

Épilogue

Ian Brown

# *Beatrice*

Inspired by Émmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's  
*Montaillou*

For Nikki



## BEATRICE

THE SET IS A ROOM FURNISHED WITH A BARE TABLE AND CHAIR. THERE IS A CANDLESTICK ON THE TABLE, AND VERY LITTLE ELSE IN THE ROOM. A DOOR OPENS OFFSTAGE, AND CLOSES.

BEATRICE DE PLANISSOLES ENTERS. SHE IS DRESSED IN A BLACK DRESS OF THE EARLY FOURTEENTH CENTURY. THE DRESS HAS, STITCHED ON TO IT, A DOUBLE YELLOW CROSS. SHE IS NOW IN HER LATE FORTIES OR EARLY FIFTIES, WAS A BEAUTIFUL YOUNG WOMAN AND IS NOW STRIKINGLY ATTRACTIVE, BUT WORN BY HER EXPERIENCES OF THE INQUISITION. SHE IS FRANK AND FRIENDLY, BUT AS SHE ENTERS IS STILL DISORIENTATED FROM THE CAPTIVITY FROM WHICH SHE HAS JUST BEEN RELEASED. IT IS THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT AND SHE IS TRYING TO UNDERSTAND WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO HER.

SHE PACES ROUND THE ROOM

They let me out.

CROSSES TO SEAT

I didn't expect. Release. I didn't expect.

STANDS AT TABLE

They said I was free to come back to my own home. They did. Free. My own home.

LOOKS ROUND

Home

SITS DOWN. LOOKS AT AUDIENCE

They used to confiscate the home in cases like mine, still do, but they said in the circumstances of my case, my age, the long time ago. They say others, released, their neighbours drove them away. You won't do that, will you? I must tell you, explain, talk to you, and then, if you forgive, do not drive me away, I may stay here. My home, my ostal. How to begin? How to tell?

Montaillou was my village, my home in the mountains, until I came down here. They came to it from the Lowlands, the orthodox Catholics, from the centre, from the King in Paris wherever that may be, from his Pope in Avignon who brought the Inquisition, the holy examination and punishment to the Cathars. They burned the good men. They persecuted. They massacred whole villages. When they came to Montaillou they arrested the whole village. They could have killed them all. They did elsewhere. I never understood. I never knew why it had to change, I don't understand why it came then or why it came with such fierceness. They say it began over a hundred years ago. Someone told me, I can't remember who now, that the Pope wanted to attack heresy and the king to subdue the rich south with its independent nobles. Well, they've certainly done that.

But when it began the Inquisition damned you and everyone you had been friends with. Touch heresy, they said, touch pitch. Guilt by association. Witchhunt.

This was what the old count kept out while he was alive. But after I'd left Montaillou, after he died, the Inquisition came to the village and the old family powers fell away. People are taxed, families poor. Except the Clergues survived for a time, survived by making others poor for their own advantage. Bernard was the count's bailiff, his all powerful agent. And Pierre was in charge of tithing in the village, the Catholic priest, the Bishop's representative.

In the end they did find out he was a Cathar. Much good his power and prestige and family did when the Inquisition found him out.

It's muddled in my mind, but it wasn't just that he was a Cathar. I don't think it was just that. They must have found out about all his other doings, his women. He slept with married women too, you know. One of my friends told me she told him it was a great sin to sleep with a married woman. Maybe they were in bed together when she told him off. Knowing him, they could have been. Knowing her, they probably were. Anyway she says he said, 'Not at all. One woman is just like another. Even if you're married to her, it's still sin. And that's to say there's no sin about it at all.' Cathars think all women are sources of sin and to go with one woman, doesn't matter whether she's married or not, it's the same kind of sin, and you can only get rid of it by total abstention or deathbed repentance.

How do I know about Pierre being my friend's lover?

#### HOLDS OUT HER THUMBS

My louse killer. You watch for the creatures on your friends' bodies or hair and then... dead. Sometimes fleas are full of blood, aren't they? They burst like a bag of dye, scarlet on the skin. If you're close friends, you never know if it's your blood or your friends, do you? It doesn't matter. It's the act of friends to delouse one another. Or of lovers.

We all used to sit in the sun on bright mountain days. Up there the days were fresh. The sun, when it shone, sparkled on the streams. The air was clear, fresh. Down here where we sit now, in the lowlands, it seems close, humid, dank. Life is dank now; then at Montailou in the Pyrenees, it was fresh. Valley people can't know that mountain air, clear, I don't think.

We used to sit in the sun or by the fire and talk, me with my louse killer and the women, we'd talk. We'd talk of what was happening in

the world, who was cheating who, who was making trouble. It's amazing what we knew. Amazing what we'd say in our intimacies. That's how I heard of Pierre being my friend's lover. Warm the intimacy of us women together there. You never spoke of your beliefs unless you knew the company was safe, shared your ideas. Dangerous to talk Cathar in the company of a Catholic. When a Catholic was close by you kept your tongue. But when you're with your friends, in the sun, by the fire, in the warm, you look for lice in the hair, along the hair-line and talk.

