

Cathedral of the Sea

Ildefonso Falcones

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Extract

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*The year 1320
Bernat Estanyol's farmhouse
Navarcles, in the principality of Catalonia*

Bernat realized nobody was looking in his direction, and glanced up at the clear blue sky. The weak late September sun played on the faces of his guests. He had put so much time and effort in preparing the feast that only bad weather could have spoilt it. He smiled up at the autumn sky, and when he looked down again, his smile broadened as he listened to the hum of happy voices in the cobbled courtyard that ran alongside the animal pens at the foot of his farmhouse.

His thirty or so guests were in high spirits: the grape harvest that year had been magnificent. All of them – men, women and children – had worked from dawn to dusk harvesting the grapes, then treading them, without allowing themselves a single day's rest.

It was only when the wine was ready to ferment in its barrels and the grape skins had been stored to distil their liquor during the slack days of winter that the peasant farmers could celebrate their September feast days. And it was then that Bernat Estanyol had chosen to be married.

Bernat surveyed his guests. Many of them had got up

at dawn to walk the often great distances separating their properties from the Estanyol farmhouse. They were all enjoying themselves now, talking about the wedding, the harvest, or perhaps both events at once. Some of them, including a group where his Estanyol cousins and the Puig family were sitting, burst out laughing at a ribald comment directed towards him. Bernat felt himself blushing and pretended to take no notice; he did not even want to think about what they might be laughing at. Scattered around the courtyard he could make out the Fontany family, the Vilas, the Joaniquets, and of course the bride's relatives: the Esteve family.

Bernat looked out of the corner of his eye at his father-in-law. Pere Esteve was promenading his immense belly, smiling at some of those invited, saying a few words to others. Then he turned towards Bernat, who found himself forced to wave acknowledgement for the hundredth time that day. He looked for his other in-laws and saw them at different tables among the throng. They had always been slightly wary of him, despite all his attempts to win them over.

He raised his eyes to the sky once more. The harvest and the weather seemed to be on his side. He glanced over at the farmhouse and then again at the wedding party, and pursed his lips. All at once, in spite of the merry hubbub, he felt quite alone. It was barely a year since his father had died; his sister Guiamona, who had gone to live in Barcelona after her marriage, had not bothered to reply to the messages he had sent her, even though he longed to see her again. After his father's death, she was the only immediate family he had left.

That death had made the Estanyol farmhouse the centre of interest for the entire region: matchmakers and parents with unmarried daughters had paid endless visits. Prior to that, no one had paid them much

attention, but the demise of the old man – whose rebellious nature had earned him the nickname of ‘madcap Estanyol’ – had rekindled the hopes of those who were anxious to see their daughter married off to the richest peasant farmer for miles around.

‘You’re old enough now to get married,’ they said to encourage him. ‘Exactly how old are you?’

‘Twenty-seven, I think,’ he replied.

‘That’s almost an age to have grandchildren,’ they scolded him. ‘What are you doing all alone in your farmhouse? You need a wife.’

Bernat listened to them all patiently. He knew their advice would inevitably be followed by the mention of some candidate or other, a girl stronger than an ox and more beautiful than the most incandescent sunset.

None of this was new to him. Madcap Estanyol, whose wife had died giving birth to Guiamona, had tried to find him a wife, but all the suitable parents had fled the farmhouse cursing the demands he made regarding the dowry any future daughter-in-law was supposed to bring. Little by little, interest in Bernat had waned. The older he grew, the more extreme his father became: his rebelliousness bordered on real lunacy. Bernat had concentrated on looking after his lands and his father; now all of a sudden at twenty-seven he found himself alone and besieged on all sides.

Yet the first visit Bernat received, before the old man had even been properly laid to rest, was of a different nature: it was from the steward of his feudal lord, the lord of Navarcles. How right you were, father! Bernat said to himself when he saw the steward and several soldiers ride up to his farm.

