

Joseph's Choice

Unpublished – Summer 2000

Kevin Donovan

When his eyes opened he realized it had been a most unusual night of deep sleep, so full of dreams that it felt more like the completion of a journey than the end of slumber; a long journey through triumph and tragedy. Completion, yes, but on this rainy morning in the spring of 1922, the dominant feeling from Joseph's dream was a discomfoting sense of dark gravity.

The details had fled his grasp the moment he opened his eyes, leaving him with a single fully formed memory of the ocean on a warm summer day. He closed his eyes to pick up the vision. A beach. A lighthouse. Boats. That was all he could see, but it clearly didn't match how he felt. It was an idyllic scene suffused with an air of tragedy and eternal finality. And then he could remember nothing else.

As with all things out of his control, Joseph had little patience, and he knew himself well enough to surmise that any further analysis of these visions would only turn him toward anger. This was just a dream - certainly not worth thinking about. He would shed this gloomy state of mind by doing what he always did: leap into the workday and divert his anger and energies toward those he hated. Suddenly his feet were on the floor and soon after he was on his way to the yard.

For Joseph, every step upward in his life had been fraught with glaring indignities, and now he was no longer willing to tolerate them. He had established himself as a major force at the shipyard, supporting the successful war effort and then converting his facilities to "make the desirable affordable" as his friend Henry Ford liked to say. On his way to the office he considered his circle of friends. At times he seemed to be one of them, even if they were just patronizing him because he was a Catholic.

The club was the final straw. He thought he knew these people, thought he could trust them. Now it was clear that their smiles were simply the façade they used to humor him. How hard was it for them to reject his membership from this measly golf club? Probably not hard at all, he thought. And so it was easy to hate them, his collegiate friends, his so called colleagues. He *hated* them.

But Joseph was also wise enough to know that hatred drove him to ever-prosperous heights and he put this powerful emotion to what he considered a constructive use. He would not be satisfied with beating them; he would beat the living crap out of them. Crush them, and they would deeply regret their petty Protestant cronyism. Control was the key. Control what they wanted, who they worked with, who they answered to. And then he could simply apply the punishment when and where he saw fit. His position in the Boston political

machinery had already given him the access. Now he just needed to increase his influence.

A message was waiting for him in his office. Twenty cases of single malt would be loaded in Dublin, assuring delivery on the eve of the beach party. He had planned this tenth reunion gathering prior to the rejection, but it was not a difficult choice to continue the plans. He would, at least for this event, patronize his Harvard classmates in return. Get them drunk enough, perhaps put them in a situation that they would later regret and file it away for future use. As long as he controlled the day, it didn't matter how much he disliked the bastards. They could paste their smiles on for him all afternoon and into the drunken hours of the late evening. He would still be in charge.

Joseph returned to the business at hand. He had a system established with his contact - a burly Italian by the name of Frank - that assured minimal communication with maximum understanding. If Frank didn't hear from him, then he was to proceed with the agreed upon plan. On this day, however, he broke with their custom and dialed him up behind closed doors.

"How easy is this to do on a continuous basis?" Joseph asked.

"What are you saying?" Frank was curious, but he was not about to lead him down this path on his own.

"I mean, if I wanted to set this up as a regular crossing for you, can you cover it?"

"Well that depends. How are you going to keep it from the Feds?"

"Cape Cod and Sag Harbor. My ships, your trucks."

"How you gonna get those ships in so close to the beach."

"We're not. That's your problem. If I get it across the ocean, you should at least be able to get it to the beach."

Joseph felt the familiar shift in the conversation, deftly moving the element of control into his own hands from the person to whom he was talking. Frank was on the hook, a victim of his own interest.

"We can do that," said Frank. "Yeah, I think we can do that."

"Try not to think too much Frank," replied Joseph. "Its not where your strength is."

It was settled. Joseph had learned early on how much control money delivered - over business, politics, women, or the sources of more money. Money was its own self-fulfilling prophecy. Now, with his usual percentage take, it would come in bundles, and with it more control.

He hung up the phone and sat at his desk with another of his smiles of success. This would do it. This would put him over the top and position him to mix with whomever he wanted; even the movie stars. He certainly wouldn't need any membership at a second-rate golf club. He might even buy the club just for the

pleasure of looking his classmates in their smirking faces and revoking their membership on whatever technicality he chose. Yes, that would be justice.

He opened the bottom drawer of his desk and grabbed a single cigar from his latest Cuban cache. As he struck the match, his door opened with no warning. This never happened. His secretary had become highly skilled under increasing pressure to screen all prospective visitors to Joseph's office, but now she had obviously failed. Joseph sprang to his feet in anger as the visitor slammed the door, a trenchcoated figure with a hat pulled down over most of his face.

Joseph reached into his top drawer for his revolver just as the visitor removed the hat, unlocking a cascade of blond hair. He was a she, and she was stunning. She had movie star looks, something Joseph had always been vulnerable to. He rarely had difficulty finding the right thing to say, but at this moment there was nothing he could say. He put the gun down on the desk, relieved and intrigued that it was only a woman.

"Can I help you?" he asked with the hint of a stutter.

"The question is, can you help yourself?"

He noticed that her coat was perfectly dry despite the torrential downpour that had been clattering on the corrugated metal roof of the shipyard offices for the better part of the morning. She had a deeper than normal voice, an authoritative voice, which Joseph found disorienting.

"My name is Bess. I need to talk to you about what you are planning to do."