I used to delouse Pierre

The priest, Pierre Clergue, told me he wanted me. It was at confession. I knew his reputation. Mistresses everywhere. What can you expect of a priest in these times? They can't marry. And they have the power to will their way over many women. But that was nothing to do with it in those days. He was just... beautiful.

Think of little Grazide Lizier! In her mother's house it first happened and her mother knowing, so they say. A child, thirteen, fourteen. And she came to his house as a maid and he was having her there all the time. She married a labourer on Pierre's family farm so he still could have her. Her husband didn't mind the priest, but she wasn't to have other men. He didn't mind Pierre, though. What choice if he did? I think she wanted Pierre. I'm sure she did. That's why I'm here now, you know. That's what brought me down to the valleys, getting away from him. My lover. I want to stay. I do. This is all the home I have now. I'll try. I'll try to tell this in order. Please, I'm confused. Only just from the prison.

I go to church. I kneel to make my confession. I felt devout then, I suppose. We didn't have a confessional box in the village church. Too little. Too bare. So, we used to kneel behind the altar of the Blessed Virgin to confess. One day, about Candlemas, before I can say a thing, he says to me... there in church, right behind the Virgin's altar... anyone could see... 'I want you more than anybody else in the world'. In the confessional! Those may not be exactly the

words he said, but next thing I remember was his arms round me, his hands all over my breasts, and, when I tried to push him off, his hand down there, trying to lift my skirt. I was a bit taken aback. Well, wouldn't you be... in the church, in the confessional? I mean, I had heard stories about Pierre Clergue, but this was, well, sudden. I didn't know what to do. So I push him away and he falls on his back-side in surprise. Flop!

Well, it's trouble if you're not careful, isn't it? You know how men are. A woman has to watch out for her men watching out for her. All those men. Let me see. Let me get it right. Berenger... married him. Raymond... under the bed. Pathau... raped me. Berenger... died. Pathau... lived with him. Pierre... loved him. Pierre... loved him. But I never slept with other men when I was married, except for Pathau, of course... he was Pierre's cousin. But Pathau raped me. He raped me. I didn't make a fuss. What would be the point? He would deny it. Berenger, my husband, might not believe me. And if he thought I was being unfaithful to him, he'd have killed me. That's the way of it, isn't it? And when Berenger died, Pathau and I lived openly together – he had a claim on me because he'd already taken me by force – until Pierre came along and seduced me from his cousin's side. He was a good looking man and I was losing interest in his cousin by then. And so was he in me, because, when I did take up with Pierre, all Pathau did was turn to my maid. So I don't suppose he can have cared too much. Pierre was always careful about us. That was a secret. Not like living openly with Pathau. I don't know. I always seem to have trouble with men.

LAUGHS When Berenger was alive, we had a steward called Raymond Roussel. Yes, we were in a castle. My husband was Berenger de Rocquefort, military deputy, governor of the castle of Montailou. Governor! A garrison of five or six. But it was enough. He looked after public order, jailer and so on. Then there was Pierre's brother, Bernard Clergue, he was the bailiff, the count's civil deputy, collecting taxes, ruling the business of the village, I mean, a powerful position. With Pierre representing the Church and its taxes and Bernard the count and his taxes, the Clergues were a powerful

family. Then that wasn't such a problem, because the old count was a friend to the mountain people. He wasn't hard about his taxes and he put the church off from taking its full tithes. But after the old count died – that was, oh, just after the new century – they say Pierre took a tithes of up to an eighth of the harvest. I ask you, an eighth! The old count, he resisted the church taxes.

Where was I? My marriage with Berenger was arranged. Of course, they always are for people like me, aren't they? I mean, we weren't that rich, but we had a position. I'm a noble woman. We have some power and prestige and a little money. Our daughters can't just marry anyone they like. These things are a matter of business. Usually, the men run it all too. So, there you are, but Berenger was perfectly quiet and friendly in his way.

Doesn't matter whether they're friendly or not, does it? You don't have a choice, do you? Who found him? I can't remember. It may have been an aunt or someone who knew the family and my father told me I had to marry him. So there it was. I quite liked him. He was cheerful and he didn't get in the way. He wanted to make children and we made our daughters, but he didn't want to use me so much it was a nuisance and when he did use me he treated me with some care and he didn't treat me badly because I bore him only daughters. So there you are, he was friendly enough in a distant sort of way and he didn't beat me often. He only hit me in our early years when I argued.

LAUGHS

Raymond Roussel. Well, there we were, running the castle, the military administration of the village. Us, I ask you. And we had this good-looking young lad for a steward. And I was younger then too. I can't remember how old I was, but it must have been about twenty because I'd had one of my girls by then and I was carrying Esclarmonde. She's number two. I wasn't showing, though. Anyway, here's this young man and it's not as if you ever marry a man of your own age, do you? Always ten years older, or more, the men. At

least in our family. I suppose that's why there are so many widows. Berenger meant well enough, but to me he was old. Maybe I shouldn't have cared about that, but I did when I married him and, even now I'm older, I resent his age forced on my youth. It's having no choice. It's being forced. And so I just found myself drawn to this steward Raymond. It wasn't love, or passion. It was something courtly, like courtly love out of romance. You know how the poets sing about it, don't touch, just look, don't do anything, just adore.

