

Five Views of a Burning

I was the one. I am the one. I am the one, the one who arrived too late.

All day I prayed for rain, for torrential rain. It came. The moment I arrived, footsore and breathless, in the little village square, the sky loured. A gentle rain began to fall.

As I rose from the warm ashes, my fingers charcoaled, the healing water was already disguising my tears. The low mound of charred twigs sizzled, the paving-stones sparked. By the time I found shelter at an inn the clouds were in torrent, the merciful anger of God was in full rage.

I drank water, I was thirsty, but I had little appetite for the pie they kindly gave me. It was crowded and busy, the inn, everyone was feasting and celebrating, the atmosphere was merry. A loud man near the bar was entertaining the drinkers with boasts and ribaldry, and claiming some credit for the day's business. I closed my ears to it all.

So many had come, and many been unexpectedly stranded by the storm, that they were sleeping in passages. They found me a bed, seeing I was a man of God. I protested that the floor would suffice, but they insisted.

I could not bring myself to speak of my mission, my purpose, my failure. I just said I had come to pray for her. I prayed and wept all night. It rained all night.

But it had come too late, the benediction of rain. Like me, it arrived too late.

I knew I was too late. For the last mile a plume of white smoke was my guide. My bitter guide, drawing me on whilst taunting me. I stumbled into a run, as best I could, sore and exhausted after two days. I stumbled running, knowing, knowing I was too late.

Smoke so clean and innocent, like a woodman's fire of leaves, rising and curving, gentle in the air. Friendly smoke, the traveller's signpost to a cottage or a goodly peasant with a flask, a pious blessing and refreshment for the weary itinerant. Smoke that seems so innocent and pure broke my heart and damned me.

God will not listen to me now. For that is my prayer, I pray to be damned. I pray for everlasting torment and damnation. I pray for her soul, of course I do. I offer my own as ransom. Though I expect there is no need. How would the Kingdom of Heaven spurn such innocence, such child-like devotion? Except ye become as little children, I am

told, was one of her own favoured sayings from the Saviour she so manifestly loved.

But it seems odd, praying to be damned. Surely one cannot ask such a thing of God. Ought I to be praying to the Devil? That, presumably, would ensure my damnation.

Philosophers will have to decide, I cannot. Whether, if I am on an errand from God, if I am doing God's will, whether arriving too late is my fault. Or is it my destiny? Was failure God's plan for me, and thus for her, our shared fate? or did I fail her, fail my masters, fail God? Fail to fulfil my part in carrying out His purpose, His Providence ...

It is a conundrum for ecclesiastical commissions, or for scholarly contemplation and debate. I cannot resolve it. I only know that I arrived too late. Too late to save her.

I am not seeking absolution, I am not making excuses. I arrived too late. I failed.

I want nothing more than to be assured of her soul's salvation, for her sake. I cannot take away her suffering. I pray only to share it, to suffer as she did but in eternity. To suffer the torments of the damned, to burn in Hell.

I shall return, I must, for honour, and report my failure; but then I shall resign my position. I shall take no letter of commendation, no badge of pilgrimage. I shall walk the world, unforgiven, like the Jew. They that spit on me will not have sinned. I shall wander the world, hungry and footsore, with my little jar of ashes. Knowing I was the one, the one who arrived too late.

I had visions when I was thirteen, just as she did. Or at least I was dazzled by a light on the hillside, and thought it was an Angel. I too heard a whispering, or something, in my head, or in my heart. I knelt before the light. I thought the Angel was summoning me to serve God.

I was punished, and justly, for leaving the sheep early. My father was not impressed, that an Angel had appeared to me in a dazzling light, and whispered. That is no excuse for a shepherd forsaking his charge, he said. But the priest said that if I was being truthful I should do more learning, for that would tell them if I was truly called; and when my father relented I proved a good scholar. Or competent anyway.

I joined the brethren. And these several years now I have been honoured to serve the bishop's commission as clerk and envoy.

It was her story, so similar to my own, being a simple girl of the country, a pewterer's daughter I believe, and just thirteen when she saw the very bright light and heard the voices (as she calls them), the

whisper to your soul, and became somehow convinced, beyond reason yet beyond denial, that Michael (she believes) or one of the Angels had chosen her for God's good work. The burden and the blessing of God's work. All sounding so familiar and credible to me, it was this made me interested in her case. And so concerned for her.

