

The Passionate Conception

Father Joe Hanlon was sitting in the confessional box. It had been a slow night; the rain had kept most people at home. He wished he had brought a book with him. He generally didn't like to do that as he mostly ended up reading the same page over and over in between confessions. However, he knew the rain, an absolute downpour with no hint of stopping, would make for a slow night. As the youngest member of the clergy at St Mary's he usually drew the short straw on duties. Last man out of confessions on a Saturday night was one of the short straws. 'Half an hour to go,' he told himself. He swung round on his swivel chair and put his feet up on the ledge that supported the partition between priest and confessor.

'I would like to make a confession, Father,' a voice announced from the other side of the partition.

'What?' A startled Father Joe exclaimed as he got his feet down and righted himself in the chair. 'You gave me a fright there, I didn't hear you come in.'

'I expect it is the noise of the storm.'

'Yes, yes of course. Please, my son, let me hear your confession.' He still felt a bit odd at calling older people my son, or daughter. At 32 he was only six years out of finishing his studies, seven since he was ordained. The older priests told him that after about 20 years it would feel fine. Some comfort. At least in confessions he didn't have to say it to their faces.

'This is a long, strange story, Father. I hope you are up to it?'

'You are speaking directly to God through me, my son, and God is up for anything.'

The man's accent sounded strange. Father Joe tried to place it, but couldn't.

'Where are you from?'

'From everywhere and nowhere, Father,' replied the man.

Father Joe blessed himself in readiness to hear the man's confession. Then he blessed himself again to ward off the chill that had started in his bones. He didn't have a good feeling about this.

'I'm not sure where to start, Father. I'm not sure where it actually began.'

'Well, my son, think back. Where is the first inkling?'

'We'll need to go way back Father, back to when I was in seminary.'

'Are you a priest?'

'No Father, but I did study for the priesthood for a time. It was back then that I discovered manipulation. I learned how to manipulate women, girls. Whenever I came home for the holidays from seminary and went out, I would meet people who would always ask me what I was doing. When I told them I was studying for the priesthood some of them, the girls, would get this look in their eyes. It was a look that said 'I'm going to show you.'

‘At first I used to just shy away from them, but then one girl caught my eye and I was hooked. Rachel. I thought I was in love. She used me, Father, she wanted my innocence and she took it. Once I had had sex with her that was it. She didn’t want to know me. I was devastated. I felt like she had actually taken something physical from me. After that I decided that whenever I came home from college I would be the one to do the taking. And I did. I wanted to fill that hole within me that Rachel had made. I took many women, Father.

Eventually I decided to leave seminary, the priesthood was not for me. I still tell women sometimes that I am a priest; it never fails. They all want to have sex with you. God knows why. Perhaps they think they are having holy sex, or that they are saving you from chastity, or that it makes them feel better as your sin will be worse than theirs. Who knows? Anyway this revenge, this lust, burned in me, but the sex would only ease the absence for a short while. Then the hole within me would be back. I was an addict, Father. I took and took but could not get enough. I started to dream about sex. At first it was fine, then it started to get scary. They weren’t as much dreams as nightmares. There would be hordes of them; women who I felt were taking over my mind, my body, reaching in to take over my very soul. I would wake up absolutely exhausted. In order to replenish my energy I would have to get energy from other people, and I learned other ways to do this, not just sexually.

I was working as an actor then and I would take all the emotional energy from my fellow actors. It is easy, Father: intimidation, manipulation, bullying. It is amazing how much energy you can steal from weak people. My ego was huge. I could do whatever I wanted with people, like a vampire. But the nights! I could not escape my tormentors. They haunted me, sucked me dry, terrified me. They were never satisfied. I tried not to sleep, took drugs to keep me awake. But you can’t stay awake forever. When eventually I did fall asleep they would be there waiting for me, laughing at me, and it would be worse. Eventually I accepted my fate. I took from the living and gave to the un-living. I call them the un-living, Father, for they are not from here, not from this Earth. They are from some other dimension. I know some of them have been alive on Earth, probably poor fools like me that have been caught up in their evil game. But most of them belong to the spirit world — or should that be demon world? I don’t have long left for this world, Father, but I don’t want to go to this awful place when I die, the world of succubus and incubus. Help me, Father! Save me, Father!’

‘My son, you have told a strange tale. I can hear your fear but I can hear no remorse for your victims; for those people that you stole energy from.’