Well, it makes it easier to bear the old men in power who use us. It was a way of passing the time, a little flirtation. In an arranged marriage, where's the harm in a little respectable flirting? Why shouldn't a woman let her eyes wander? So long as she keeps her hands to herself?

Anyway, it all came to a head one day when we'd been talking. Berenger was away and I don't know what I'd said. He was always asking me to run away to Lombardy with him. I mean to say. I told him it was no good saying Lombardy is a place for Cathars to find peace, tongues will... I'm not a Cathar now. I've repented. I've confessed. And I refused him. That was then. I told him people would say we'd gone for only one reason. I said it might be possible if it was a religious pilgrimage with chaperones, but to Lombardy, with a young man!

PAUSE

He did want me, though. That night, we'd dined together and God knows what silly things we said. So, here I am, setting the house in order and I go to bed. Everyone in the house is asleep and so am I, just dropping off, when Raymond comes out from under the bed and gets into it, in his shirt! Just his shirt! After we'd spoken, he'd gone in secret to my bedroom and hidden under the bed. And he starts trying to make love to me, hands here, hands there, and I could tell he was excited. Excited?! So I cry out, 'What are you doing?' I mean, I knew. Well, then, Raymond says, 'Shut up. Be quiet.' I said, 'You peasant! `Shut up`?' Calling him a peasant was a

bit of an insult because he did have some claims to being gentry, but I didn't care about that then, what with his hands, his ideas, and his no breeches. So I call out to my servants in the next room. 'Help!' I shout, 'Help! There's a man I don't want in my bed.' I'll tell you what, he got out then so fast, out of the bed and out of the room. A little later we let him go. He didn't really want to stay after that.

I don't know, seduction's funny. I remember asking Pierre why he seduced me. Come to that, why he seduced so many women. He said, 'I'm a priest. I can't have a wife.' I think what he really meant was that he couldn't settle to have just one woman. I said to Barthelemy, not the same thing quite, but I told him, 'You priests chase women more than other men'. Barthelemy was my lover later. Later, after I moved down here. After my second marriage. He brought me to this, you know. To these crosses.

#### LOOKS AT CROSSES, TAKING THEM IN

I wear them for my heresy, for a penance till I die, because I was close to the Cathars, the good men, not the Catholics, the bad ones. But the Catholic Inquisition says the Cathars are heretic. So I must wear my crosses TOUCHES THEM till I die.

Heretic. That's a heavy word. Pierre was both Cathar and Catholic. That's a heavy matter. To be heretic and orthodox, representative of the bishop and the Inquisition and to believe what you must suppress. But I don't believe in heresy. This is my home. I want to stay. I have repented and confessed. I used to be tempted by Cathar ideas, that's all. I don't believe them now. I've repented. I must recant. Pierre talked. Cathars believe all the world is evil, he said; the devil owns the world. What did that have to do with us? He said flesh is sinful in itself, so nothing he did added to that sin. He talked like this a lot after we'd made love. I wanted to lie at ease, but he talked on. The Cathar priests, the good men, didn't touch women. They kept apart. Women to them were the very cause of sin. I know all men think it's women's fault – they'd be angels if it wasn't for women arousing them – but for the Cathars, the good men, this was

a special belief. Pierre said, since sin was unavoidable, there was no point in avoiding it. He said women were sinful, but he never seemed to stop touching them. Pierre's energy, his lust in this belief, swoll and swoll so that for him to be in the company of a woman was no better than to bed her, to be with a woman for him meant to own her. But the Cathar good men acted according to their faith even until they were burned. The old count still kept the Inquisition out then, but in the valleys here they burned what they called heretics black dead.

PAUSE

After we'd made love, he'd tell me these things and we'd lie together and I would delouse him. Sometimes at the window, sometimes by the fire, sometimes in the bed.

HOLDS UP HER THUMB My lousekiller.

The Cathars, the good men, said that, with the riches of Satan, you can't be satisfied, whatever you have, because the world is Satan's and doomed to be destroyed. But Pierre wasn't good like those heretic priests. For him, money was the family, was power, was prestige, was position, and he would never marry because that would mean sharing that, losing some of it to someone else, some other family. Of course, then, the financial power of families could mean something. That was before the old count died and the Inquisition destroyed beliefs and the Bishop's taxes and tithes reduced the village. They say the King in Paris wanted to reduce the whole of the South to his control, and that the Inquisition and taxes were part of his plans for suppression and control. I don't know. These levels of power are beyond me. I just live my life in the midst of what I see, partial, limited, incomplete as that is.

I remember Pierre's mother, Mengarde, and her daughters, Esclarmonde and Guillemette. I used to delouse Mengarde sometimes as a mark of respect and honour. We used to talk in the warmth. She was a friend to me. We talked of daughters and men,

and the village life, and the Cathars, the good men. We never spoke of them when little Guillemette was around: she wasn't old enough when I knew her to hear about the Cathars, so we kept quiet. You never spoke of your beliefs unless you knew the company was safe, shared your ideas. There were some in the village you couldn't trust, the Catholics. You had to be quiet when they were near, but if they weren't around, we'd gossip, Mengarde and I and our other friends, about who was in the hills with the Cathars, the good men. The Catholic women might try to find out these things, if they were around, but we never spoke of the Cathars when they were there.