I was deeply saddened when I heard about her sufferings. About the way they had chosen to treat her. No doubt she was rash, certainly she was unwise for lack of learning, lack of counsel. But it seems unnecessary, to exaggerate the errors of a peasant girl, a lamb gone astray, and to make her suffer so. God knows the truth, and reveals it to wise and patient men, who listen and are kind. There is no need of such treatment.

The shaving of her head, the keeping her from sleep, feeding her dirt, causing her to make her cell a toilet, I cannot understand it. And walking her naked about the village, goaded with a pitchfork, flogging her back as she knelt in the square, inciting boys to throw stones and dung at her. I believe she prayed continuously, throughout the ordeal.

Then they took her back to the gaol and questioned her by day and night for several days under extreme persuasion, as they call it, including the pricking of her flesh with bodkins, while tied on a board. All the time imploring her for her soul's sake to abjure her heresy, a heresy which I am told she denied throughout, or believed devoutly to be true faith. I suspect she did not comprehend the difference.

News came that the regional tribunal, after all efforts to persuade and reform her, had with heavy heart condemned her to die. In fact the tribunal did not examine her: they delegated it by pro-forma warrant to the father-inquisitor, who had full discretion in their name. And in God's.

I prayed for her soul and for clemency. But my brother who advises the bishop, instead of praying (or doubtless he prayed as well), went through books of law and advised that the commissioners here could call the case to be heard again, before them, in the meantime issuing a stay of execution while we reviewed the matter.

I was glad to be the one chosen to bear the document to her inquisitor. I set out with no baggage but that precious paper, and walked as fast as I could for two days. And I arrived too late.

If only the paper had been ready sooner. If only they had given me a donkey. Surely the rules of my order – for we are mendicants, we go on foot as beggars – surely they could allow for the urgency of an errand from God, an errand of mercy.

If only I had stayed less long over night, at the house of charity. Or had risen earlier. Or had taken less breakfast, or none, or had taken it in

hand and set off instead of sitting to it. If I had refrained from pausing to pray at the shrine of Our Lady on the way. If I had commandeered the saddled horse I saw outside a big house, about a mile from the village. If only, if only I had arrived in time.

In time to embrace her, and cover her nakedness with my cloak; in time to kiss her cheek, and speak with her of Angels.

Instead of seeing her white smoke rising, Heavenward. Instead of blackening my fingers in her warm ash, and washing them with tears and rain.



We witnessed it. We watched it all. Hand in hand, we witnessed the burning of the heretic.

We watched it to the end, to when the smoke thinned and there was just a charred mess, smouldering. You could barely discern if they were twigs or bones. The sky had clouded over by then, as if the smoke had filled it. And it began to rain.

We went home contemplative, almost dejected. Yet inspired. We went home hand in hand – no longer uncertain, no longer ashamed. Thinking of the burning maid, the heretic, a young life closed in such pain. The sacred flame so beautiful, so purifying, separating flesh from bone, body from soul. Her skin darkening and curling off her as she exhaled her death scream. The fierce crackle of the kindling, the shroud of smoke. The priest proclaiming purgation by fire.

The clouds finally sprinkled the scene with gentle rain. We left none too soon. It rained torrentially once we got home, and all evening. Another sort of purification.

We said little, over our bread and gruel. We were both thoughtful, something stirred inside us. I did not light the lamps. I extended my hand and she took it – we retired early, without speaking. Not even to make prayers by the bedside. Our act was to be our prayer, our celebration, our sacrament ...

We undressed, but I did not avert my eye from her nudity, nor she from mine. As in Eden, we looked upon each other without shame.

Without words. Words were neither spoken nor needed, we were as if called by God to the altar of joy, and ordained in our union, our act of union. It was beautiful and mutual. She arched back and clung in a sweet intensity of passion, quietly continuously sighing.

Near the end she cried out, long and unrestrained, longer and louder than before. Her skin was coated in sweat. She went limp in my arms,

even as I remained rigid inside her. In the morning I kissed her face and she smiled.

I have never felt so inflamed, so fired with passion, so convinced our union was Heaven-sent, so immersed in our love, so abandoned. I lost myself in her. Our inner visions became one. We felt the fire, the flame, the flesh of the heretic, warmly peeling and falling from her, the welling up of her dark blood, the white bones before they blackened, the offal and innerds as they boiled away.

God sanctioned our union this night, in a shared holiness of flesh, a sacramental sharing of inside flesh, the sacrament of knowing. God sanctified our union with unction, and the ecstasy of inner touching. God blessed our union in the very infusion of joy.