‘As soon as I die,’ the old man had repeated time and again to him in his brief moments of lucidity, ‘they’ll be here. You must show them my will.’ With that, he pointed to the stone beneath which, carefully wrapped

in leather, he had left the document containing the last will and testament of Madcap Estanyol.

‘Why is that, Father?’ Bernat had asked the first time he heard this.

‘As you know,’ the old man replied, ‘we lease these lands from our lord, but I am a widower, and if I had not drawn up my will, he would have the right to claim half of all our goods and livestock. That is known as the intestate right; there are many others that benefit the lords of Catalonia, and you must make sure you are aware of them all. They will be here, Bernat; they will come to take what is rightfully ours. It’s only by showing them my will that you can get rid of them.’

‘What if they take it from me?’ asked Bernat. ‘You know what they are like . . .’

‘Even if they did, it is registered in the official account books.’

The steward and his lord’s anger soon became common knowledge in the region. It merely served to make the only son’s position look all the more attractive, as he had inherited all his father’s possessions.

Bernat could clearly recall the visit the man who was now his father-in-law had paid him before the grape harvest. Five shillings, a pallet and a white linen smock: that was the dowry he was offering for his daughter Francesca.

‘Why would I want a white linen smock?’ Bernat asked, not even pausing as he forked the hay on the ground floor of his farmhouse.

‘Look,’ was Pere Esteve’s only reply.

Leaning on his pitchfork, Bernat looked in the direction Pere Esteve was pointing: the doorway of the stable. He let the pitchfork fall from his hands. Francesca was silhouetted against the light, dressed in the white linen smock . . . Her whole body shone through, just waiting for him!

A shudder ran down Bernat's spine. Pere Esteve smiled.

Bernat accepted his offer. There and then, in the stable, without even going up to the young girl, but never once taking his eyes off her. He realized it was a hasty decision, but so far he had not regretted it: there Francesca was in front of him now, young, beautiful, strong. His breathing quickened. That very night . . . What might she be thinking? Did she feel as he did? Francesca was not joining in with the other women's animated chatter: she sat quietly beside her mother, answering their jokes and laughter with forced smiles. Their gazes met for a moment. She flushed and looked down, but Bernat could tell from the way her breast heaved that she was nervous too. Her white linen smock thrust itself once more into Bernat's fantasies and desire.

'I congratulate you!' he heard a voice say behind him, and felt a hand clapping him on the shoulder. It was his father-in-law. 'Look after her for me,' he added, following Bernat's gaze and pointing to the girl, who clearly did not know where to put herself. 'If the life you have in store for her is as magnificent as this feast . . . This is the most marvellous banquet I have ever seen. Not even the lord of Navarcles could lay on such a treat.'

In order to please his guests, Bernat had prepared forty-seven loaves of wheat bread: the peasants' usual fare of barley, rye or spelt was not good enough for him. Only the whitest bread, as white as his bride's smock, would suffice! He had carried all the loaves to be baked at the Navarcles castle, calculating that, as usual, two loaves would be enough to pay for the privilege. The baker's eyes opened wide when he saw this display of wheaten bread, then narrowed to inscrutable slits. He demanded seven loaves in payment, and Bernat left the castle cursing the laws that prevented peasants like him

having their own bread ovens at home, or forges, or bridle and harness workshops . . .

'You're right there,' he told his father-in-law, banishing the unpleasant memory from his mind.

They both stared down the courtyard. Some of his bread might have been stolen, but there was still the wine his guests were drinking – the best, stored away by his father and left to age for several years – or the salt-roasted pig; the vegetable stew seasoned with chickens; and above all the four lambs, split down the middle and roasting slowly on the embers on their spits, oozing fat and giving off an irresistible smell.

All of a sudden the women started bustling about. The stew was ready and the bowls the guests had brought were soon filled. Pere and Bernat sat at the only table laid in the courtyard. The women rushed to serve them, ignoring the four empty seats. The rest stood or sat on wooden benches or the ground and began to eat, still casting glances at the lambs roasting under the watchful eye of some of the cooks. Everyone was drinking wine, conversing, shouting and laughing.