## TOUCHES HER CROSSES

Well, you see what can happen if the Catholics get to hear of these things.

I remember something else about Mengarde. When she died, Pierre buried her in the church, under the altar of the Virgin of Montailou. That's how important she was, the altar of the Virgin. I worship the Virgin, adore her. She speaks to God for women. She is the God of women. Not just an angel interceding. She saves us herself. They told me that this was heresy too. If it's heresy, it's heresy to a man, not to a woman. Why should the Virgin not be our God? She's the women of women, the mother of mothers. She understands us. She brings life. She brings children.

My daughters used to de-louse me. I love it when my daughters de-louse me. That's when we relax, when they tell me their hopes. It was at de-lousing when they were younger that they told me their hopes about marriage and I told them about pleasure and men and disappointment.

I kept their first menstrual blood. I preserved the blood of their first bleeding, the blood that marks them a woman, to make a love potion later so that their husbands would love them. It's a charm a woman with her daughters in her heart has to use so that the husbands keep her daughters in their hearts. How men hit women!

They lose their tempers. They're used to being in command. But if a man cares, he won't hit a woman. A lot of men beat women in the way of things, without thinking. They expect them to do what they're told, no arguments. Some don't. Pierre didn't hit me, even though we were lovers.

None of my men hit me. Except my first husband. Orthon, my second, might have, but I was older then: I had my own strength in age and riches. If the charm can save my daughters from being beaten by their men, then you must use it. Even if it is sorcery, which it isn't.

When the bleeding came to Condors, I looked her straight in the eye and asked what was worrying her. She told me. I told her what being a woman means and how things might be. A mother must do that. I did it for all my girls. We knew that as soon as she started to bleed, we must look round for a husband for her.

If you have riches and power, you marry for riches and power. Love isn't a question. You make a business arrangement for your family. I had the dowry. I had the little wealth we owned and I wanted my daughters to be safe. They would say things like, 'Why have I got to marry him? He's horrible!' Well, Condors did anyway. He isn't good looking, her husband, I'll give you that, but he is steady and he has a manor and he doesn't drink and they say he didn't beat his first wife – she died in childbirth, poor thing – and he doesn't beat Condors. There you are, if there was anything I could do to help make Condor's life more, well, pleasant, of course I did it. That's why I kept the blood to make the right love potion for them all. And perhaps Ava has trouble with a husband who chases all the time after whores, but there's nothing wrong with an open business transaction and he doesn't keep her or the children short. And he doesn't beat her. She just feels humiliation that he's so open about it. But what can you do about it? What can you ever do? He's never brought her disease. And Condors is settled with her ugly man and they are almost friends. He's gentle. My potion really worked for him. And Esclarmonde's husband takes proper care of her even if

he does like a drop of drink. And Phillipa, my favourite, red haired like me. Her husband is kind. He only hits her in anger. And only once in a while. He does care about her. So perhaps my potions have worked. Without them, things would have been worse. And they don't starve, my girls. They all have prestige and position. My grandchildren are all well enough off and healthy, thanks be to the Virgin.

My daughters are my joy. This, I tell you, is what matters to me, even more than my home. They stood by me. Full of tears, they were. Oh well. The Cathars always say that the souls of the dead, the good souls go through the holes in a woman's body into the body of the unborn child. So a soul never dies, it just moves on to the next body. That's why my girls are so good. When Pierre told me this, I always said that, if the good souls went into a baby's body, why couldn't it talk when it came out. He never had an answer. But my daughters have good souls in them. They always had. They've been good to me. I suppose all my men have used me in the end. But my daughters spoke for me.

What next, what must I say? I've told you of Pierre, my marriage, my daughters, my heresy. I'm trying to understand why I'm here, trying to make an order out of my confession. What next, what next? How did I come down here? My sister Gentile, worried me away from Montailou. Our father, I confess it, was sympathetic to the Cathars. A chevalier, lord of Cassou, up high, near Montailou, but you lived in Foix, in the lowlands, to be near the count. He was not really a Cathar, but he was friendly and they would visit. A friend said when I was a child, 'If the host in church is really the body of Christ, he wouldn't let priests eat him. And even if his body was as big as a mountain, the priests would've gobbled it up in a pie long ago'. He paid for those friends. While I was still at Montailou, the Inquisition heard of you, my dear old father, and you were arrested.

They found him to be a Catholic, but they decided his friends were not. He had to wear a single yellow cross, just one, not like my two

because I am a heretic, you know. They let you go, but you had to wear the cross.

PAUSE

He might have been burned to death or maimed, you know how it is.

PAUSE

I am afraid that might happen to me. That I might be condemned to be burned. I've heard of women who are condemned. They can't be hanged. A man's hanged naked. To undress a woman publicly would be a shame to decency. The women they bury alive or burn. To be buried before you're dead, feel the flames licking at your body, melting your flesh, blackening the white of your skin, is not to be borne. But they heard my case and heard what I had to tell them and decided I was repentant and had come down to the lowlands and lived as a Catholic.