And, I now believe, God sent her to bring us this joy. This intimation of Grace. God sent her to assure us of His will, His destiny for us. For it was her coming amongst us, the heretic maid, that kindled our hearts; it was she breathed upon us until we burned for each other anew.

She told stories to the children, of Saints and Angels, and the deeds and words of Our Saviour, which she knew without book. And they loved her, and followed her about, she was so kind and easy with them. I did not discourage it, nor spurn her help in the school-room. But then the priest said she had fallen under suspicion and must be examined.

The directness of her look, her bright blue eyes, her friendly smile, the comeliness of her form, her close-fitting attire, her loose-necked shirt, the Crucifix that drew your eyes into the cleft of her bosoms, her seeming wisdom beyond her years, wrought upon me in such measure that I abandoned propriety and abased myself to her. It was as if those loving eyes saw into everyone's heart: she bade me rejoice in the wealth I had already, in my own house, and offer my passion to one who had quietly nurtured it, and longed to hear it declared.

Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also, she said. And may the Angels watch over you both.

Her words were as a prison door thrown open on my desires. I spoke my heart to my serving girl, and thanks be to God her yearning was as mine, just as the maid had prophesied. I took her to bed that same afternoon, under a sure conviction that Heaven blessed our union and had sent us the heretic maid, like an Angel, to herald and intimate it.

We came out to see her when she was displayed about the village and flogged. Stripped naked, her head shorn, her eyes sore with weeping, her skin freshly scrubbed, clean and white and tender; until the flagellation, the beautiful chastisement, raised a dust that covered her. And then boys and housewives pelted her with filth.

Now we watched her brought from the place of torment and drawn to her reward by a rope, defaced with wounds and bruises all over, and filthy, her mortal frame ruined by the terrible rituals of persuasion.

She stumbled and rose again. Someone threw a clod that knocked her down, but still she managed to rise up again. A boy ran out from the crowd to embrace her, and she kissed him. She stumbled once more and was dragged the long stretch, into the square, on her front.

Before the stake she was flogged, where she lay, one last mortification of the doomed flesh. The rope cut sharp red lines across her back and bottom. Pulled to her feet, she was granted a final licence to recant and die in Grace. She bowed her head and uttered not a word.

Buckets of water were cast over her, washing her of grit and dust and freshening the scratches and sores that covered her. The dousing would also allow her to burn more slowly. Stood upon a board in the midst of the woodpile, she was bound by her ankles and neck to the stake, and her hands tied together behind it.

They asked her to kiss the Crucifix that a servitor held towards her on a pole. Her head raised and she kissed the air before it, for she was tied by her neck and the boy could not get close enough.

Then in a moment of beatitude we shall never forget, instead of bowing again she turned her face slowly round, looking at the great multitude of us who had come to see her burned. The muttering of the crowd hushed. Her big round eyes seemed to look directly at us, into us, each and every one of us, blessing our witness, our participation, inviting us to share her immolation, her passion; sharing it with us, taking our burden of sin from us and suffering for us. Burning for us.

And as she did so the priest commenced to lead us in the Our Father. Her youthful face, though shorn of its curls, her bare body, though spoiled by the torments, yet kept me minded of whose hand I clasped, my servant, my heart, my treasure ... Her head now bowed for the final time, and about her descended a stillness, a dignity, a holiness, defying injury and nakedness and the quickly igniting tinder beneath her.

We watched her begin her beautiful transformation, her skin begin to peel, her flesh to burn, her sinews and bones begin to be bared. True nudity, the irreversible undressing, the falling away of mortality. But too soon the smoke enveloped and hid her. It filled the square. The sky darkened.

And from the midst of the smoke I thought I heard a long faint scream, that rasped into a throaty sound, or merged with the crackling and hissing of the pyre and the coughing of those who were closest.

We held hands throughout. We witnessed the burning. We shared the sacrament of immolation. We saw into the smoke. We leaned into the heat. We reached into the flames. We felt her inside body, as if clasped to our own in our arms, the fire and the passion rising, the flesh intermingling, before breaking to pieces and tumbling into a broth of offal, into steam and ash, into deep black nothingness.

At the end I called after her, long and unrestrained, longer and louder than before. My skin was coated in sweat. I unclasped her and went limp, and lay my head between her bosoms. In the morning I kissed her face and she smiled.

We are not ashamed any more. We are not ashamed of our joy. We know that God sanctioned it and blesses us, and sent us the maid in token of it. As soon as convenient, I am going to speak to the priest.

