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# I used to be quiet about the fact that I perform abortions. Now I'm upfront.

By Colleen Krajewski July 10



The author, a gynecologist who performs abortions, has a tattoo on her arm of a coat hanger and phrase "Never again," to reflect her concern that abortion rights are being restricted. (iStock/Lily illustration)

One month after Donald Trump was elected president, I leaned back in a black leather chair as a man hovered over me. For the first time in decades, the fate of *Roe v. Wade* seemed to be in real doubt. Feeling a mix of anxiety, sadness and resolve, I thought: *I'm committed now.*

The tattoo artist slowly etched, on my right forearm, a rather large coat hanger — the symbol of illegal abortions that cost unknown numbers of women their lives in the years before *Roe*. Overlaid, in bold lettering, were the words "Never again." From now on, unless I was in long sleeves, everyone I met would see my tattoo the moment we shook hands — at the office, at parties, in the supermarket, on first dates.

To many people, the only thing worth knowing about me is that I am a doctor who performs abortions. They probably don't think much about my amazing family, my three little dogs, my devotion to my students, or my skill at restoring old furniture.

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At parties, sometimes a woman will catch my eye from across the room and make a beeline toward me. As we chat, she will reveal, in a hushed voice: *"I've had an abortion."* I'm simultaneously touched and saddened that my new acquaintance feels compelled to tell her story to a complete stranger — and to do so in a whisper.

The party-goers have clearly talked before I arrived: *Colleen is going to be here tonight. Did you know she does abortions?* I am a symbol before I even ring the doorbell.

How could I expect the men I date to be any different? In the past, I've tried every strategy: Burying references in my online dating profile; waiting until the third date to talk about the specifics of my work; carefully dropping the word "abortion" in conversation and watching for a reaction.

And there's always a reaction. Every man I have ever dated — no matter how liberal or open-minded he professes to be — has flinched, looked away, or gone silent when I first tell him what I do. Abortion becomes shorthand for so many things that are difficult to talk about: intimacy, alienation, poverty, violence, lack of opportunity, disappointment, illness, and the general messiness of human bodies and circumstances. I watch myself transform from potential girlfriend into political symbol. In more instances than I'd like to recall, this has meant that a new relationship ends before it really starts. The [majority of American adults support a woman's right to an abortion](#), but it's another matter to date someone who performs them.

Because of increasing restrictions at the state level, abortion access across the United States has gone from bad to worse. For example, in Pennsylvania, where I live and work, [a recent bill \(SB3\) proposed by the state legislature seeks to ban surgical abortions](#) in the second trimester.

If this bill passes, my patients' lives could be endangered; and if I follow the standard protocols to save them, I could be prosecuted under the law as a felon. This bill was written without consulting with any medical experts, and is strongly opposed by all mainstream medical associations and physician groups. And yet, it may pass with enough votes to override even our governor's veto.

Embracing the symbol of the coat hanger meant also accepting myself as a symbol, which I had always resisted. But as I shed the stigma of being an abortion provider, I felt free. I was tired of playing games, and for the first time in my life, I was ready for someone to love me because I provide abortions, not in spite of it. With that tattoo, I made some other changes: No more batting my eyelashes on dates, feigning innocence or acting apologetic about who I am. No more waiting the requisite three days to call back, or counting down three dates to have sex if I wanted to.

An unexpected side effect of the 2016 election is that many people have become vocal about their support for reproductive rights. Suddenly, dating an abortion provider can be cool, a way to proclaim one's liberal street cred. I met an investment banker who was close to a decade younger than I am. For him, my profession seemed to add to the edginess of dating an older woman. There was the hard-partying Alaskan fisherman on an extended shore break, who found my commitment to reproductive justice "hot." So, abortion providers are "hot" now? As time goes on, I sometimes forget about the tattoo entirely. Once, I wore long sleeves before becoming intimate with a fascinating biomedical engineer, and, when he first saw the tattoo, he burst out laughing, apparently delighted by my commitment to the cause.

Neither the tattoo nor my new perspective changed everything. There

was the entrepreneur with political aspirations who sent mixed messages and ultimately drifted away. Was it because I could be a liability to him in some future election, or was he just not over his ex? Being more open about what I do has not led to perfect communication or the end of insecurity.

In addition, the ongoing threats to reproductive health care have left me with little extra energy to deal with disapproval or embarrassment from men. If it becomes clear that I'll have to bend and cajole to win someone's support, there will be no second date. A friend once said, "Behind many woke men are exhausted feminists" — and I'm no longer willing to exhaust myself for the comfort of others. In the best instances, my newfound impatience and clarity have allowed for deeper connections and a sense of shared purpose.

Recently, an online dating match messaged me and, without knowing my specialty, began lamenting the threat of SB3. He's an attorney temporarily based in North Dakota, where he's defending Standing Rock protesters. Our conversation about social justice led to such a strong connection that we ended up meeting despite the distance.

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Whatever happens, I will no longer be silent or fearful when a new love interest — or anyone — makes me feel exposed and vulnerable. As my tattoo says: *Never again.*

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Colleen Krajewski is a gynecologist and family planning specialist from Pittsburgh.

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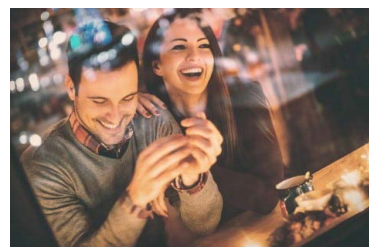


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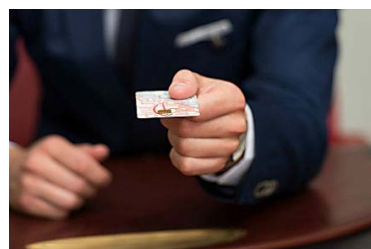
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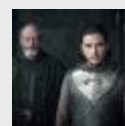
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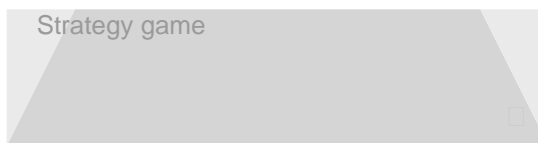
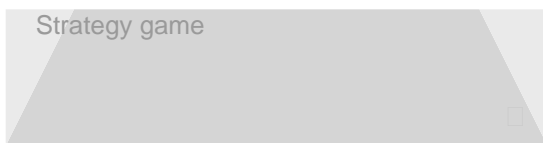
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