I don't have a child who carries the genes of, and was raised by, a father who would abandon a woman carrying his child, leaving her to deal with it alone.

These days, when a woman finds herself in pregnant despair and panic, she

can go to a doctor, receive counseling and decide what course to follow. If she decides to have an abortion, she can undergo the procedure, have follow-up, and pay a sane and reasonable price for this service. Birth control has advanced far beyond the diaphragm and the condom, and her options for avoiding future pregnancies are easy to get and easy to use.

My pregnancy started, as I said, in New York City, but the father and I were both students at The Principia, a Christian Science college in Elmhurst, Illinois. Neither of us drank or smoked, and, while I can't speak for the father, I never had and still never have taken drugs. Our first sexual experiences took place on these isolated, holy grounds, on the bluffs hundreds of feet above the Mississippi River, where we were watched like hawks, under curfew, reading our religious lessons every morning, chapel twice a week. I never noticed that religious people have sex any less or more responsibly than the "hippies" in Greenwich Village (where I moved the following year). Nobody, religious or not, wants the emotional pain, pregnancy and disease which can result from irresponsible sex. Sex happens. It happens everywhere: at The Principia, at Bob Jones University, in the Vatican, everywhere, in Greenwich Village, Oklahoma and Nebraska and Alabama. Everywhere.

And you, Maidens, do you want to go through what I went through?

Or worse? Many of you wouldn't have the money to compensate the doctor for the risk he or she was taking. Some of you might not survive the assault upon your body as well as I did, might bleed to death because you were afraid to go to your local doctor with a hemorrhage which you would have to explain. Some of you might have been raped or molested. (Let's not pretend this doesn't happen.) Do you want people asking you questions about that? At this vulnerable, hurting, sick point in your life, do you want to confront the father/cousin/teacher/brother/ neighbor who molested you? Maybe your religious beliefs are different from your parents' beliefs. Do you want to sort this out at a point when you are vulnerable, beating yourself up because you have made an unforgivable mistake? What if you are in a sexless marriage and are having an affair? (No use pretending it doesn't happen.)

Do you want to be on the defensive, explaining yourself at every step? Do you want to be attacked and harassed? Do you want to feel like a criminal? Do you want to give up leverage over the people who are providing this service for you? Do you want to place in your life a deep secret?

I'm a Crone now – I am never again going to have a baby, no matter how many corn fields or kitchen tables I frolic upon. This is no longer my problem. You have access to much better birth control than I had when I was young; but for the same reasons as ever, you Maidens are still getting pregnant when you least expect it.

Religious conservatives, not unlike the Christian Scientists at The Principia, are leading the effort to overturn Roe v. Wade. Do the math -- if one pregnancy in four ends in abortion, and if religious conservatives make up a substantial percentage of our population, there must be plenty of religious conservatives making the decision to have one – who thereafter remain silent, as I have remained until

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writing this article. They will not be there to help you.  
Think about it. And soon.

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