

Abortion

How it affected one woman's perspective

By DAVID McCAUGHNA

Mandy, as I shall call her, sits at the desk in her residence room and gazes out upon the dreary York winterscape. The soft tones of Joan Baez fill the background. Mandy's been working on an essay and her desk is piled high with books and notes. She wants to get it finished as soon as possible so she can go skiing over Reading Week but she's agreed to talk for a while about the abortion she had two years ago.

Having an abortion is not unique in this country. It has been reliably estimated that in excess of 100,000 illegal abortions are performed here each year. From these cases at least 20,000 women are admitted to hospital each year for post-abortive complications and around a thousand of these end in severe disability or death. The rate of abortions among university students is supposed to be very high and most of the girls I spoke with at York could think of at least 3 or 4 others whom they knew or had heard of who've had an abortion. But Mandy, it seems, is a pretty rare case. She's willing to talk about her abortion.

"I was really frightened when I found out I was pregnant. Remember, I was in first year and I'm from a small town in Ontario. I was very naive. First year girls were really scared to talk about sex for one thing, and I didn't really want to tell anybody and I was really afraid of what my parents would think or what everybody would think because generally I was fairly moral up till then, if you want to put it in that context. I don't know. I was just too scared to ask anybody about the pill before and I certainly wasn't about to tell anyone I was pregnant."

Mandy talks of her experience with surprising ease. In the two years that have passed she has gained a new perspective on it and now looks back with almost cool detachment.

"When I first discovered I was pregnant I started to cry, 'cause it's a really scary thing to have happen to you: all of a sudden discovering you're going to get big and fat and be pregnant and everybody's going to know. It's really the whole connotation of people knowing about it and thinking of what people are going to think. I don't think I'd be so worried about what people are going to think now but back then I was really scared. Extremely scared. I just didn't know what to do."

The father was Mandy's long-time boyfriend whom she had been going with all through high school. At the time he was attending in another part of Ontario. When Mandy told him she was pregnant he wanted to marry her.

"That was another question. I was 19 and getting married scared me even more than being pregnant because so many of my friends had been married and that was something I just didn't want to get into. I just didn't want to get married and he kept pushing it so I really couldn't lean on him for any advice. I just kept trying to stay independent from him. We mostly wrote letters back and forth about it and he came up to see me a few times but it always ended up with him shouting and me crying."

Mandy laughs now. It all seems very absurd and ridiculous.

"Of course I didn't want to tell my parents because I knew they would be terribly upset about the whole thing, particularly my mother. She always said, 'You have to wait until you get married; any nice girl just doesn't do things like that.' So I was terrified of telling."

Being in first year at York and from out of town was a lonely experience for Mandy. She didn't have anyone here to discuss her predicament with.

"I just didn't feel like confiding something like that with the other girls in residence. I eventually told one of my closest friends from home and she was just as upset as I was but we both didn't know what to do about it. Finally I began thinking that maybe I should get an abortion but I didn't know how to begin or how to start or anything so I sort of got my girlfriend to discreetly ask around but it was really difficult."

Mandy stops to catch her breath. She watches the flow of kids passing beneath her window. The record is over and she puts on some vintage Bob Dylan.

"Well, finally I got to talking to a friend of my boyfriend who I'd known for a long time and he got me the name of a doctor in



Montreal where I could go and have an abortion. I needed \$500. I had about \$200 saved up from the summer and my boyfriend gave me \$300. So one week-end I just left a note in my room — I guess I was about a month pregnant — so I left a note saying I'd be back on Wednesday. I left Saturday and I went to Montreal.

"This is really a weird story. I went to Montreal and I got to the doctor's office and there were a whole bunch of ladies waiting in the office. So I was sitting there waiting, I really didn't know what to do. I gave the secretary my name and I was sitting there and all of a sudden the police raided the place. I was really nervous. I didn't know what was going on. I tried to play it really cool. . . like I was just there for a check-up or something. This man sat down beside me, plainclothes detective I guess, and started asking me questions, my name and where did I live and so on and I told him. I kept saying 'What's happening?' and he didn't say anything; he said 'You'll find out.' And after about 15 minutes they brought the doctor out and he didn't look very happy about anything, they took him off, and I was called into an office and there was a man sitting there. He asked me to sit down, he was very nice. He asked me why I was there and I just kept playing very innocent, like I didn't know what was going on and I came for a medical check-up for my university. He believed my story and I kept asking him about what was going on and so finally he told me that this doctor was known for operating an abortion ring and that's what was happening and I acted very shocked and he took my name and address and let me go. So that sort of fell through."