I used to tell my friends the story of my father's friend and Christ's body and the priests and the pie. I have to wonder if the word about my father came to the Inquisition somehow from me. I know that when I was arrested, twenty years later, they knew I'd told that story. It was the very first thing they asked me. They had files. They had confessionals, yes, but they knew more. There were informers. Those in power hear everything. I've learnt what I can't say. The valleys have changed. When I was a girl down here, you were less afraid. And I would not have had to wonder if it was me, telling my story to entertain loved ones, led to my father's arrest and public humiliation. He died within a year of his release. Maybe it's all part of my heresy and sin. Maybe it's all me.

How did I come down to the lowlands? I was always close to the Cathars, but I was never really one of them. Our family was Catholic; we were, but we were close to the independence of the mountain people. I lived near them most of my life. My girls were

born among them. They didn't need the hierarchies of the church. But I wasn't really of the mountain folk. I don't think I was. And my sister was a firm Catholic, married in the plains, orthodox. She said I was wrong to be so involved with Pierre. She didn't know his beliefs, but I think she suspected. And she knew I can be indiscreet and she knew father had been condemned to the bondage of the yellow cross. My friends were in Montailou, but Gentile told me it was no longer safe from the Inquisition. And God forgive me, we all knew the old count was getting on and his heirs were weak, wouldn't be able to protect his hill towns. She and my brothers found a second husband for me, Orthon de Lagleize – his name means 'of the Church' – a noble on the lowlands. I wasn't really a Cathar; I worshipped the Virgin; I had my daughters, two needed to marry and two still to school.

The whole village begged me not to go. Pierre led them, saying I was going down among the Catholic wolves and dogs of friars and bishops. But I had to follow my arranged marriage, my safe haven, and I ended up with my husband, living between Foix, where the count lives, and Pamiers, where lives the bishop and the Inquisition he was going to unleash on the hills. I renounced the errors of heresy when I came down. I confessed to a friar. I returned to the Catholic church. My sister ended my two years with Pierre and I was dragged away from my mountains where the danger of Inquisition and the power of the king was growing. But I left part of my heart in the clear air and friendship of the mountains. Some of them betrayed me later, but you can't blame them. The whole village has been arrested. They were all threatened with living flames.

I was torn by my journey down the roads to the valleys, to my new husband, to darkness, but I came down here. He was polite to me. We found a good husband for my oldest, Condors, and I had my safe Catholic Lowland husband for a time. But he wasn't so young. Anyway, he died and I was still looking for a husband for Ava and my two youngest girls had still to be taught their lessons. They went to this priest, Barthelemy, for their lesson. He was so delicious, I could have gobbled him up. I liked both my priests, but Barthelemy

was my indulgence.

This I must tell, one day, he had finished his lessons, and my Ava and Philippa were in his class, I went to meet them, there he is, standing there. I say to him, 'Come to my house this evening'. He did. I got rid of the girls for that night and he finds me there alone. 'Well' he says, 'What d'you want of me?' Silly question. I said, 'I love you. I want to sleep with you'. I was getting on a bit. I didn't know if he'd be interested, so much younger than me; I still wanted him in me so much. He looked a bit surprised, but I told him again, 'I want to sleep with you'. He said 'all right'. We did it at once in my home and did it often again. He actually used to call it, 'Committing the carnal sin'. He did, he called it 'the sin of the flesh'. He still did it, and I enjoyed it. Me, I called it 'love'. I adored the man.

I used to say to him, 'You priests and your priors and abbots and bishops and archbishops and cardinals, you're the worst! You commit your 'sin of the flesh' more, you desire women more than any other men'. He tried to say I was trying to justify myself. But, my God, he was so young. I was coming up to forty and he was twenty four. So lovely, he was. I've never committed the sin of sorcery, but, by God, I think the priest Barthelemy cast a spell on me, for I loved him so passionately. And yet when I met him, I had four girls, I was widowed twice, and I thought my days of such things were well behind me. I didn't think the men would look at me any more: they've eyes only for the younger women, the girls, just the way Pierre and the other village men were always after the young girls, forcing them, too. I thought my best was well behind me. But how attractive he was and it's so flattering when they respond!, makes you feel there's some life in you yet! So, I was locked with Pierre, no doubt of it, but I loved Barthelemy. I loved him, and my great pleasure was to know I gave him pleasure. I loved feeling young and alive in his arms.

This was after my second marriage. I must have married Orthon, really, for the security, and the position. And that moved me away from Pierre. Apparently after I left he was so active with the village

women it was a miracle his breeches didn't burst. He and I made love two or three times a week. I think he was hurt when I left. It wasn't just my body he wanted. He liked me. Later, with the others, it wasn't like with us. He took them by his power, his authority, his position as representative of the Inquisition. He'd threaten them. He wasn't the man I knew. Not that I gave myself to him straight away. Not on that day he grabbed for me in the confessional behind the altar. That happened in Lent, February I should think. Some time then, anyway. But I didn't give myself until the summer. The spring and the summer's such a time for dalliance. That's what the poets sing.

