



Astonishing Truth: Abortion is Everyone's Beeswax

Description

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Author's Memo

Madison, Wisconsin is full of surprises, sometimes entertaining, always enlightening. But I didn't plan for an abortion protest during a family weekend.

The morning after my nephew's wedding in a rural community, we set off for brunch in the city. With time to kill, we visited the weekly farmer's market and circled the Capitol in search of vegetables and breads. I didn't expect the morning to be political because at weddings, I leave partisan issues outside the church door or, in this case, the red barn's gate. But in Wisconsin, the governor is Democratic, the legislature Republican, and the abortion law dates to 1849. It's a formula for protests and an environment where politics are ubiquitous. When I unexpectedly ended up nursing an injury on the steps of the capitol building, I surveyed protesters who joined farmers and merchants at the market. This essay emerged from those minutes observing an abortion rights activist.

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By Colin Lloyd for Unsplash

At the farmers' market, something reached under my skirt. First, a hard pinch above my knee, then a prickle and a tingling. When I swooshed the gray cotton, a bee buzzed out.

“C'mon, Mom, sit here. Let's look at that bite.” My daughter Elizabeth directed me to the steps of Wisconsin's State Capitol—a granite behemoth topped by a dome that stands just three feet shorter than D.C.'s.

“I’ll be fine.” I searched my purse for an antihistamine. “Can I have a sip of your drink?” The sting stung my spirit as well as my thigh—for no good reason, the bee had targeted me.

As the bite bloomed, I spied a protester, farther up the capitol steps, holding a placard. Shirtless, which wasn’t surprising in the humid heat. Dissenting, which wasn’t surprising near a university campus with a liberal population.

While the activist exchanged one placard for another, I looked more closely. Slight build, long hair, bare breasts. This shirtless protester was female.

Is public nudity legal in Wisconsin? My eyes shifted left, then right, for the uniformed officer I expected to appear. But only crowds of shoppers shuffled towards the protester, on their way to stalls of jewelry, woven baskets, Asian foods, and home-grown vegetables. Meanwhile, a stocky, bearded gun-rights advocate shouted at passersby, drawing more attention than the bare-breasted activist.

‘Is public nudity legal in Wisconsin?’

I imagined myself in her place. She looked a lot like me thirty years ago. Slim. Dark hair. Tiny breasts. Could I stand topless in the middle of Madison, Wisconsin, to protest an injustice? I imagined my exposed chest vulnerable to eyes and elements and pictured my minuscule breasts that caused years of self-consciousness. I remembered the last time I changed in a pool locker room, concealing my sagged arms and wrinkled thighs: I couldn’t envision myself a naked crusader on this public stage.

[Lili Luxe](#) has been appearing topless for ten years, usually to protest state nudity laws that discriminate against women. Now, her cause is abortion rights—in a state where women are bound by an 1849 law that criminalizes it. Most days, Lili devotes her lunch hour to raising money for the Women’s Medical Fund of Wisconsin to pay for abortion care.

On my own lunch hour as a high school choir teacher, I coached singers or typed concert programs. I focused my entire day on my own career, my own job, my own reputation. Never once did I consider using my lunch hour to benefit others.

Lili’s preferred location is in front of a famous statue. The 1893 sculpture, by a female artist, depicts a woman on the prow of a boat. The figure stretches one arm forward and, in the other, clutches an American flag. The bronze statue is named Forward. *Is Wisconsin’s motto still Forward?*

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The splotch on my thigh grew to a four-inch circle. It flushed my skin red and incensed me—that a force beyond my control could inflict such pain. The bee was like an unfair law. I could try to avoid it, but it would find its victims.

The bee sting, and the protester, inspired me to act. But what power did I have? To protect against bites, I could wear light-colored clothes and avoid perfumes. To protect against unfair laws, there were yard signs and election polls and the lady on my block who wanted me to canvass. None of which would prevent all future attacks but might mitigate the risks.

On our way home, the venom spread. It made my skin itch. Bees sting for two reasons: defense and predation. But what are they defending? And why must they prey?

I rolled down the window to let in some fresh air. I got ready to issue a good whack if it also let in a mosquito or moth or other creepy pest.

Credits

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