

Being Counted

By Johanna Garfield

I WAS one of the thousands at the pro-choice rally in Washington who had never marched before. Though I consider myself a liberal, no cause had stirred in me a desire to demonstrate. Sure, I'd worked for Adlai Stevenson, signed petitions, written my congressman. Still, I'd never marched.

I suppose I thought my presence didn't matter. After all, what difference would one person more or less make? I could sit down and still be counted. And the whole thing was faintly embarrassing: being part of a mob scene; chanting; carrying placards. Wasn't there something a little, well, adolescent about it? When I'd watched such demonstrations on TV in the past, I'd been uncomfortably reminded of the high school pep rallies other kids attended, at which I'd always felt out of place.

And in fact there were echoes of summer camp — of high school. In the bus going down as we conscientiously practiced cheers ("2-4-6-8/ Separate church and state!") or inspirational words to be sung to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," my seat companion muttered, "This reminds me of the Girl Scout parade I was in as a kid."

Yet this time I was moved to go. More than moved. Compelled. Driven. Though there would probably be more people at this rally than at any previous rally in Washington, I knew I had to be there. So outrageous, so unthinkable was the possibility that what we were marching to protest could come to pass.

I never had an illegal abortion. But I've known those who did, friends who came of age before *Roe v. Wade* and experienced the shame and terror of furtive visits to questionable "clinics," or hastily arranged vacations to Puerto Rico (both clichéd images, but nonetheless true). And they were the ones who could afford a relatively safe procedure. But even if I hadn't known such women, I'd have been there. The thought of the millions of unwanted babies — even more of the angry, rejected children and adults they grow into — would have been enough.

It was pouring at 6 a.m. when we left. There was no toilet on the bus, and when you got there you had to wait a half hour for the Port-A-San. Even a hot dog was impossible to come by.

Many of the cheers we learned didn't scan or were badly worded ("We're gonna kick back/ Bush's attack"). The words to the song didn't fit very well, and some of the signs people carried weren't in the best of taste, if entertaining. I didn't see any movie stars ("We could've seen it better on TV," said a friend good-naturedly, and I'm sure it was true), and we had to walk two miles back to the stadium where the buses were parked because you couldn't get near the subways for the sea of people.

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. I hadn't yet heard the rumor that the number of marchers was being seriously underreported, which would have lent a depressing note to my otherwise euphoric mood. But in a way, whether I was one of 300,000 or 600,000 wasn't the issue. Whatever the number, for the first time in my life I'd stood up to be counted.