‘Father, I am sorry. If I could make reparations to all those people I offended, I would. Please help me, Father. Save my soul from eternal damnation.’

‘You must desist from your practice of taking energy from others and you must refuse to give energy to these demonic women in the night. For your penance you must say a decade of the rosary every night and you must make a devotion to the Virgin, for I believe the Blessed Mother will be your salvation here. Now make a good act of contrition, ask for forgiveness from your victims and I will absolve you from your sins.’

After the man had left, Father Joe sat on in the confessional box, shocked. He had never heard such a tale. He didn't know if the man was sane or not but he could still feel the cloying, clinging energy that had been around him. Eventually, feeling sure that the man had left the church, he got up and locked the main doors. Confessions were over for the night. He made his way into the sacristy and poured himself a coffee. The rain was still battering down and he could hear some rumblings of thunder in the distance. He decided to add a shot of whisky to his coffee.

'Chase away the chill,' he stated out loud.
Yeah, he thought, physical and metaphysical chill.

He loved this old gothic church with its spires and towers, even on a stormy night like this. It wasn't the cosiest place to be, but he still felt a peace and tranquillity here. Just as he was about to take another sip of coffee, there was an electric blue flash of lightning and an almighty crash of thunder. Father Joe jumped up, spilling his coffee. He stood there stock-still. He felt a prickling all around him, a tingling all over his body, and the air in the room started to feel thin. It was the build-up of static electricity; lightning was about to strike again. The instant he thought this an arc of blue light flew from the kettle socket across the room right in front of him and disappeared into the phone jack on the wall. At the same moment an even louder clap of thunder shook the building and all the lights went out.

Father Joe stood absolutely still, rooted to the spot. He heard a banging in the church and made his way cautiously through the now pitch-black room to the door that connected the sacristy to the church. Thank heavens he had not yet extinguished the altar candles; there would at least be some light in the church. Emerging into the church he carefully headed towards the altar and picked up a lighted candle in its ornate holder. The fuse-box was located near the entrance to the church. He would check to make sure it was okay and see if he could get the lights back on. The wiring in the church was pretty old and had needed replacing for some time but there was always something else that needed fixed first. He hoped the fuse-box had not gone on fire.

Making his way down the main aisle he noticed that both front doors of the church were wide open. I know I locked them, he thought to himself. Must have been the lightning. He placed the candle down on the last pew and moved over to secure the doors. The rain and wind made this difficult and by the time he was finished he was soaked through. He turned round to retrieve the candle and all the hairs on his neck stood up. The church seemed to be filled with an opaque fog. The fog undulated gently and a form seemed to take shape within it. It was the figure of a woman.

Father Joe watched in amazement as she became more detailed; she had long dark hair that waved and danced medusa-like in the fog, and was wearing a dress of various shades of dark grey and black that moved around like a living thing, revealing then concealing parts of her body. The apparition seemed to give off an electrical charge. It felt like anger directed towards him. She fixed her eyes on him and Father Joe felt as if he were staring into black bottomless pits with flashes of red fire in them.

‘You cannot absolve what is not of your world, Father,’ she raged at him. ‘Who are you to absolve me or mine?’

Father Joe could make out other dark figures behind the woman, as he stood petrified in the church.

‘You think you can meddle in my world, with your absolution and your forgiveness and your Virgin.’

Father Joe tried to reply but no words would come from his throat. He tried to move but his feet would not respond.

‘You, Joseph Hanlon, are nothing, nothing to me!’ she screamed.

Father Joe was taken aback when she used his name. But it gave him some impetus.

‘You don’t know me,’ he managed in a hoarse whisper.

‘I know all there is to know, *Father!*’ she bellowed back at him.

‘Get out of my church!’ Father Joe’s voice was gaining in strength.

‘You want to take me on, son of Eve?’ A cunning smile twisted around her lips.

‘Avaunt thee Satan!’ Father Joe commanded.

The apparition let out a cruel laugh, ‘You fool Father; you don’t stand a chance!’

‘Avaunt thee Satan!’ Father Joe screamed.

‘So be it,’ seethed the woman and she launched herself at Father Joe. Thunder boomed and lightning flashed as Father Joe was caught up in a thick mist. He could feel his body being pushed and pummelled, he was choking with the mist in his nose and mouth, he couldn’t get a breath. There was a storm inside him, suffocating him from within. Somehow he called out, haltingly and with difficulty.

‘Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death...’

Then he collapsed on the floor.