Nothing is so hard to win  
As the thing I most desire  
Nothing causes such longing  
As the thing I cannot hire  
Alas of love all my gain  
Is its gift of my sad pain

He was strong and he was caring. We did it so often. When Pierre worked his way into me, I knew I wanted him. We made love a lot, a lot. It's coming clearer. This is Pierre. This is how I came to sin. This is a pattern.

So, Pierre. I was so frightened of falling pregnant by him. But he had a secret herb. If a man uses this herb or whatever it is, when he comes together with a woman, he can't make babies and she can't conceive them. This isn't sorcery – I was accused of sorcery later by Barthelemy – but this wasn't anything like that. He didn't want me falling pregnant, he had the herb. I was brought up in the country I thought I knew what it was like. 'Is it the one cowherds hang over a cauldron of milk and rennet to stop it curdling?' Sperm's like milk, don't you think? Looks like it a bit? If it is like the cowherd's herb, then it would stop the sperm from curdling inside me so I wouldn't have his baby. That was my idea. But he wouldn't tell me.

The way it works is when he wants to know me 'carnally', he wears

this herb wrapped up in a piece of linen, about an ounce. It is as long and wide as, say, the first joint of my little finger. LOOKS AT JOINT. This size. He has a long cord he has tied in a loop to the linen package. He puts that around my neck when we are going to make love. When we are naked and standing up, when he puts it around my neck, he would make the package perch there, there in his hairs for a moment, hiding in there till I played with him, and the herb in its package fell into my hands. 'Let me keep the herb'. But he never would let me hold it long or keep it. 'No, I won't', you'd say, 'because then you could go with another man and not fall pregnant'. Then, when the time came, he would put the herb package inside me, in the opening of my belly. Then we could make love.

He wanted me for himself. He was a bit jealous because he wasn't my first. My husband was. And then Pathau. But I never played with anyone else while I was with you. He was so odd about other people stealing his place or his possessions or his privileges. He saw it happening all the time. I never gave him cause for jealousy and he was all right with me, but he was proud of his position as priest and wouldn't allow any slight against that. And he was proud of his ostal and its wealth and would do down anyone in a transaction to help his family. What about you and your brother, Bernard, the bailiff. You went about stealing people's property in the name of the law and you even murdered one poor man when he threatened to protest to the count. And what happened to his property, his flock of sheep? Somehow or other they ended up in your ostal and their owner was found on the hillside, neck broken. Your ostal had to be first. Pierre had to be in control to be boss, trust no-one. Men never know how fond we can be of them. Never trust our love. That's because you're such traitors yourselves. And then, your treachery makes us treacherous and so the world runs on.

But if he hadn't had that herb I wouldn't have felt so free to be with him. To have a baby would have been such a shame to me, widow as I was, and to have had an abortion... If you were found out, the punishment... My life has been hedged with the fear of being

burned. I would not take the risk of your child. With you father of so many bastards, I would not feel free, unless you had the herb, or else my freedom would have been my death.

But it did happen freely and the reason in my heart for it to be so free I never quite knew. Something in you lets it happen. Your belief that the world was the devil's, your commitment to sin because all was sin. So you can't escape it. So enjoy it. That's what I thought then, too. I suppose, then when I was a heretic. Not now, of course.

For the Cathars the thing is repentance at death. Then they're saved and absolved of all the sins they've committed in their life. They die in endura. When the time has come to die, no more food, penance, purge your body of earthly appetites and, whatever's bringing you to death, you must die of hunger. Then a good man comes and lays on his hands and you go to heaven. Not your body; they don't care what priests say about the last judgment. They believe your body will be destroyed like cobwebs, because it's the work of the devil. Or you might be reincarnated. That's what they believe, not me, not now. These are the beliefs I used to hold. Some of them. Or was supposed to hold. Pierre held them. My father did too, more or less, though you never quite said so. Did I hold them? I know I feel in me the tension of sin and desire and even love set against any moral order men lay on my living. Anyway, I never met the good men face to face. They avoided the company of women because they would have brought them to sin. Women being unclean. I do like the idea that the body goes, though, fades like cobwebs after death. I sense the passing of life, of sinews sapping, of substance slipping away. The Cathars say it is all the same, sin or no sin, because life is sin and each action is as bad as the next. Catholics preach repentance and purity and the avoidance of sin which seems to lie close to the avoidance of life. Me, I felt my desires as a woman and my children's vitality, the life in them and I did want two of the five men I have been obliged to know, but only two out of five, and the men made the choices. Except I chose Barthelemy at the end. That was something. Sin, repentance, purity, I know what those words mean, but I know it coming from the prison of the Inquisition. But when I

felt, in my own way, felt inside me...

