

The Sinner

A woman begins her journey up the aisle. The curls of grey hair that poke out cheekily from under her woolly hat betray that she is old, but not yet elderly; she has a kindly face, deep laughter lines around her eyes and a step that hints at a shuffle. She is wearing the closest she can find to 'best'; scuffed leather loafers and her least-bobbly fleece, the periwinkle blue one that matches her eyes. She has put on lipstick for the occasion, a bold orange that she borrowed from Lynn; a flake has settled on one of her front teeth. The woman would be mortified if she knew it was there, and in fact will be when she discovers it in an hour's time, but nobody has yet had the heart to tell her.

It's a long way to the confession booth, made longer by the fact that Jenny is (if she is honest with herself) dawdling a little. Really, she would prefer not to arrive. She has a big confession to make.

Jenny has impure thoughts every day. She has done for as long as she can remember. The Catholic church teaches that impure thoughts only become a sin when they are willed, but that's just the thing - recently, Jenny has begun to will them, too.

She has taken up working at the till in the Tesco Express up the road from her house; a short shift three days a week. She doesn't need the money - her generous teachers' pension still does her very nicely, and for the most part she doesn't go in for what her mother would have called 'extravagencies', except getting her hair done once a month and that's only really to keep it short and somewhat respectable because she never remembers to brush it. Rather, she sought out the job because she's always been a

The Sinner

hard worker and likes to be around people. All human life comes through the supermarket, Jenny often thinks, although she sees the pitying looks in the customers' eyes and knows that they must think it's terribly sad, this woman in her sixties working at the cash register to make ends meet. Well, more fool them, Jenny thinks - she's in her late seventies.

She likes to talk to the customers and ask about their days; if they're not in a chatty mood (and so many of them aren't) she looks at what they've bought instead and simply imagines what sorts of lives they might have. Tampons, painkillers, wine and naan bread belong to women at their time of the month; flowers, *Ok!* magazine and fresh fruit belong to grandparents visiting relatives in hospital; twelve rolls of fruit pastilles and six tubs of butter belong to a man about whom Jenny isn't entirely sure she wants to know anything at all.

It's when her brain isn't occupied that the thoughts come on. They happen when her mind starts to wander. She never gets much warning, just a small, sharp pain behind her left eye; that's when she knows they're about to start. There's nothing to be done then but let them crash over her, like a seeing downpour you could never outrun coming at you across a field. These days she's not sure she'd stop them even if she could, and that, that is a problem.

She sits behind the till, items flowing through her hands and across the scanner like a silk scarf, and she thinks about the *beep* whipped cream in a can and the *beep* fat, juicy

The Sinner

strawberries and the *beep* oily salmon and the *beep* bendy bananas and the *beep* curly pink prawns and the *beep* fleshy steak and the *beep* dark, rich coffee and the *beep* gaping bagels and the *beep* melting ice cream and the *beep* rippling red jelly.

But this is not what Jenny has come to confess.

Jenny's second husband died on Wednesday and she's sorry to admit that she is relieved. This morning, not four days later, she clambered unsteadily up on a stool to get her 'best' shoes down from the dusty box on top of the wardrobe and came back to church for the first time in 53 years. She'd never really stopped believing in God. It was just that Jim had been an atheist and hadn't liked her going to church because it made him feel as if she were part of some sort of secret club that he was excluded from, which she supposes she was, in a way.

She could still be a believer, Jenny reasoned, just one who didn't go to Mass. God would understand, she thought. God would want her to obey her husband, as she had promised to do in her wedding vows. She didn't want to do wrong by either of these men, not Jim nor God, but Jim would never know that she had come back now that he had shuffled off this mortal coil. It's not as though he believed in a Heaven from which he could look down at her and be angry.

But it's also not the absence from Mass that Jenny has come to confess.

The Sinner

The sex with Jim was hardly what you'd call regular, which Jenny considers to be a good thing, since it was hardly what you'd call pleasant either. Her first husband had been a much more sensual lover in the technical sense. She'd married Robert aged nineteen because he was objectively handsome and made her laugh; her hair didn't stand on end when he tenderly brushed crumbs off her cheek and rested his hand there for a moment, but she didn't know that it was supposed to.

Jenny started working as an English teacher at the girls' prep school in town and her twenties unfurled around her like a bustling high street. Her friends from school mostly became secretaries and housewives, and she would often invite them round to dinner because Robert enjoyed cooking for other people - it was part of how he showed love. More and more often, her friends would lean in close to whisper, cheeks flushed with wine and jumping in the candlelight, that their husbands were lazy in bed, or clumsy, or even violent. Then Robert would come back into the dining room holding a trifle triumphantly aloft and her friends would sit up straight again and gaze enviously at this gentle, willing, loving man. Jenny knew she was lucky, but she also knew with an iron-clad certainty he had been wasted on her. She liked him a lot, obviously, even loved him in a way. But when it came to matters of the flesh she could only ever think of their bodies as objects; a pestle and mortar grinding peppercorns or the back door key forced into the front door.

