

Desecration

No one I know is aware of the abortion. And my name isn't Marie but that's what you can call me. I'll never tell my nearest and dearest but I feel there should be a record of what happened somewhere.

I made the decision to remain childless early on in life and with good reason; the housing estate I grew up on was peopled with women and girls shackled to their child-care duties. Brood mares, so many of life's doors summarily slammed in their resigned faces, little more than domestic slaves. And since my mother was pregnant with my baby sister I've had a creeping horror of pregnancy, childbirth and babies. They make me shudder in disgust. I have to turn my head when I see an impregnated woman—I find them grotesque and animal, overtaken by that lowly urge to breed. I think it was witnessing my sister being born at home that did it—the blood, the screaming, the pain and the awful sight of her forcing her way out through my mother's most tender parts. I'd seen our cat purr as she kittened; now I saw the atrocity that is child birth. It was the most violent thing I'd ever seen; the extremes of her agony convinced me she was dying. I was terrified. I don't think I've ever forgiven my sister for it—perhaps that's why we never got on. But it wasn't long before my mother was up and about, making the hard-earned pennies stretch even further, thanking her picture of Christ for the 'blessing' that had been inflicted upon all of us.

I excommunicated myself aged eleven when I concluded that God is a psychological tumour that must be excised. And despite my hard won education, my mother—so good with children, so inept with adults—always saw nothing in my future but Catholicism's righteous role for women: proud mother of a multitude of brawny babies, preferably boys.

So when I woke up that morning, with cold sweat on my forehead and knew that I was pregnant, my decision was already made. When it comes to children, my mind is barren of parental feelings, cold and stony. I didn't want a child, I couldn't raise a child, I was repelled by the whole situation. I had the counselling, read the leaflets and scoured the web besides; my decision was informed by all the information available. Before that I had no idea that a quarter of all women undergo an abortion, even though I'd supported two of my friends through it. I longed to talk to them about it, but for reasons that will become apparent, I was unable to.

It was very early in the pregnancy when I had the termination and I was stunned by how little I felt. After all, the foetus had been not much more than a slug of jellied potential and had made no impact on my silhouette. It's probably better off in limbo along with all the un-baptised babies and Old Testament prophets. But I know that women and lapsed Catholics can never escape guilt. I'm hoping that writing this all down will be cathartic, a sort of auto-psychoanalysis. A confession if you will, though I do not ask for forgiveness; there is nothing to forgive. I can imagine your blame worrying at me like a pack of wild dogs. You might say: *this is your fault, you should have taken precautions*. If only it were that simple.

This is where my story deviates from the tragic tales of other desperate women all around the world. I am a lesbian, I've never doubted that. Plenty of my Sapphic sisters sleep with men, hell, some even have kids with them but I

am not one of them. Certainly I fooled around a little with boys when I was in my teenaged experimental phase. I didn't like it and even they didn't seem too impressed, 'Don't just kiss it, suck it!' (which, by the way, I never did). And that was the closest I got to sexual intercourse with a man. Women were another matter; they thrilled me. I was moved by the scented softness, the tenderness, affection and true romance of the wonderful women I was with. I do have a great fondness for men, it's just that they can't get to me, can't reach me mentally and sensually like a beautiful woman can. So by the strictest definition I am a virgin, a virgin invaded by an unwanted child.

Immaculate Conception is not without precedent in the annals of scientific literature: during my investigations I found an article describing just such a case. In November 1985 an ovum removed from a woman about to undergo IVF treatment, spontaneously began to divide in the absence of any fertilising agent, though it died after the first division. The clinic's director, being a true man of science declared, 'God only knows how that happened!' And though I refuse to believe in God (or anything else for that matter), this is where he enters my story.

I'd had a busy day but in bed I was strangely restless, and the moon peered in like a nosy neighbour. It must have been some time after four am when I eventually fell asleep and was plunged into a bizarre and vivid world. Not since childhood have I



The Annunciation © Ruby

experienced such an intense dream, so realistic I felt as if I was wide awake. I found myself in a stark, white room, utterly featureless: no doors, windows, carpets or visible source of light though the place was brightly lit. It filled me with a tense claustrophobia and I longed to run, panic grasping me firmly. When I screamed no sound emerged. And then suddenly I wasn't alone. He was tall and shining with a strange symbol inscribed on his flawless forehead and terrible, terrible eyes—it hurt to look into them. Carrying a lily like a sceptre, he was horrifically beautiful and when he spoke it sounded like a duel between angry violins.

'I am Gabriel,' he announced and I winced at the unbearable sound, 'You have been chosen,' I tried to respond but I was still afflicted by silence. 'The Lord has decreed that I get you with child. His once begotten son will now be twice begotten as foretold. You are honoured above all other women.'