I'm trying to make sense, find a pattern, because the bishop says I must, his pattern. I want my pattern, my sense. I always adored the Virgin. I burned candles before her. I worship her. I am a Catholic, I think. I confessed when I came down from the hills and made peace with my sister, Gentile. I lost from my life my home and my lover and I escaped what came to Montaillou. It wasn't just the punishment that came, and taxation. It was a way of life that went. Now individual ostals and independent people all brought under the bishop in the lowlands and the count in the lowlands and the king in Paris, whatever kind of land that's in. Now. We've been made Catholic, French and taxed. But I missed that trouble. I wasn't there. I confessed in time.

PAUSE

That trouble. The church sent its Inquisition to root out heresy and it went through our village and punished the heretics, imprisoned them, tortured them, killed them. It massacred whole villages in other places. It was gentle to Montaillou. It only crushed it. That is the power of the true church. But why do so many wicked things happen? The priests don't behave as they should. Innocent people are slain on suspicion. Priests don't obey their vows of celibacy and yet the good men of the Cathars do. The heretics are the good Christians and the Christians heretic. No moral system holds; they all fall into their opposite, into hypocrisy. But I must confess to you.

Confession. Pierre made love to me once after I left Montaillou. He came to our house under a false name. There in our house I came together with my Montaillou priest for the last time. My maid kept watch at the door so we wouldn't be disturbed. He came to me in memory of good times past, not as a token of times to come, which is how it is at the beginning of things.

I became afraid of him, for him. He would always want to try out something more risky. It was as if he was proving himself, testing

himself, all the time. You always had to show you could go further. Once he sent his pupil to me to take me to the church. It was late and the boy had a lantern. When I get to the church I find Pierre has put a bed in the sanctuary. I said, 'We can't do this in St Peter's Church'. And he says 'What does St Peter care?' Then he says how much he loves me and takes my clothes off and makes love. That was it. That was the end. It was all too dangerous. Pierre wasn't looking for me any more, he was looking for danger. All the time trying, testing, tempting temptation itself.

But Pierre was a good and competent man in his way, ran his church and parish duties well, and was seen in the district as doing right by that side of things. In that way he was respected. And yet in the end you, who had been a leader of the Cathars in the village, the man I loved and desired, you denounced those you led, those friends I loved.

When the Inquisition came, Bernard arrested all the adults and they were cross-examined. And the prime provider of evidence was the priest Pierre. He would never betray a whole family, or two friends together. Out of ten people arrested, Pierre would be sure that eight would be released. The other two would find their secrets told. But they would be quiet for the sake of the eight released. And the property of the two who stayed in prison was confiscated by the bailiff, Bernard, brother of the informer in chief, into whose ostal the property somehow came. And so the Clergue family became more rich and more powerful and had greater and greater prestige and the chief informer on the Cathars was himself a Cathar, a man who loved to live dangerously. And he was safe as long as those left free might fear his power to imprison them. And he was safe as long as those under interrogation knew their family were still free.

Someone tried to speak, she tried to tell the Inquisition Pierre was a Cathar. And what happened? He accused her of bearing false witness. The church believed him, and found her who told the truth guilty of lying. And the duty fell to Bernard Clergue of cutting out her truthful tongue. That's the punishment for bearing false witness.

No-one accused Pierre again. He was safe.

What brought him to this? Was it just the riches for his family? Was it just his need to control? Was it just his obsession with power? I think it was all those things. But at the root I think it was that the Inquisition came close to him and frightened him with the death it might mean. And while he was still a priest, and they believed him dutiful and pious in denouncing others, they would not put him in jail, take away his family's ostal, and they would not torture him. And so, he informed.

But even then, he was kind to me. He had to come to a diocesan council and I was ill at Varilhes in the lowlands, so he came to me, and sat on the bed, asked after my health, how my heart was and so on, and he took my hand and caressed my arm. You told me God alone can absolve sins and I had no need for confession. Maybe all it came to was he didn't want me to mention his name, to implicate him. Bernard came to me later, tried to threaten me to silence. But I wasn't going to inform: to tell all about Pierre was to talk of myself. Anyway, what Pierre said then, when I was ill, about confessing direct to God and God absolving sins helped me a lot. It gave my mind some rest. So I asked, 'Why are you helping the Inquisition?'

He said, 'I've got those peasants of Montailhou just where I want them. I'm their priest. Their women serve me the way I want and, now the Inquisition's come, I've got absolute control'. 'Why do you need that?' I said. 'My family is the centre of my life,' he says, 'If I have power, my family has power. My family is rich. Now can I help it be richer and safer. But there are still people around who have insulted my family'. I could never get to the bottom of that – who insulted them or in what way. You were strange about things like that. But the idea of using the Inquisition like that personally... it's not safe.

'Why do you persecute the Cathars, the good men?' God forgive me, I was a heretic then. 'You used to be a friend to them'. 'I haven't changed,' he says, 'I'm still their friend, but now I can get my own

back on the Montailou peasants'. He called them peasants but he was a peasant too. 'I'll get them back for the times they didn't show me respect and offended my family and cheated my ostal in business'. It didn't make sense, but he thought it was true and he resented his prestige being dishonoured. He became, that beautiful man, a bully.