Mandy now realized that she would have to tell her parents. The following week-end she went home and told them.

"They were very upset and everything, just went from bad to worse and at first they didn't want me to have an abortion — they thought it was really terrible — and I just kept thinking of the consequences. Perhaps I was being really selfish about the whole thing; thinking about myself and how I couldn't stand it, but I also had a girlfriend in high school and she went through grade 13 and she had the baby but she was totally oblivious to everybody about her, she was also very cold and callous about the whole thing, like she didn't care about the baby at all and the boy didn't care about her and she had the baby and just gave it away and she never saw it again and so it was just something she discarded and I knew that I would be very upset if I actually had a live child and I wouldn't know what to do. I wouldn't know whether to keep it or give it up for adoption or what, and I just thought it would be better for everybody if I just didn't have it. So, anyway, it turned out that a friend of the family got me an abortion. He was studying medicine or something and I went and had it with him, it didn't take very long — about an hour — it was painless and everything was very clean. And I came back to school on Monday and everything was just like nothing had ever happened; it was exactly the same as before."

Mandy was quite fortunate. She had a safe abortion with no after-effects. She didn't bleed heavily and could only complain of being tired afterwards. Since then she has been on the Pill and says that she feels quite happy and has a good bit more self-confidence.

"Now I think I'm much more aware of what women have to go through and what I had to go through and I'm really concerned about other people. Looking back, I

feel really sort of mixed up about the whole thing. I really think the way the Canadian abortion laws are is so absurd. And I get really scared when I think of all the girls in my position being really afraid and really alone and not knowing who to ask or where to go and just ending up botching the whole thing. And it makes me very angry that boys are so quick to criticize and put down girls that they say are killing another human being. They don't know all the hassles and turmoil you have to go through and the whole emotional upsetting of your life. It's really a very difficult decision. My boyfriend disowned me completely afterwards, as if I was something horrible."

There has been a change in the moral climate over the last two years. Things like birth control and abortion are no longer hush-hush topics. I wondered if this change had affected Mandy in any way.

"It's easier to talk about now. Like I know I could talk to other girls about it, perhaps impersonally, but when you come right down to it, when it actually happens to you, I think you still get a very scared feeling and you're still worried about what people are going to think. So many people are really hypocritical about it. They'll say that 'I think that abortions are great, that the Pill is great' and so on and when they actually find out somebody had done it they start saying all sorts of horrible things, 'How could she do it?' and that sort of thing. I think girls are still basically afraid of what people think."

What effect had it had on her parents?

"My parents have sort of altered a fair bit, they're more aware of what they didn't know about me before. They were sort of closed from me. They're quite a bit more worried about me now I think. They just sort of wonder if I'm alright and if everything is going fine but I think we are closer. My parents took it all very hard but I think they've gotten over it and they sort of understand. They don't say anything about it anymore."

Did Mandy ever stop to think what would have happened if she had gone ahead and had the baby?

"I used to think about that a lot. I can just see myself going through the nine months being absolutely miserable and having this baby and never seeing it again. There just didn't seem much point. I could have kept it by myself I guess but that would be selfish too because it would never have a father. It wouldn't have a normal life. But then again would it have had a normal life if I gave it up for adoption? I'll never know. The whole thing is now fading from me. I used to think about it a lot but even now I still sort of cringe when I think of people pregnant and knowing what they have to go through. But it's over. Passed."

Mandy flips through the books and magazines in front of her. She's nervous. A week or so ago she gave up smoking and she has already bitten her finger-nails down to nothing.

"I don't belong to any, but I think that women's groups are very important. They seem like the only group that understands women. I think women's liberation makes a lot of sense when there are so many girls dying every year from abortions and so many girls coming through a high school system which tells them nothing about life and about sex, or love. It really scares me to think of all these girls who are afraid of sex; who are afraid of living. I remember high school. The good old guidance classes.

"We had such great classes, like 'What are the ten best points you want in a husband?' or 'What does your most desirable man look like?' and stuff like that. They wouldn't tell you anything except basic hygiene. When really all girls wanted to know was what's going on."

It's getting late and I know she wants to get back to her work. One final question: you wouldn't want us to use your real name in EXCALIBUR would you?

"No. Can you see my real name in EXCALIBUR? I can see everybody in the whole school coming up to me and saying 'Oh, you had an abortion. Oh, isn't that nice, hmmm.' It would be really difficult. Sometimes I still get sort of angry when I think what I had to go through. But it doesn't bother me much now. I sort of think it's really a good thing that happened to me. It made me grow up a lot."