As she ladled porridge into our pewter bowls, her bodice unlaced, she said Will you mind if I cut off my hair sir, by way of remembrance?

I will help you my dear, I said, and then chop wood for a fire.



It was out of my hands. I left it to the priests. I stayed at home, doing my account-books.

I was sceptical at first. But I do not interfere. We are a good, God-fearing community, the church is the centre of our life, it is our heart and soul. And that is as it should be. We render to Caesar what is Caesar's. The padre gives me advice, and is fond of a discussion of Aquinas, or even Aristotle, over wine. But he does not question my jurisdiction. Nor I his.

There has never been anything like it here before. I thought perhaps they would take the child away, and that would be an end of it. She was not all that much trouble. Younger children adored her, she was so friendly and tender with them. And so *like* them in her simplicity of manner, and of faith.

As magistrate I would have treated her as a waif, a mere nuisance, had her lightly flogged and moved her on to the next parish, or else got her apprenticed to a cook or a baker here perhaps. She seemed to want to stay, being devoted to Saint Michael and the Angels.

But if the father who had come to enquire into her errors and to advise our padre thought differently, who am I to interfere?

Church matters and laws are not my province. I keep our little community law-abiding in accordance with the laws of man. It is not my place to pronounce on what offends God – and I am glad of it, it is

a tricky business. Blasphemy and heresy and apostacy and possession and witchcraft – these are things for the priests and the fathers and the bishop, the ecclesiastical courts and commissions.

Just to put the record straight: I did not put the child in gaol, nor order her interrogation. I assigned the gaol to the father and his assistant, and then – as it says in the Holy Book – I washed my hands. I neither tried her, nor condemned her. Burning is out of my prerogative. I left it to men who know better what is heresy and what is not.

The child was not ill-treated. The assumption is often made, but I take the padre's word. If perforce she endured suffering of her own making, by being so unreasonable, that is regrettable. She was given ample opportunity to renounce her errors and heed good counsel. I was sorry she did not respond to the father's patient deliberations with her.

I did not particularly approve of her being exhibited naked. But that is the practice they follow, it is often effective, it induces humility, the father says. As well as being an example to others.

While the extreme persuasion of the body is the final technique, used but with the most unswerving of them, the most unrepentent, when all else has failed. It is perfectly legal. I prayed for it not to be needed, for her to see reason and recant. And God saw fit not to grant my prayer, a prerogative He not infrequently exercises.

But it has convinced me that we had no choice. That, as the padre had said, she was not so innocent as her big doe-eyes and disarming smile made her seem. I do not know where the stubborn defiance she demonstrated to the father and his assistant came from if not from her ungodliness, her alliance with the spirit of irreligion and wickedness that seems to stalk the earth these days.

Whom does it serve, to be defiant unto the burning, if not the Dark One, as the father wisely observed when he supped here.

She had only to renounce her wrong opinions as heresy and swear to his instrument of abjuration. We would have given her clothes, instead of those unseemly rags she was in when she arrived. She could have been articulated to my cook or have worked at the inn for the innkeeper's wife. Unless they had in mind to send her to a nunnery.

I would not have minded sponsoring her a short while as she got back on her feet, for she showed a doughty spirit. As well as a devout and unshakeable faith, whatever her errors.

The padre I am sure would have supervised her religious education, had she stayed among us. She already exhibited a good knowledge (if a flawed understanding) of Scripture and the Saints. She knew many sayings of Our Lord by heart, though I doubt if she could read.

Our school-master had I believe at his own behest offered her private instruction in return for her assistance in the school-room, for which she would take no payment. (Rumour has it he offered her more.)

On reflection, amended of her deviancies, her learning brought on a little, the school-master might usefully have accommodated her several talents, considering his want of a mistress. *And* how the little ones loved her so, and she them.

It was charming to see – before her opinions and attire brought her under suspicion – how she addressed the children in their own simple terms, and told them stories as they followed her about the village. How she said blessings to all and sundry, and made the sign of the cross (not knowing, I feel sure, that giving benedictions is a prerogative of ordained clergy). How she adored the cheap tin Crucifix she wore, which seemed polished on account of the constant devotion it received from her fingers and lips.

On the occasion that I spoke with her I came home more blessed by Heaven and Christ and a variety of Saints and Angels than I ever had been by a churchman. There is little harm in such naive piety, when it is well-meant.