I suppose he was always like that. I let it go. I didn't notice. I didn't care. Was it because I was used to men's power over women? It was that, but it was more. I didn't want to see the bully in him. I wanted his body and the movement of us together. I refused to see the rest as it grew in him, the endless demand for power, position, prestige, control. Maybe I should have noticed and spoken to him, to try to stop this drive to dominate, but I didn't. And when I was ill he came to me and was kind to me while he spoke so cruelly of our old village.

And he went from me after that visit and I never saw him again. Later, he sent me a parting gift of an engraved glass and some sugar. He must have met a Saracen trader. But I never saw him again. But I know he served the Inquisition for many more years and then, one day, they found out he too was a heretic, and they took him and examined him and they shut him away in the blackness of the Inquisition's prison. And then he died. They found out he was a Cathar. I didn't want to tell them.

My part in it was little. I did tell on you. You had betrayed so many without being betrayed because you remained powerful, and I cared for you still and you loved me in your own way. Why did I keep quiet for so long? You didn't deserve my protective silence. That was my gift, a free gift to you. And why should I tell the Catholics who burned or the Inquisition which tortured my friends? I cared for my friends, Cathar or Catholic. And if you were a priest working for the Inquisition, well, who knows what fears he faced? And, in the end, the Inquisition with its secret powers and its files and its questions would have crushed the village. Pierre was only the means; the cause was the church and the king and their need to rule us all. He took

his chance to live a little longer and support his family. But he did wrong.

My Barthelemy did wrong too. Barthelemy, who bewitched me, whom I adored. But he found out about my past as a heretic. He began to fight with me. He called me a wicked old woman, a witch. And he left. He said to me that, if he found himself in the diocese of Pamiers, or wherever there was an Inquisitor, he would have me arrested. I smiled at him then. What could I do? This man who I'd given everything that remained to me, whose body was the delicious fruit of my last loving years. I smiled as he abused me and said he would denounce me. To what? To torture for all he knew. Probably to torture. Even to death. I said, 'The priests of the good Christians are better than you.' I suppose I meant Pierre by that, too. God help me. Pierre did not drive me as far as the youth and beauty of Barthelemy, but I think he was a friend whatever he came to.

They arrested me. They took me to Pamiers and the bishop interrogated me himself. I tried to resist, at first. I even tried to run away when they first called me. They were not kind to me, the Inquisition. They were severe. I wasn't tortured. I wasn't threatened with burning. I was put in a dark cell on my own, fed once a day, with a single pail for my functions changed every two days, if they remembered, no clear air, no views, no height as in my mountains, my children and grandchildren I didn't know where, no word, silence. And when I was brought up with a few years left to me, my lovers gone, my daughters my only love and my own confused faith within me, when I was brought up from the dark cell to the bright sunlight and quiet, certain routine of the examination, I had no way of hiding. I was reduced. Some might resist. Some might protect. But I had lived my life through to here and still wanted some few years with my friendly daughters. I didn't want to be burned at the stake. I didn't want the pain of physical torture. The shock of light when I was brought up to my lowland Inquisition was pain to my eyes. And I told all. I told about Pierre. Not in rancour of hate. In fear, yes, but calmly. I was confessing my life, simply unburdening my soul. Telling them my beliefs. I told of my mountain life, my

daughters, my father, my grandchildren, my charms, my love-making, my husbands, Barthelemy, Pierre. And Pierre never came out of prison they put him in. Never again emerged. They burned him.

Barthelemy emerged. He did. He was released and the bishop did not require him to wear the crosses of the heretic. You see, he was no heretic, no Cathar. I was his problem. I was his immorality. I, not heresy, was his sin. So he was released. And here you see I, too, emerged from the prison. But I have to wear the crosses of a heretic and be seen in the street as I pass. It is a weight on my mind.

The men have sought the tidiness of dogma and authority and control. In my life I know how untidy it is to be beaten by a husband or have a beloved daughter beaten, how untidy it is to crave a good life for one's children, how untidy it is to love. They wrote down all my words in neat notes and they tidied away Pierre into his death cell, but death is mess and life is mess and I have never made sense of my contradictions nor do I have faith that sense exists. I have tried now to make an order, make a pattern in my confession, but it is not my pattern, I am not in this order. Every ordering has caused suffering and left another form of disorder. I must wear these crosses of my confusion. They have let me go from their prison, but they say I may not live here in my own house if you want to drive me away. That would tidy me away for you. But would it be right? Would it give you peace? I have done what I have done and felt what I have felt and pray that you will not drive me away. And if you were to let me stay, what do I want? What do I see in my life to come?

I shall soon go to God. The Virgin will know how to receive me. I want to sit here in my ostal – what remains to me – and know that my girls love me and fought my case before the bishop and will visit me still with my grandchildren. My own dear daughters, the blood in my heart, the heart in my home. And I will have memories of my life. And I want to make sense of them even if I know I cannot. Sin is not what I thought it was. Pierre is not what I thought he was. I

am different and yet me.

There, if I look at it, is my thumb, my louse killer, and to kill the lice, the fleas on my friends, my daughters, my lovers, to release the mingling of our blood, is an act of untidiness, an act of affection and health. And however the Catholic Inquisition with its search for sin may see that act, and however the Cathars with their world belonging to the devil may see it, this is the act of a woman, an act of love.