And with that he made a fluid hand gesture and some invisible force threw me to the floor which was cold and shiny like marble. Another gesture and the blue night-dress I was wearing melted away. In ordinary dreams the surreal and impossible can be accepted with aplomb but not this time, I struggled and raged inwardly though I was unable to make any outward movement. And then he was on top of me and inside me and pain possessed my being.

My soul was violated, there was nowhere for me to hide. All of me was being plundered. I was absolutely helpless to stop it. Agony is just a word, the reality goes far beyond any verbal concept a human could devise, but even just his mere touch tingled and stung like a jelly-fish's kiss. His thrustings were savage and hot, tearing me, and if I could have chosen death at that moment I would have welcomed it gladly. Just beyond the sickening rhythm of his shoulder I could see the frail lily on the cold floor, crushed and bruised where he had trodden on it in his haste. There was a perverse intimacy in the way he stroked my hair and I struggled to bite his hand as it passed my face but to no avail. Like the sensation of salt ground into a wound I felt a stinging spurt inside me and then I was awake and alone in bed, sobbing and sobbing like the world was ending, which mine was. There was a sick feeling in my stomach, like when I had taken communion wine without eating. His stench of hygiene and absences clung to me; in the shower my tears went unnoticed amongst the welter of scalding hot water. In the mirror I told myself my body was clean though I knew my soul never would be again after being desecrated. A passing car caused light and shadow to scurry through the room and my heart wrenched—I saw him standing behind me in the mirror. I turned, scattering bottles and tubes and saw there was nothing there. I sank to the floor among the oozing shampoo and cried, cried until there was nothing left but jerking gasps. That's when it struck me; the impossible was true, I was pregnant.

Of course at first I refused to accept it. I raged against the injustice and although I felt terribly weak I smashed every picture and mirror in the house. Victimhood held no satisfaction for me. Defiantly, I held out hope that I was wrong. But horror and disbelief crashed down on me when I stood there clutching the little plastic stick, the vibrant blue line a stake through my already broken heart. There was no going back. Before I had lived in a state of grace and this was the fall. According to the bible, women in this situation rejoice; I was as far from rejoicing as it is possible to get. I immediately made the appropriate preparations to dispose of the parasite growing inside me, the rotten

fruit of rape. The dream and the pregnancy occupied my scattered mind. There was no comfort—I couldn't even pair off both things as an evil coincidence as there is no such thing, only subjective perspectives that our minds frantically try to make a pattern from.

The actual act of feticide didn't require a hospital stay; the medical staff were curt and quietly judgmental, blithely oblivious to the incredible circumstances that had brought me there. On the table, while they carried out their messy business, I tried not to think about the dream by musing that surgeons must have to cultivate the same moral detachment as serial killers. But as the ignominy and invasion of the procedure intensified, the dream ordeal returned and the tears flowed. I turned my face away and was suddenly struck by the juxtaposition of the legs of two trolleys contriving to make a bold silver cross, reflecting the light and seeming to glow. The sight transfixed me and slowly, creepingly, like twilight shadows darkening, the operating room dissolved into a church. The sacred sterility, ambient lighting, strangely intoxicating smells and the doctor in his vestments, revered like a holy man, all fitted into the hushed atmosphere of this chrome and tiled church. I realised that I was on the altar; I was the centre of the rite. It all made sense; the removal of the foetus was a sacrament, a holy ritual, restoring me to a state of purity. I was being made anew, purged of all earthly sin. But to be truly shriven I had to bare my soul. With my legs still in the stirrups, the blood tacky on my thighs, I confessed the child had been conceived in a dream rape. I was shocked back into the cool reality of the operating theatre by their disbelief, immediately nullifying the feeling of sanctity that had possessed me and alerting me to the mistake I'd made. That's how the police and the psychiatrists became involved.

The police talked to me in a special room with pastel soft furnishings. I felt pelted with questions, even though they were gentle and well-meaning—at first. When they didn't like my replies, they asked the same questions all over again and I gave the same non-answers, growing more frustrated and upset as it continued. The investigating officer Doggart was a bald, tall and spare man, with keen intelligence in his eyes. His voice was no-nonsense and his questions were like rivets driven in.

'Do you have a boyfriend? Do you take drink or drugs? Had you been out drinking that night? Was anyone with you? Can you describe your attacker? Were there physical injuries, physical evidence? Have you washed the bedding, the clothes you were wearing? What did you do immediately afterwards? Who have you told? Why didn't you report this?'

I didn't even know which I was supposed to be answering—not that I could have any way. I felt like looking around for the person they were questioning, the person that would have all the right answers—perhaps that's what I'm always looking for?