Their marriage ended when she found out about his affair. Again, Jenny had been quietly relieved. Although he didn't say it, she assumed that Robert had found someone

The Sinner

with whom his body made music rather than white noise, and now she could stop feeling guilty. Good for Robert. There was a part of her that was sad to see him go, but she knew it was right. He was gentlemanlike even in his affair - he was horribly ashamed and insisted that she keep the house. That was the worst bit for Jenny because she knew the divorce (and the affair, for that matter) had been her fault. People may say men are red-blooded and lustful but women are too.

The same friends with the bad-in-bed husbands said well-intentioned horrible things about the affair; that Robert was an idiot neanderthal led by his prick, and that his other woman was a cruel slut-temptress-homewrecker-whore. But none of it was true. The friends pitied Jenny when she said it wasn't so bad, she's sure they did, because they told her sadly that it was alright, she didn't need to defend Robert and his new woman, that she was allowed to be angry. But they never seemed to consider that Jenny had known what it was like inside that void of a marriage as well.

Jenny is halfway to the confession booth, and it's important you know at this point that Jenny does want to be good, which surely makes her a good person, overall.

Jenny had married cold, distant Jim after that debacle - at least she knew he'd never blame *himself* for any issues in the bedroom, so she could avoid that particular shame. And he was right not to blame himself. Because it wasn't that Jenny didn't like sex, though it might have seemed like it to Robert and Jim - it was more that she had only ever had satisfying encounters with one person.

The Sinner

It had been going on for almost sixty years. Lynn was the French teacher at the school where Jenny worked in her twenties. They were different - Jenny dumpy and scruffy, Lynn tall and glamorous, but they were inseparable for years. Then one Friday at the pub after work there was a little more sherry than usual and a few more cigarettes and the brush of a hand and a quick kiss and that had really been the beginning and the end of everything for Jenny.

But that's private. It's not that Jenny's a prude (she certainly isn't) but some parts of her relationship with Lynn feel sacred - divine, even. To put them into words would make them sound lewd and dirty and it's not that Jenny *minds* lewd and dirty things exactly, but it would be inaccurate, and she *does* mind inaccuracies. Words are inadequate to describe what she has and does with Lynn, she finds, so those things stay between her, Lynn and God.

Lynn and Jenny live next door to each other, and have done since Robert moved out. They have seen each other almost every day for sixty years, alone mostly because she and Jim did not get on, although this shouldn't be read as an inkling on Jim's part; Jim did not much like anyone. For decades the two women have laughed and laughed together, their bodies feeling young beside each other, though there has been much change as the years have trundled past. There are rolls in their bellies now, and in their backs, or, more accurately, there've always been rolls, but now they are more like folds, like pieces of baking parchment that have been screwed up and smoothed back out

The Sinner

again. Jenny loves the skin of Lynn's chest, leathery and wrinkled like an elephant's ear. Lynn shrieks with laughter when Jenny tells her things like this. They don't mind that they're getting old.

They go out together too, and they travel. They went to Rome last year (Jim did not want to come) and got the bus from their hotel across the river to the Colosseum. A lovely Italian couple smiled kindly at them, stood up and offered their seats. They said *grazie, grazie* and the couple said *prego, prego* and ushered them over, two old English dears on holiday in silly sunhats. Lynn and Jenny fell about laughing when they got off the bus, because they'd been offered seats by people who had no idea - none whatsoever - what they'd been doing all morning.

It's this that Jenny has come to confess. Six decades of adultery with a woman. Though of course God must already know. And yet - nothing has been done about it. Nothing has ever stopped them. Jenny has not been punished for her sins, she realises.

How can it be wrong, Jenny thinks as she draws closer to the wooden box. She thinks of the dark gaps in Lynn's back teeth that Jenny sees when she throws her head back, the tube of toothpaste in the bathroom that Lynn curls up like a Swiss roll to get out every last drop, and the happy, tuneless hum she does when she tidies that Jenny has never told her about for fear that awareness of it would bring the humming to a halt.

What kind of God could consider that there is anything wrong with Lynn?

The Sinner

Perhaps God is not listening. Perhaps God is not to be found here at all, in a silence so big it needs high vaulted ceilings to contain it. Could it possibly be that her God is found instead in a glass of brandy and a knee-slapping cackle and the purple crocus Jenny noticed pushing its determined head out from under a headstone in the graveyard outside?

Jenny fiddles with her mittens as she approaches the booth, glances quickly over her shoulder, and pulls the door open. She sits down on the hard wooden chair, folds her hands in her lap. She adjusts her handbag on her shoulder, then puts it on the floor, and refolds her hands.

What if God is a woman, Jenny thinks. What if she is a woman, and what if she is on my side?

Jenny pulls the door to the confession booth closed. We can't see her face, but we can hear a wide grin in her voice as she declares, "Forgive me Father, for I have sinned."

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