I was sorry to hear they took it from her, her Crucifix. I spoke to the padre about it but he said it could not be found. She wept when they paraded her from the gaol, having undressed and shaved her, not I think entirely from the shame or from rough handling, for her lament (they say, I did not attend but I had full report from my constable) her lament was for loss of My Holy Crucifix, she called it, wrought me by my Father in Heaven, that I may hold Gentle Jesus in my hands.

And then instead of covering her nakedness she joined her hands as if in prayer, and spoke Our Lord's words: I was a stranger, and ye took me in ... I was naked and ye clothed me ...

If she would just have assented to the father's document, it seems to me she could have continued to converse with her Angels while leading a God-fearing and decent life, in our village or elsewhere, and hold whatever opinions she chose to hold about ordinations and the wealth of priests and sanctification of the spirit, or whatever else, but quietly and privately – as do we all.

Foolish child. But she has payed for her stubbornness with her breath.

The father supervised her burning and conducted the offices of exorcism and purgation with all correctness and solemnity. I am assured that it passed quickly and the final suffering was mercifully brief, releasing her soul to the verdict of a Higher Judge.

My constable tells me she had to be dragged to the place, which is a pity, but was calm and resigned at the end, acknowledging the processional Crucifix and looking about the crowd before bowing her head. Those who report she coughed much he says are mistaken, for it was the bystanders the smoke made cough.

I confess we were half expecting an emissary from the bishop's commission, which sometimes reviews such cases, to bring a reprieve or commutation. I had a good horse saddled ready in case such a messenger reached my house first. But he did not come.

Many others did. They came from all parts of the diocese, and beyond. Almost everyone from our parish attended, my constable says it was like Michaelmas Fair. The rain held off in spite of gathering clouds, and the villagers and street-vendors did good trade, supplying beads, refreshments and sustenance, and especially, after the torrential rain that followed the burning, the unexpected need for shelter. Ostlers and taverns and even the bawdy house did excellently well.

Our village inn was thronged, and found temporary beds for many who had come far or were ill-equipped to journey home in the storm, which raged into the night.

It will do our worthy little village no harm, to have good report from such as have sojourned here.

And church and community will come through strong and united, once the silly heretic child who tested us in our faith is forgotten – as she soon will be.



I love my work. I'm proud of what I do. I take pleasure in it, it's very rewarding.

I worked on the latest, the heretic, night and day the whole week, and we burned her yesterday. Nothing is more satisfying, nothing more exhilarating, than to know you've released a soul from the chains of error or evil, whether the life is saved too, or whether the abominable flesh is forfeit.

I thrive on it, I tell everybody how I love my work – and I never have to buy my own ale!

But there are exceptions. It isn't always like that. There are times when it feels wrong, when the victory is hollow. When you know in your bones the treatment we give is not the remedy. Some subjects, well, they're just not right for it.

I'm a technician, a craftsman I like to think. But I'm a servant, I'm part of a process. I see to the physical parts. The strong-man stuff, yes, all right, I do that, I drag them about and push them and thump them, somebody has to. But my craft is the tools, the equipment of torment and restraint: the ropes and chains and fetters, the board and clamps, the points and blades, the bodkin and pincers and fleam; and then the anatomy – the art of applying these instruments, correctly, effectively, persuasively, to the naked living flesh, the artist's canvas.

The flesh is nothing, like in the burning, the tools and the torments are nothing. They're a means to an end. It's the words that are important. It's the spirit that's important, the soul. All I'm doing is providing a means for the words to make their impression, for the spirit to be moved by the words. The father is in charge, the words are his.

As I said, there are times when you know it's not right, when the accusers have made a mistake. There's no satisfaction to be had when the subject's unsuitable, it spoils the enjoyment as well as the sense of fulfilment. You pack up and go, even before the fire's out, your pride in the work a bit tarnished.

I had a deaf mute once, sweet-natured and plump, she was astonished when I took the pincers to her. I objected, I said We can't carry on, she doesn't know what you're saying. But the father said it was her soul we were wresting from apostasy, not her ears.

I can still see her trusting smile, her big blue eyes, looking up at me with little more understanding than a child. We carried on, and we burnt her of course. It was a bad week's work.

That was in a different diocese. I moved on after that. The father I work for now, he's dedicated but he's no fanatic. He can sort out the simpletons, the mutes and morons and misguided, the beerhouse blasphemers and whores (for we get them too), from the die-hard apostates, heretics, and witches. Since I've been with him I've not had many where it wasn't right, where you know all through, whether they confess or not, that they're just harmless innocents.

