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Opening extract from

Burning Issy

Written by

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MELVIN BURGESS

Burning Issy

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Preface

The Christian God is the God of love, the Bible teaches us. But the Church has not always remembered. In 1613 eight people were hanged at Lancaster, just a few of the hundreds of thousands who died for the same reason all over Europe. They had been found guilty of witchcraft. Now we live in more enlightened times, but the killer's vision remains in our eyes. A witch is still a figure of evil, even though the name of their persecution – Witch Hunt – is the name we give to every fanatical attempt to destroy the harmless.

Many of those killed were simply old, or ugly, or poor, or victims of religious bigotry and frightened neighbours. But the idea remains that some really were witches – not old ladies in tall black hats, but the survivors of an old religion that worshipped nature. What might these people have been like?

They were not rich or powerful, they did not read or write and they have left us no record whatsoever. Misrepresented, misunderstood, abused and at last totally destroyed, nothing is known of them but what their enemies have told us. This is a story for them. It is not a story about good and evil, or an attempt to show things as they really were, because that would deny the world as they saw it and believed it. I have tried to show how it may have felt to live then . . . to believe that God was jealous and cruel, that the fires of hell awaited sinners like yourself, that the Devil walked the Earth and that witches had evil powers and were near . . . in your village, in your family . . . maybe even inside yourself.

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There was a lot of talk about God but it was the Devil we really feared. Witches lived in the villages and farms. On nights when they gathered to worship, the Devil came up from hell and walked among us, in our fields, on our moors. In the street you might brush against a man who had kissed him not a few hours back. Once, some boys showed me a mark on Pendle Hill where they said the Devil had walked. It was the print of a cloven foot, like a cow's only bigger. A few metres further on were the remains of a fire. The boys asked me what the Devil looked like and where he had kissed me. When I said he never had, they didn't believe it.

'Burning Issy,' one of them jeered. That was my nickname. But they didn't dare touch.

It took so little. Just an accusation from a spiteful neighbour and you could be arrested. If you were

arrested you would be tortured and if you were tortured you would confess and be hanged. Innocent cottagers, who would have run a mile at the whiff of witchcraft, had been executed just for knowing how to treat a cold.

I was a mystery. I was brought out of the North when I was only two years old with nothing but my name and a dream of fire. No one expected me to live, but I did. That's the way I mean to keep it.

When Nat, my foster-father, set out that morning there was a hard frost and the donkey's hooves clattered on the frozen earth. By the time he reached Colne the wind was flinging icy rain across the streets, and the ground underfoot had begun to melt and turn the tracks slippery. Nat was regretting that he had chosen such a foul day to fetch his supplies. He was walking at the donkey's side past the market stalls when he saw a woman running through the puddles towards him, carrying a bundle of filthy, half-burnt rags in her arms. She was wearing nothing but a smock and a shawl, her feet were bare and she was wet through. He could tell by her wobbling run that she was at the end of her strength. That was not unusual. But what was striking about her, he said, was the way she carried that bundle of rags – not like a beggar woman with an armful of

rubbish, but as if she bore a treasure over the muddy streets.

She ran up and thrust the bundle at him. Nat opened the rags and saw... me. The strangest, ugliest little face looked back at him, a mess of patches of bright-red skin and fat yellow lumps. It wasn't just the blanket that had been burnt. I was scorched scarlet and my face was covered in great yellow blisters.

'I've no means to bring her up,' said the woman, in a Scots accent. 'Her mother's murdered and I'm driven out of my home.'

Nat never thought but wrapped me up and put me on the donkey. He took out a loaf of bread and gave it to the woman, who nodded. They walked on a few steps but then turned back to look at one another and they both laughed because it looked as if Nat had swapped the baby for the bread. Nat remembered her laugh in particular, he said, because it was such a happy, gurgling, delighted noise, despite all her obvious misery.

As he looked through the rain at her he saw that she too had burnt skin on her hands and face, long blisters reaching over her cheeks. Her hands were wrapped in bloody rags.

'She's called Isabel,' the woman called across to him, past the people hurrying in between them, past the rain and the wind. 'She's two years old.' Nat nodded, the

woman smiled and ran off, splashing and stumbling through the holes in the road to take shelter under some awnings in the market. She chewed her bread and watched as he led the donkey up the road until they were hidden from each other by the market-day crowd.

I was wrapped in a dirty woollen shawl that was just a web of tatters and wear. My new foster-father threw it away within the first ten minutes and bought me a little woollen blanket to keep me warm on that cold December day. It was a sign that the woman knew something about people that the first thing Nat thought of was to spend his money on keeping me warm.

Nat was not a young man. His wife had died three years before, he lived alone with his daughter Kate and his son Ghyll and he could not afford another mouth to feed. But he spent the money anyway and had to go without the tools he wanted to buy. I was blue with cold, half-starved and too weak even to cry. I coughed like a cat in that blanket all the way home, and when we got there Kate told him he was an idiot to spend the money, anyone could see the baby would be dead within a week. But here I am still, thanks to Nat's big heart.

'I'd rather have the loaf of bread,' said Ghyll, whenever Nat told the tale. It had become part of the family history and I could never hear it often enough, as if I might get some clue to myself from the re-telling.

As for the woman, she disappeared. Nat believed she'd died and blamed himself for not bringing her back home with the baby. There were rumours of a Scots woman settling near Hebden Bridge and marrying into the cloth trade, but whether it was her or another we didn't know. She never got in touch.

Kate underestimated her father. Nat had the gift of healing. My pitiful red and yellow face soon mended, and as I grew older the scars faded, until in the end all that was left was some shiny skin around my cheeks and eyes where the burns had been deepest. Isabel got shortened to Issy, and I became part of the family.

The memory of my burning was slower to heal. Even a candle by my bedside frightened me at first and Nat had to keep me behind a screen where I couldn't see the fire on the hearth. I woke up screaming every night for weeks, and although the dream became less frequent with time, it never left me. Even today when I stand too close to a blaze, my heart begins to race and my scars itch and throb and I remember how it was . . .

. . . Without warning, violently, I'm snatched up into a blinding, searing light. My face is scorched, flames beat the air before me, around me. I'm trying to turn my head, but it's frozen, I'm trying to scream but the heat sears my

throat, I'm gagging on the hot air, screwing up my eyes, thrashing, twisting, but there's no escape . . . And then I open my eyes . . .

There was a face, there was always a face. And that face terrified me. I saw it clearly in the dream, but after waking I could never remember it. It was right in the fire, burning. The fire was getting hotter and closer and at last I managed to snatch a lungful of hot air and scream something – a word, I never knew what – so loud I woke myself up.

Nat told me I must have had an accident when I was small. Others had different ideas. There were those who said that a girl who came from nowhere had something to hide and that my dream was a memory of the place I came from. As for the face – that was the face of him who owned me: the Devil in hell. They were the ones who called me Burning Issy. Heaven help me, I used to believe them, but I know better now.

Our parson, Parson Holden, didn't agree that I came from hell. But he thought hell was where I was heading and that the dream was a warning to me to stay in the ways of God. The parson was not a bad man and

considered it a special duty to help me. I did not understand why God should have singled me out in this way, but I was very sure about one thing: whether the fire was from my past or in my future, I above all things wanted never to come near it. Every night I prayed for God to keep me safe. I would have done anything to keep the face from me.