'Yes, a real feast,' Pere Esteve concluded between mouthfuls.

Somebody proposed a toast to the bride and groom. Everybody joined in.

'Francesca!' shouted her father, raising his cup to her as she stood next to the roasting lambs.

Bernat stared hard at her, but again she hid her face.

'She's feeling nervous,' Pere said in excuse, winking at him. 'Francesca, daughter!' he shouted once more. 'Come on, drink with us! Make the most of it now, because soon we'll be leaving – almost all of us, that is.'

The guffaws following this remark only intimidated Francesca still further. She half raised a cup she had been given, but did not drink from it. Then she turned away from the laughter and went on supervising the cooking.

Pere Esteve clinked his cup against Bernat's, spilling some of his wine. The other guests followed suit.

'I'm sure you'll see to it she forgets her bashfulness,' Pere Esteve said out loud, for all to hear.

This led to more guffawing, accompanied by sly comments that Bernat preferred to ignore.

In this merry way, they set to work on large amounts of wine, pork and chicken stew. Just as the women were taking the lambs off the fire, a group of the guests suddenly fell quiet and began to look over to the outskirts of the woods on the edge of Bernat's land, beyond the ploughed fields and the dip in the land that the Estanyols had used to plant the vines that provided them with such excellent wine.

Within a few seconds, the whole wedding party was silent.

Three men on horseback had appeared among the trees. A larger number of men in uniform were walking behind them.

'What can he want here?' Pere Esteve muttered to himself.

Bernat followed the newcomers with his gaze as they drew closer across the fields. The guests began to whisper among themselves.

'I don't understand,' Bernat said eventually, also in a low voice. 'He never comes here: it is not on his way to the castle.'

'I don't like the look of this at all,' said Pere Esteve.

The procession drew slowly closer. As the figures approached, the laughter and remarks the horsemen were making took over from the merriment that had been in evidence in the courtyard; everyone could hear them. Bernat surveyed his guests: some of them could not bear to look, and stood there staring at the ground. He searched for Francesca, who was in the midst of a group of women. The lord of Navarcles's powerful

voice rang out. Bernat could feel anger rising inside him.

'Bernat! Bernat!' Pere Esteve hissed, clutching his arm. 'What are you doing here? Run to greet him.'

Bernat leapt up and ran to receive his lord.

'Welcome to this your house,' he panted when he had reached the men on horseback.

Llorenç de Bellera, lord of Navarcles, pulled on his horse's reins and came to a halt in front of Bernat. 'Are you Estanyol, son of the madman?' he asked disdainfully.

'Yes, my lord.'

'We were out hunting, and were surprised to hear your feast on the way back to our castle. What are you celebrating?'

Behind the horses, Bernat caught a glimpse of the soldiers, loaded down with their prey: rabbits, hares, some wild cocks. 'It's your visit that demands an explanation,' he would have liked to reply. 'Or did the castle baker tell you about the white loaves I had baked?'

Even the horses, with their large round eyes focused on him, seemed to be awaiting his response.

'My marriage, your lordship.'

'And whom are you marrying?'

'The daughter of Pere Esteve, my lord.'

Llorenç de Bellera sat silently, looking down at Bernat over his horse's neck. The other mounts snorted impatiently.

'Well?' barked Llorenç de Bellera.

'My bride and I,' said Bernat, trying to hide his discomfort, 'would be very honoured if your lordship and his companions would care to join us.'

'We're thirsty, Estanyol,' was all the lord of Navarcles deigned to reply.

The horses moved on without any need of prodding. Head down, Bernat walked alongside his lord's horse back to the farmhouse. All the guests had gathered at the

entrance to the courtyard to receive him: the women stared down at the ground and all the men had removed their caps. A low murmur greeted Llorenç de Bellera when he halted before them.

'That's enough,' he said as he dismounted. 'Carry on with your banquet.'

The guests complied, turning round without a word. Several of the soldiers came up and took care of the horses. Bernat went with his new guests to the table where Pere and he had been seated. Their bowls and cups had disappeared.