This putrid piece of meat we roasted yesterday wasn't one. She was perfect. She was a peach. She was the ideal subject – ripe, feisty, combustible. As determined a foe of the faith as ever I've set fire to. Burning was the only thing for her. And she knew it.

She reminded me of the deaf mute, the same round face and cow eyes, soft white body with plump young bosoms and buttocks, tight slit and hole never used but for toilet duties. Seventeen or so, at a guess. A fresh country wench, just ready for a romp in the hay and some milking. But there the resemblance ends.

This lewd blaspheming imposter who prattled with Angels and went about blessing people and berating priests was evil through and through, every fibre, my work on her proved that. Primed and lusty for it she was. The more pain she felt the more stubborn she got. I could hurt her without compunction – she revelled in it, like a sow in shit.

Before long I could tell, I pretty-much knew she would never confess or repent or abjure, nor beg mercy. Nor beg me to save her in return for carnal favours (as they do). Nor did she.

Yet nor was she ignorant in any shape or form. She knew exactly what she was doing, presuming to criticise clergy and comment on doctrine; she knew dressing the way she dressed and flaunting her heresies before children would get her in trouble. She came to this place for that very purpose – it matters not whether Angels sent her or demons.

And thus, being brought to account, the rabid vixen defied us and wrestled against us every inch of the way.

Even at the burning. She openly blessed the urchin who ran up to grope her. She pulled on the rope, willing me to drag her the last furlong. She rose from her final flogging as though she'd relished it – I'd put nails in the rope to serve her right. And with fire at her ankles she refused to kiss the Crucifix or speak the Lord's Prayer. She just gazed about the crowd, gloating, like a witch casting the evil eye.

And when the flames crept up her and her skin started peeling off she squealed through the smoke like a pig on a pitchfork.

Though I'd already pricked and prodded such a quantity of squawks and screeches out of her, one way or another, it was all hollow hissing, like frying a snake. Or a serpent.

And so, you'll say, I failed; the father failed. But failure is a manner of success, in these extreme cases. We failed to get a retraction, yes. But she was not innocent. Not a bit of it! This cunt from hell, the devil's succubus, held to her errors like dogma, with a conviction which neither my persuading of her flesh nor the father's discourse with her conscience could shake in the least degree. Proving her heretic indeed, a hardened, intentional one, an enemy of God.

So I took the greatest pleasure in bringing the creature to justice, stripping its carcass and shaving it and scrubbing it and flogging it and thumping it and pricking it and poking it and dragging it and burning it. It was better than carnal pleasures. Though I took them as well.

I stayed with her night and day, like I said. I put my hands all over her, and believe me she loved it. I left her her virginity because I knew she wanted rid of it; but I had her up her heretical backside three nights on

the trot. The grateful bitch shrieked herself hoarse. She liked it so well I feared she'd recant – now picture me explaining that to the father!

Since the whore-house is full of poxy matrons, and the lads here are all besotted with the heretic, it was the best recreation I got in this apology for a village.

Latterly on the tilted board, clamped by wrists and neck and ankles, worn out with beatings and buggings and lack of sleep, you'd have thought the slut would lie still. Pah! It wriggled like a strumpet in a snake-pit, as the spirited ones do. Pricking her was perfection, the way she writhed and undulated with it – as it should be, a synchronisation of craftsman and subject, like an embroiderer and his cloth.

Nothing, none of it, stilled her diabolical spirit. Not tearing her rags off her and burning them before her eyes – You'll need no clothes where you're going, I told her, it'll be warm enough. She said: Is not the body more than raiment? I don't know where she got that saying from, the impudent hussy, but hers certainly was! I gave her a clout across the head for answering back.

Not shaving her all over and parading her bare-arsed for the lads – the slag didn't even cover herself. Nor flogging her shameless hide till my arm ached and the rope frayed.

None of it subdued her. Not feeding her grubs and dog-turds, nor making her piss down her legs. I caught some in a tankard for her – the filthy cow drank it defiantly; so next time I filled her up with mine, straight from the tap. She didn't care so much for that vintage.

It was probably better than the swill they were dishing out at the inn as we celebrated after. But at least that cost me nothing, as I'm proud of what I do and tell everybody – so once they know who I am they regale me with drinks and pies.

Though the main reason I went was to catch the souvenir hunters. Draw them in with locks of unholy hair; then get them vying with each other for the silver Crucifix that dangled between her udders, when it wasn't being slobbered on or fondled. I made a killing there – pardon the expression.