There was a silence as Joseph tried in vain to figure out who this was and what was happening. He almost always knew what was going to happen. This time he didn't, but she was only a woman, so he might as well sit back and enjoy it. She had long straight blond hair that was parted in the middle, unlike the current styles. Her face was perfectly proportioned, with high cheekbones, roundish eyes and full lips, all of it elegantly framed by her golden locks.

"Please sit down," he said, back in control

It occurred to Joseph that his secretary had made no effort to stop this woman from barging into his office. Stranger still, she had not followed her in nor called him to apologize.

"What can I do for you Bess?" He was hoping he could do a lot of things for her. Her beauty was quietly beginning to challenge his total control.

"You have a decision to make."

"A decision?"

"And it's an important decision."

He suddenly became concerned. What did she know? Did she work for Frank? Did she work for the Feds? He needed to keep his distance.

"You are being faced with a choice that will greatly influence your future and the future of your children and grandchildren." she said.

"And that choice is?"

Joseph thought this was somewhat cute, a beautiful woman in a trenchcoat coming into his office, playing prophet. Maybe she could help him with some of his investment decisions.

"Your family will realize success and fortune, but they will also encounter tremendous misfortune if you allow your hatred to dictate your course."

"What hatred? I don't hate anyone?" Joseph replied in knee-jerk fashion. Hatred was his most private emotion.

"However, if you follow a noble path, one truly representative of your spiritual upbringing, you will still realize great success without tragedy."

"What do you know about my spiritual upbringing? You mean my Catholic upbringing?"

"I know what it was meant to be and I know what it turned out to be."

"Who are you? What are you doing here and how did you get in?"

There was silence. She did not answer; she just looked at him as he softened under her gaze. She was striking and Joseph clearly had been struck. He suddenly felt apologetic for his tone of voice, but now even more curious.

"I am here for you," she said.

"Oh. Now I understand."

Frank must have sent her as a token of his gratitude for their recent deal. He should have figured that out immediately, he thought, laughing to himself.

"I am here to present you with the choice," she continued.

"I like choices."

Now his only concern was whether the door had locked behind her. Not that it had mattered. He had been caught before, but it was never too difficult to snuff out the brush fires of gossip. She probably had nothing on under the coat.

"Joseph, you must realize that others are weaker than you. They do not understand the differences in people or their religions. You must forgive them."

Role playing, just like Hollywood. He'd seen this before. Was she playing the Catholic angel that he would soon ravish?

"You must understand that you can never have total control. Control is always fleeting and never as powerful as the holder believes."

She was getting a little preachy for him, but she had obviously practiced this, and her loveliness was sufficient for him to continue his indulgence.

"If you choose the immoral path, you and your family will live under the illusion of control, and that will be their downfall."

"What do you mean?" he asked with a smile.

"Each time that tragedy strikes, it will be because of your family's failure to sense danger. Your sons and grandsons will perceive safety when it is not there. They will inherit your illusion of control and fail to see their lack of it. But you can save them from this if you can relinquish your hatred and accept the world as one in which control is shared and the common good is protected."

It was the reference to sons and grandsons that shook him from his lighthearted admiration. Now he was even more curious. Perhaps this was not what he thought it was. Maybe it was a threat, or maybe she was just a crazy woman with an opium habit.

"So what are you saying, exactly?"

"You know what I'm saying. Do not make money at the expense and misfortune of other. Do not seek revenge on your fellow man. Accept the flaws of those who cannot see beyond their earthbound affiliations."

He had never heard that word "earthbound". Were there affiliations that were not earthbound?

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, Bess, but I have a chance to change the world," he said.

"Yes, you do. But you also have a chance to raise a good and healthy family."

"So what's the difference? Why can't I do both?"

"If you choose the moral path, you will not have as much money, as much influence, as much control," she said.

"That doesn't make sense. I can't ensure the success of my family without control. You can't do one without the other!"

"Oh you would be surprised at the potential of your family. They need only to be pointed in the right direction. They may not have the power you wish for them, but they can succeed."

"But they *must* have control. They must always have the control!"

His voice went up a notch. She had very calmly debated him on the point, and this was unlike any woman he had ever met, all of whom would have submitted to him by now.

"They will never have *total* control," she said. "It is your choice as to whether they understand that or not."

He found himself strangely introspective. There was no reason to engage this nut case in conversation, but at the same time, he felt as though he was having a dialogue with himself.

"I can't trust people that hate me. I must beat them, and I must have the means to beat them. My family will never have to struggle like I have. They will never have to put up with what I have put up with!" His voice raised to a crescendo.

She paused again, letting his bluster fade in the silence.

"You have the means to beat your enemies and if you choose, you will beat them. I am only telling you of the consequences. Your family will triumph, but your choice will set in motion an ill-fated chain of events that will last to the very end of this century."

She rose from her seat, and was quickly out the door before Joseph could stand up. He tried to get out from behind his desk but hit his knee on the open drawer. Limping in pain, he reached the door only seconds after her exit, but she was gone. His secretary looked up at him as he came into the reception area.

"Jenny, do you know who that woman was?" he asked.

Her expression was blank. She had no idea what he was talking about.

"Didn't you see her come in here?"

"I'm sorry Mr. K, I didn't see anyone come in, and you know I wouldn't let anyone come in without ringing you first."

He shook his head. "Nut," he said.

And then he returned to his office and shut the door behind him.