The lord of Navarcles and his two companions sat at the table. Bernat withdrew several steps as the newcomers began to talk among themselves. The serving women brought pitchers of wine, loaves of bread, chicken stew, plates of salt pork and freshly roasted lamb. Bernat looked for Francesca, but she was nowhere to be seen. His gaze met that of his father-in-law, who was standing in a group of the guests. Pere Esteve lifted his chin towards the serving women, shook his head almost imperceptibly and turned on his heel.

'Go on with your celebration!' Llorenç de Bellera bawled, waving the leg of lamb he was holding. 'Come on, enjoy yourselves!'

Silently, the guests began to approach the roasted lambs for their share. Unnoticed by the lord and his friends, one group stood their ground: Pere Esteve and a few others. Bernat caught a glimpse of the white linen smock in the midst of them, and hurried over.

'Get away from here, you idiot,' his father-in-law snapped.

Before Bernat could say a word, Francesca's mother thrust a platter of lamb in his hands and whispered: 'Wait on the lord, and don't go anywhere near my daughter.'

The peasants began to devour the lamb, still without

saying a word, but from time to time glancing anxiously up at the table where the lord of Navarcles and his two friends were laughing and shouting. The soldiers were resting some way away.

'When we were hunting, we could hear loud laughter from here,' Lord de Bellera complained. 'So loud it drove away all our game. Come on, I want to hear you laugh!'

Nobody obeyed.

'Country bumpkins,' he told his companions, who burst out laughing again.

The three of them sated themselves on lamb and chunks of white bread. The platters of salted pork and chicken stew were pushed to one side of the table. Bernat ate standing up nearby, occasionally glancing anxiously out of the corner of his eye at the gaggle of women surrounding Francesca.

'More wine!' Lord de Bellera demanded, raising his cup. 'Estanyol,' he shouted, seeking him out among the guests. 'Next time you pay me the taxes on my land, I want you to bring this wine, not the vinegar your father has been fooling me with until now.'

Bernat was facing the other way. Francesca's mother thrust a pitcher of wine into his hands.

'Estanyol, where are you?' Llorenç de Bellera pounded the table just as a serving woman was about to serve him more wine. A few drops sprinkled his clothes.

By now, Bernat was close to him, and his friends were laughing at the accident. Pere Esteve lifted his hands to his face.

'Stupid old crone! How dare you spill the wine?' The woman lowered her head in submission, and when the lord made to buffet her with his hand, she fell to the ground. Llorenç de Bellera turned to his friends, cackling at the way the old woman was crawling away from them. Then he became serious once more, and addressed Bernat. 'So there you are, Estanyol. Look what your

clumsy old women have done! Are you trying to insult your lord and master? Are you so ignorant you don't realize that your guests should be served by the lady of the house? Where is the bride?' he asked, looking round at everyone in the courtyard. 'Where is the bride?' he repeated, when there was no response.

Pere Esteve took Francesca by the arm and led her to Bernat at the table. She was trembling from head to foot.

'Your lordship,' said Bernat. 'I present you my wife, Francesca.'

'That's better,' said Llorenç, openly staring her up and down. 'Much better. From now on, you are to serve us the wine.'

The lord of Navarcles sat down again and raised his cup. Searching for a pitcher, Francesca ran to serve him. As she poured out the wine, her hand shook. Llorenç de Bellera grasped her wrist and steadied it. When his cup was full, he pushed her to serve his companions. As she did so, her breasts almost brushed his face.

'That is how wine should be served!' the lord of Navarcles bellowed. Standing next to him, Bernat clenched fists and teeth.

Llorenç de Bellera and his friends went on drinking; they kept calling out for Francesca to come and refill their cups. The soldiers laughed with their lord and his friends whenever Francesca had to lean over the table to serve them. She tried to choke back her tears, and Bernat could see a trickle of blood on her hands where she had been digging in her nails. Each time she had to pour out the wine, the guests fell silent and looked away.

'Estanyol,' Llorenç de Bellera finally shouted, clutching Francesca by the wrist. 'In accordance with one of my rights as your lord, I have decided to lie with your wife on her first night of marriage.'

