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'Right now, for so many in the US, what makes sense feels submerged. Buried and gone'

As women's rights are rolled back and politicians ensure measures to protect citizens from mass shooters are overruled, it's hard not to feel that the US has slipped, Twilight Zone-like, into a different dimension



Essay by **Johanna Grohmann**

Back in 2008, my husband (who is from Newry) and I were living together in Dublin. And I can remember whenever the topic of abortion came up in conversation with someone, it felt as if someone had just dropped a lead curtain over the room. People would grow quiet. And my husband would give me a look – the look he sometimes gave me to let me know that this was something in his country where I did not, as an American, fully understand the conversational landmines hidden within, and that I should just listen, rather than run my big, American mouth. It was not unlike the look he gave me when I tried to share my opinions on Bono.

And so I would hold my tongue and say little. But I recall feeling a kind of wonder that abortion was illegal there. It was hard for me to get my head around how a place that felt progressive in so many other ways (hadn't I witnessed a damp but joyful Pride parade through the city centre?) could still be so trapped in time. Could still deny women this very basic human right. A right that in my own country had been legal since the 1970s. But, it would be another ten years before abortion would be made legal in Ireland.

Fast forward to a summer day in June, 2022. I am sitting at my desk in my Brooklyn apartment, laughing with a friend over text. When suddenly, a new text pops up on my phone. "Roe vs. Wade overturned. OMG. WTF." I stare at my phone in disbelief. Of course, we knew it was going to happen. But now that it is actually happening, it feels otherworldly: Twilight Zone. Black Mirror. A different dimension.

I stalk to the living room and sink onto my couch. Pick up the remote. I need to turn on the news. Need to see that it's real.

Only the day before, the Supreme Court also made it easier for people across the country to carry and conceal weapons in public spaces. Including in New York City, where I live. Considering the constant stream of mass shootings, that news also felt improbable. Baffling. Especially when anyone who has spent even 15 minutes in Manhattan knows that it is precisely the lack of guns that makes the city feel safe. It is why I have walked home from the subway at 1am on countless occasions. It is why strolling through Times Square feels almost as casual to me as strolling through a local town square.

The day Roe is overturned, there is a protest in the West Village. I peer at the little square on Twitter. "Wear green!" It says. I nervously debate whether or not to attend. Considering the recent gun ruling, is it even safe to go? I decide to go, but will stay on the fringes. I promise my husband I won't stay long.

I grab a marker from my son's art bin. I find a scrap of cardboard. *What to even write? What to even say anymore?* It has been so many years of cardboard signs waved in the air.

The crowd is so deep getting off the train, it is difficult to get out of the station. Once above ground, it is a beautiful evening. The sun is dappling the trees of Washington Square Park, and the temperature is balmy. It feels incongruous, confusing, for a day that all day long has been described as "dark." *Such a dark, dark day...*

Protesters stream into the park, and I want to join in the chants, to join my voice to theirs. But I am struggling to process that this is actually happening. Someone beats a drum behind my head. "Abortion stops a beating heart!" the anti-abortion activists often shout. I think of the beating, pounding, furious hearts of the women around me. As a mother, the physical and mental demands of pregnancy and childbirth feel as real to me as my own heartbeat. I cannot fathom forcing someone to undergo the



experience against her will. I stand dazed, my sign limp and dangling in my hands.

"Jo?" A voice calls out.

I turn, and spy the face of a friend from college. A man I haven't seen in 15 years. We embrace, then eye each other awkwardly, stranded in the strangeness of reuniting in the midst of such a surreal moment.

"It's good to see you," I say.

"Yes," he gives a sad nod. "Nice to see a friend... on such a dark day..."

The shootings happen one right after the other. It is almost impossible to keep track. One morning we turn on the news and see the outside of a supermarket in Buffalo, New York. Ten days later, the news cameras are outside a school in Uvalde, Texas. My husband and I stare at the photos of the children. They are the same age as our son. In snapshots taken of them hours before the shooting, they are pictured proudly holding



it's going to cause a lot of suffering.”

She tells me how her own mother – my grandmother – told her stories of her friends getting botched abortions pre-Roe. “She had friends who bled to death.”

She has never told me these stories before. Never spoken of them until now. She then tells me how the day before, she'd seen a friend in a shop, and the friend was delighted with news of the abortion ruling.

“A lot of babies will get to live!” She beamed at my mother.

“But what about the women who can't take care of those babies?” My mother questioned.

The friend said nothing. Stomped off in a huff.

In the days ahead, there will be a story in the news of a ten-year-old girl in Ohio. She was raped by a 27-year-old man and became pregnant. But because abortion is now illegal in Ohio, she was forced to travel to Indiana to get an abortion. She was nine when she became pregnant.