For it wasn't silver at all, it was buffed pewter – utterly worthless!

†

I am the one. I was the one. I was the one she blessed, on the way to her burning.

It was a big day for us, my mother said. We would do well out of them burning the heretic. All our rooms were full – what with the father who

came to question and condemn her, and several gentlemen and their ladies who came to watch. So there was more work to do than normal. Fires to light and breakfasts to prepare and night-slop to take out.

Then later we were expecting throngs of folk from near and far, needing refreshment or hot food before heading home. Good for the thirst, all that smoke, my father quipped.

We'd spent all week chopping firewood, cleaning the pewter, and drawing ale from the barrels and diluting it, as my father said it was too strong for a religious occasion. While my mother was busy baking pies. If she confesses let's hope she's hungry, was another of his jokes. He meant if the burning got cancelled she'd have to eat our pies.

She would as well, she liked pies. She wouldn't have the pence for them though. She told us she lived without money or possessions, but for her treasured Crucifix, only the love of God that burns in her breast (she said) and the clothes of a boy that she arrived in those months ago. It was that made them send for the father who enquires after heretics and tries to save them from their errors, for they say it's a sin to wear boy's clothes. When you're a girl I mean.

She said she was called of Holy Angels to attire herself thus and go into the world, blessing all who are pure in heart and preaching to children. She gathered the little ones around her in the street and told them stories about Angels. When our priest scolded her for it she bade him heed the words of the Saviour: Except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. He was ever so cross.

She came to our parish because it's dedicated to the Archangel Saint Michael, and also to all the other Holy Angels. She told us how he'd appeared to her in a very bright light when she was thirteen.

I can understand why she loves him so much, as he's a tall, muscly man with long legs and huge beautiful wings, his arms stretched forward. His statue is in our church. It always used to give me a funny feeling, gazing at him, nude and shameless like that. But now I'm thirteen I'm more interested in girls.

That was the main reason I went out to watch when they perambulated her through the village, and flogged her. Word had got around that they would undress her first. Since she was so pretty and so friendly, and we all fancied her, all the boys, we were eager to see her bare.

But it was a shock at first, for they'd also shorn all her hair off. She looked like a bald man. It was such a shame, she had nice hair, and a nice face, with big blue eyes, bright and piercing when she looked at you. She'd always look at you as if she knew you, and liked you, and saw into your heart.

And it was the same. When we got closer, she looked at us with the same look, and I felt such a pang of sorrow for her. She was still pretty, though her ears stuck out a bit, you couldn't see them when she had her hair. Her eyes were still loving, even though they were wet. She was crying because she'd lost her Holy Crucifix. We went round searching for it later, me and my friends, but we didn't find it.

She was clean when she first came out, they'd only just taken her clothes off. So we got a good long look at her, her bosoms and belly and bottom, all plump and curvy and pale. And her private parts. It felt naughty, but you couldn't help seeing them, she didn't cover them with her hands at all. I thought she was ever so lovely.

The big man guided her by prodding her with a hay fork with broken prongs. When they got to the market square in the middle of the village she seemed to kneel and bow her head in prayer. Then the man flogged her back with a heavy rope, very fiercely. It flattened her on the ground, he beat her so hard, just the arch of her back, and raised a cloud of dust round her. A chant of Repent Repent started up, when the priest said she'd still not recanted.

Me and my friends threw clods at her, and horse droppings. I don't know who started it. Lots of people had come out to see her. Some other boys threw stones but we didn't. And women came from their houses with pots of piss or kitchen-slop and chucked them over her.

I've said sorry in my prayers, for throwing stuff. And I've asked for her soul to go to Heaven, though I don't know if I should if she's a heretic. But I wish I hadn't thrown stuff at her. You just enter into the spirit. After we'd got used to seeing her bare, and she was crouched from the flogging and all covered in dust, it didn't seem to matter. But I felt sorry afterwards.

And I feel it even more so now, after what's happened. After seeing her dragged to her burning. After being kissed and blessed by her.

I wasn't allowed to watch the burning, my mother forbade it. But seeing how our house became deserted as the hour approached, I'd crept out among the throng, just for a look as she went by.

The father and our priest and the servitors from our church came in procession, and she was led along behind them by the big man who'd flogged her, pulling a long thick rope tied round her wrists. She was still bare, but you almost couldn't tell, her skin was so discoloured all over, whether with filth or with cuts and sores and bruises.