His friends raucously applauded the decision. Bernat leapt towards the table but before he could do anything,

the lord's two companions, who had seemed hopelessly drunk, sprang up, hands on the pommels of their swords. Bernat stopped in his tracks. Llorenç stared at him, smiled, then laughed out loud. The girl implored Bernat's help with her eyes.

Bernat stepped forward, but felt one of the swords pressed against his stomach. As the lord dragged her to the outside staircase of the farmhouse, Francesca still looked at him beseechingly. When de Bellera grabbed her round the waist and lifted her over his shoulder, she cried out.

The lord of Navarcles's friends sat down and took up their drinking again. The soldiers stood guard at the foot of the staircase to prevent Bernat making any move.

The sky was still a deep, dark blue.

After some minutes that to Bernat seemed endless, Llorenç de Bellera appeared at the top of the staircase. He was sweaty and was trying to fasten his hunting doublet.

'Estanyol,' he shouted in stentorian tones as he walked past him towards the table, 'now it's your turn. Dona Caterina,' he added, addressing his companions and referring to his new young bride, 'is weary of bastard children of mine turning up all over the place. And I'm weary of her snivelling. So do your duty as a good Christian husband!' he said, turning and addressing Bernat.

Bernat lowered his head, and then walked slowly and reluctantly up the staircase. Everyone was staring at him. He went into the large room on the first floor that served as kitchen and dining room; it had a big hearth on one wall topped by an impressive wrought-iron chimney piece. As he dragged himself over to the ladder that led to the bedroom and granary on the second floor, he heard his footsteps echoing on the wooden boards. Unsure what to do, he stuck his head into the gap at the

top of the ladder and peered around him. Now, he could hear nothing.

His chin was level with the boards, and he could see Francesca's clothing scattered all over the floor. The white linen smock, her family's pride and joy, was torn to shreds. He climbed to the top of the ladder.

He found Francesca curled up in a ball. She lay completely naked on the new pallet, which was spattered with blood. She was staring blankly into space, covered in sweat; her body was scratched and bruised. She did not move.

'Estanyol!' Bernat heard Llorenç de Bellera shout from down below. 'Your lord is waiting.'

Bernat could not stop himself retching, then vomiting on to the stored grain until he felt as if he had brought up all his insides. Francesca still did not move. Bernat ran back to the ladder and climbed down. When he reached the bottom of the staircase, pale, revolted, his head spinning, he ran blindly into the imposing shape of the lord of Navarcles.

'It would seem that the husband has not consummated his marriage,' Llorenç de Bellera commented to his companions.

Bernat had to raise his head to face him. 'No . . . your lordship, I could not do it,' he stammered.

Llorenç de Bellera fell silent.

'Well, if you are not up to the task, I'm sure that one of my friends – or my soldiers – will be more ready for it. I told you, I don't want any more bastards.'

'You have no right . . .!'

The wedding guests looking on shuddered as they imagined the consequences of this outburst. With one hand, the lord of Navarcles seized Bernat by the throat. He squeezed, and Bernat was soon gasping for breath.

'How dare you? Are you thinking of using your lord's

legitimate right to lie with the bride to come along later and make claims for your bastard child?' Llorenç bufeted Bernat before letting him go. 'Is that what you're after? I'm the one who decides what the rights of vassalage are. And nobody else! Are you forgetting that I can punish you how and when I choose?'

He landed another blow on Bernat's cheek, sending him crashing to the ground.

'Where's my whip?' he shouted angrily.

The whip! Bernat had been only a child when, together with a crowd of others, he had been forced to accompany his parents to watch the public flogging that the lord of Navarcles had inflicted on a poor wretch, although nobody knew for certain what he had done wrong. The memory of the crack of the leather whip on that man's back resounded in his ears, just as it had on the day, and night after night throughout his childhood. No one who had been there that day had dared make a move; no one did so now. Bernat got to his knees and looked up at his feudal lord, standing there like a great boulder, his hand held out for someone to pass him his whip. Bernat recalled the raw flesh of the other man's back: a bleeding mass so lacerated that not even all the lord's ferocity could tear any more strips from it. Bernat crawled blindly back towards the staircase. He was trembling like a child caught up in a dreadful nightmare. Still no one moved or spoke. Still the sun shone in the clear blue sky.