One morning, in Indiana, my husband gives my brother a lift to work, driving across the river to Louisville, Kentucky. On the way back he spies a giant billboard: “Surrendering your newborn at a fire station delivers no shame. No blame. No names.” As if nine months of pregnancy, birth and then dropping an infant off were as simple as baking a cake and leaving it on someone's porch.

Five blocks from my brother's work sits the EMW Surgical Center, one of only two abortion clinics left in Kentucky. The day Roe was overturned, the clinic had to halt all abortion care. Had to cancel appointments, sending desperate, pleading patients away.

My husband heads back over the river, down the streets into my Indiana hometown. He passes the bright red letters of Kenny's Gun Shop. At Kenny's, the “Open” sign winks with its neon glow.

We spend a week in Indiana, then on the Fourth of July, make our way back to Brooklyn. I walk into our apartment, exhausted, and take a rapid test for Covid. It's positive, and I fall into bed, feverish. I scroll my phone in a haze, and it is filled with photos of a shooting earlier that day at a Fourth of July parade in Illinois. The pictures are of strollers abandoned. Children's scooters scattered in the street. A two-year-old's parents were both killed. He was found wandering alone, calling for his mother. And I think of Senator Cruz's proposal for the one door into the school.

“Where is the door to a parade?” I wonder.

Outside my bedroom, the sky booms with fireworks. It is our Independence Day. The annual celebration of our nation. I think of what it is to live in the United States right now. How for some, it is like whiplash. It is utter confusion. It is like standing in quicksand, and someone tossing you an anvil.

While for others, it is indeed a time for fireworks. It is a place where our gun rights are being protected at all costs. Where it has been decreed that the life of a foetus has the same rights as everyone else. It is a time of great celebration and triumph. The day Roe was overturned, Senator Mitch McConnell tweeted: “This is an historic victory for the Constitution and for the most vulnerable in society.”

Those words roll through my head . . . “the most vulnerable in society”, and my mind floats back to that child-sized Superman coffin. It is the image that will not leave me. “A Superman is what we need,” I think. A superhuman power to somehow zoom in – all unstoppable fists and strength – and somehow make things right. To catch the cat falling from the tree, and push the car from the oncoming train. To somehow make things make sense once more. But right now, for so many in this country, what makes sense feels submerged. Buried and gone.

On Instagram, I see an artist friend selling specially made protest signs, the proceeds of which will benefit an organization in Ohio that helps women find abortion care. “If my uterus shot bullets, it would be less regulated,” reads one of the posters. I purchase one.

Unsure of what I will do with it when it comes. I wonder who my money will help in Ohio. And I think of that ten-year-old girl. Her story was doubted, of course. Something that heinous, it couldn't possibly be true. But then, of course, it was. I imagine her being bundled into a car, traversing this country's highways, in search of some help. In search of some hope for the future that lies ahead. ■

up their school award certificates. The gap-toothed smiles of nine-year-olds.

The news will later report on specially designed coffins someone volunteered to make for the victims. One of them will be a bright blue. It will have the yellow triangle and the red S of Superman painted on top.

Three days after Uvalde, Senator Ted Cruz will stand on a stage at the National Rifle Association's annual convention. He will be only 300 miles from where the schoolchildren were shot. He will gravely shake his head.

“It's never been about guns,” he will say. “What stops armed bad guys is armed good guys.”

“But wasn't there an entire team of armed officers at the school that day?” I think. “Wasn't there a whole slew of good guys?”

Cruz will suggest schools maybe have only one door leading in and out. Perhaps that is the solution?

The day after Roe is overturned, we are to drive to Indiana for a planned visit with my mother. I can tell my husband is nervous that we are heading into

what he thinks of as “gun country”. Of course, with the recent court ruling, everywhere now kind of feels like gun country. A few days earlier, we'd had a quiet conversation about what to do if we were somewhere where we heard gunshots. He suggests that in a grocery store, maybe take cover in the stock room. The conversation feels slightly ludicrous. Statistically, we know mass shootings are still “rare”. But they do not feel rare. They feel constant.

I spend the drive to Indiana scrolling my phone. It is filled with black and white photos of women crying on the steps of government buildings. As well as women from anti-abortion groups crying tears of elation, their heads thrown back with wide smiles. I think of my mother – a devout Catholic who herself has given birth to ten children. I try to imagine what conversations lie ahead on this trip. I have spent my entire adult life avoiding the topic of abortion with her. I am jolted with surprise when she brings it up herself.

“I am personally against abortion. You know that,” she says. “But I also know that what's happening . . .

Abortion rights supporters demonstrate outside the US Supreme Court in Washington DC after its decision to overturn Roe v Wade. GETTY