She stumbled and fell a few times, but managed to get up. Just as she was passing where I stood she turned her face directly towards me, and recognised me – I'm sure of it. Her eyes looked right into mine. And in the midst of her suffering, she smiled at me.

It was instinctive, stepping forward, hugging her. I didn't give it any thought, or I'd have been too shy. I just found myself there, clasping her. My arms round her dirty wounded body.

Bless you, she whispered, and kissed my cheek. And may the Angels watch over you.

The big man must have turned to see why she paused. He shouted Scram and yanked at the rope. She fell full-length onto the gravelly road, and was dragged all the rest of the way on her front.

It was my fault ... It was my fault she was pulled down and dragged like that. I backed into the crowd, crying. Or rather the crowd moved past me, and closed in around her as she was dragged into the square. I felt terrible, causing her more hurt. Yet something had happened.

Something had happened inside me. In that instant it happened, in just those seconds. I hugged her, she blessed me, she blessed me with a kiss. Bless you, and may the Angels watch over you.

I know she's a heretic, an abomination they say, an affront to God. I know she's older than me and I'm not a man yet, and we pointed at her bareness and mocked her and threw dirt. I know she kept up her defiance of the true faith against all attempts to make her see reason, my mother says. I know her skin was all blemished with torturing and flogging, and she was dragged because of me, and then burnt alive. I don't know if her soul's gone straight to Hell, or where it is, but I'm sure we're not supposed to think it'll go to Heaven. Or pray for it.

But I do. I've prayed all night for her. And I shall pray for her every night. Because I love her. I do, I've fallen in love with her.

My mother told me off for going to the burning, when I got in. I said I didn't so she smacked me for lying. She thought my sore eyes from crying was the smoke. But I hadn't, I didn't see the burning. I just watched her being led there, and then being dragged.

I had to pull myself together and help, all afternoon and evening, we were very busy. I worked hard, there was a lot to do. When the heavy rain kept on we had to make up extra beds for travellers who'd got no carriages or no hats, people slept in the taproom and even on the floor in the passages. Luckily we had plenty of ale and pies and firewood.

The father-inquisitor's assistant, the big man who'd paraded her through the village and flogged her, and who dragged her to the burning, came in the taproom boasting of his deeds. Everyone bought him drinks, he was the hero of the village. He called her names and said rude things about her, how she'd liked him feeling her and sticking things in her, how she'd writhed like a whore.

I heard him say if Hell had Saints, she'd be one. And they all laughed.



A father who came from the bishop, I think, arrived too late to see her. He was greatly distressed to have missed seeing her burnt. He said he'd walked and ran for two days.

We gave him a pie and I made up a bed for him, near mine. He slept little though. Like me, he prayed and wept most of the night.

I lay thinking about her, and picturing her in my thoughts. Bald and bare but not spoiled any more, not dirty or injured or burnt. Soft and pale and lovely, like a Saint or an Angel in Heaven. I felt such love and pity for her it gave me a pang that made my whole body shiver, and I wet myself a bit.

This morning before he left I asked the father who arrived too late, if I was bad for thinking about the heretic all night, and feeling sorry for her, and praying for her to go to Heaven. He said he felt sorry for her too and was praying for her too, that's why he'd come, to pray for her. He said he thought she probably would go to Heaven. I said Then it wouldn't be wrong to love her? He smiled and ruffled my hair.

He asked for a small pot or jar, and my mother found him one. Come with me as far as the square, he said, and we will tell Saint Michael about how we feel. He kneeled and scooped up a little of the ash from the remains of the bonfire. It was like a black paste, it was so wet.

He said some of the words of the burial service, ashes to ashes, then asked Saint Michael and all the Holy Angels to guide their stray lamb to the Shepherd's loving arms. For did He not say of the innocent: Forbid them not, for *of* such is the Kingdom of God. Amen.

It is in the Archangel's hands now, the father said. But if *he* loved her enough to appear to her in a very bright light, how can it be wrong that we should love her too?

I told him what the big man said, about if Hell had Saints. The father said if heretics can be Saints, he thinks she might well be accounted one, one day, when the church looks to its own errors. He made the sign of the cross to me, and set off with his little jar.

I haven't saved any ashes – but I have something nicer, and much more precious. I have a lock of her hair. A beautiful golden curl. My father says it cost him a pint of ale and a pie, I'd better take good care of it. I shall. I shall treasure it always, and always think of her and pray for her. And I shall always love her.

For I'm the one. I am the one she blessed, on her way to be burnt.

†

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