'I'm so sorry, Francesca,' Bernat whispered after he had struggled back up to the top of the ladder, pushed by one of the soldiers.

He undid his hose and knelt beside her. Glancing down at his limp member, he wondered how on earth he was going to fulfil his lord's command. With one finger, he began to caress Francesca's bare ribs.

She did not react.

'I have . . . we have to do this,' Bernat urged her, gripping her wrist to turn her towards him.

'Don't touch me!' Francesca cried, coming out of her stupor.

'He'll flay me alive!' Bernat protested, staring at her naked body.

'Leave me alone!'

They struggled, until finally Bernat seized both her wrists and forced her upright. Francesca was still fighting him.

'Someone else will come!' he whispered. 'Another man will be the one to force you!'

Her eyes opened wide in an accusing glare.

'He'll have me flayed!' Bernat repeated.

Francesca fought to beat him off, but he flung himself on top of her. Her tears failed to dampen the sudden rush of desire he felt as he rubbed against her naked body. As he penetrated her, she gave a shriek that reached the highest heaven.

Her cries satisfied the soldier who had followed Bernat and was witnessing the whole scene shamelessly, head and shoulders thrust into the room.

Before Bernat had finished, Francesca gradually stopped resisting and her howls turned to sobs. Bernat reached his climax to the sound of his wife's tears.

Llorenç de Bellera also heard the screams from the second-floor window. Once his spy had confirmed that the marriage had been consummated, he called for the horses and he and his sinister troop left the farmhouse. Desolate and terrified, most of the wedding guests did the same.

Calm returned to the courtyard. Bernat was still sprawled across his wife. He had no idea what to do next. He realized he was still gripping her shoulders and lifted his hands away. As he did so, he collapsed again on top of her. He pushed himself up and found himself staring

into Francesca's eyes. They seemed to be staring straight through him. Any movement he made would press his body against hers once more, and he could not bear the thought of doing her more harm. He wished he could levitate then and there so that he could separate his body from hers without even touching it.

Eventually, after what seemed an eternity, Bernat pushed himself away and knelt down beside her. He still did not know what to do for the best: to stand up, lie down beside her, get out of the room, or to try to justify himself . . . He could not bear to see Francesca's naked body cruelly exposed on the pallet. He tried to get her to look at him, but her eyes were blank again. He looked down, and the sight of his own naked sex filled him with shame.

'I'm sorr—'

He was interrupted by a sudden movement from Francesca. Now she was staring straight at him. Bernat looked for a glimmer of understanding, but there was none.

'I'm sorry,' he repeated. Francesca was still staring at him without the slightest reaction. 'I'm so sorry. He . . . he was going to flay me alive,' he stammered.

In his mind's eye, Bernat saw the lord of Navarcles standing with his arm outstretched, calling for the whip. He searched Francesca's face: nothing. What he saw in her eyes frightened him still further: they were shouting in silence, as loudly as the screams she had uttered when he had flung himself on her.

Unwittingly, as though trying to make her understand that he knew what she was going through, as if she were a little girl, he stretched out his hand towards her cheek.

'I . . .' he started to say.

His hand never reached her. As it approached, the muscles of her whole body stiffened. Bernat lifted his hand to his own face and burst into tears.

Francesca lay there, staring into space.

After a long while, Bernat stopped crying. He got to his feet, put on his hose and disappeared down the ladder to the floor beneath. As soon as she could no longer hear his footsteps, Francesca got up and went over to the chest that was the only furniture in the room, to find some clothes. When she was dressed, she gently picked up all the things that had been torn from her, including the precious white linen smock. Folding it carefully so that the torn parts did not show, she stowed it in the chest.