A look of friendly disbelief eventually suffused Doggart's firm features, 'Think about what you're asking us to accept, Marie. An angel attacked you in a dream and got you pregnant? You have to admit if someone else told you this story you would be disinclined to believe it, wouldn't you? We want to help you. Don't you want your attacker caught and punished? Now is there anything you can tell us about this man that might help us locate him?'

With these words the terrible eyes of Gabriel seemed to burn in front of me. I so wanted to explain those eyes to them, how they contained some terrible

weight of sadness like a caged ape's eyes, but also a horrifying lifelessness like a shark's. It all rushed over me once more, the pain, the acute longing for death. Doggart terminated the interview as I sat with my head in my hands, tears gaining colour on the lino, a libation for plastic Persephone. As he left the room I saw him glance back, and I was startled by the blatant pity in his eyes. To him I was a lost cause and it was with clear dissatisfaction that he abandoned me to my fate.

I heard him 'handing me over' to the psychiatrist. They stood just outside the door in a cramped little hallway, voices lowered but still audible to my sharp ears.

'So what do we have here then?' The psychiatrist's years of academia and medical practice told in his manicured voice, making it distinct from the frank eloquence of Doggart's soft northern accent.

'Well,' Doggart paused as if puzzled, 'she thinks she was raped by the angel Gabriel in a dream, she terminated a pregnancy that she says resulted.'

The doctor snorted, 'So it's fair to say she's presenting with delusions then?'

'I suppose, but she seems otherwise perfectly rational. I mean, clearly she has some sort of mental health issue but she spoke as if she was telling the truth. I think she probably was attacked, I just wish I could find out what really happened.'

'I wonder if she has a file?' the doctor said.

'A history?' Doggart replied, 'I wouldn't be surprised. Surprise is a luxury I gave up long ago.'

The doctor laughed and the door opened. Dr Studley was pink and blond and round and wore a look of insincere attentiveness as he pretended to listen. His tentative questions and gentle suggestions turned to a hardened face and gravely shaken head when I refused his 'logic'. 'Have you experienced mental illness before? Depression? Psychosis? Insomnia? Loss of appetite? Have you ever attempted suicide? Have you ever been committed? Do you hear voices? Do your appliances talk to you?'

I was wearied by his quest for answers when it was clear to me that reality allows no definites apart from death, everything else inhabits various grey areas, most of which are distinctly uncomfortable. But he was confident of his monopoly on rationality. I could see his plump hands twitching to seize up his expensive pen and prescribe it all away. He obviously felt assured that he was superior to me, better than anyone like me, it oozed out of him and formed a smug miasma that he wore like a stole. I was nothing to him, simply next in the faceless production line of humanity's endless ills.

He took me to a different room, sat me down and gave me his version. He explained it all with something like mock patience. He said it was date rape, that a man must have slipped a drug—I forget its name—into my drink and then subjected me to that ordeal. I don't remember anything like that. The details, he said, must have been wiped out by the action of the drug, which of course was no longer in my system. He said the drug conspired with my subconscious to create the fantasy of Gabriel as a mental protection. Fantasy! Protection! Truly he knows nothing – an educated idiot, a phrenologist with a prescription pad. After talking to me for all of seven minutes he declared I was suffering from a mental illness. How can he possibly know when he's not in here with me, when he didn't know me before all this happened? Do you know what it's like to be

told you can't trust your own mind, that the inescapable inner voice is whispering lies, counselling evil? And surely I would be the first to know if I were mad? He almost begged me to remember something that never happened or at least acquiesce to his version of events.

I was left alone there with a little paper cup of bitter coffee and a packet of cigarettes as my only consolation.

Questions, mine and theirs, swooped like birds. I shook as if someone had slapped my face hard. No one believed me; it was lonely to be the only one who knew the truth. They had questioned my sanity, my very consciousness and identity. As he'd left, there'd been a smug little smile on Dr Studley's face as if he enjoyed puncturing a soul, enforcing his version of reality on all who turned to him for help. Hatred blossomed in my gut and I slammed my hand against the table. Energy never dissipates, it only reforms and my rage changed into desperate claustrophobia. I was trapped in that tiny, windowless room. It seemed to be getting smaller and for a brief, hysterical moment I thought it was shrinking, the air growing increasingly scarce. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. When I opened them the room was normal. But questions still rattled in my head. I questioned everything, even the apparent reality of being shut in a stuffy room. Perhaps I was really somewhere else, wandering along a beach or doing the shopping? How could I really know? Could it all be less true than I thought? I brought my hand down on the table again but this time gently, caressingly, to check it was really there. By the time they came back the room was hazy and stale with the smoke of every single cigarette in the packet.

I will admit that I am plagued with confusion. But some things, especially the dream, remain complete and ineluctable, down to the colour of the pollen clinging to the lily's stigma. I am still me, but that is different to what it was before.

The event is erected in my unconscious like a standing stone, the mist of all other thought helplessly eddying around it.