

Catherine Millet

THE SEXUAL LIFE OF
CATHERINE M.

Translated by Adriana Hunter



A complete catalogue record for this book can
be obtained from the British Library on request

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First published by Editions du Seuil in 2001

First published in this English language edition in 2002
by Serpent's Tail,
4 Blackstock Mews, London N4 2BT
website: *www.serpentstail.com*

Typeset by Intype London in 10.5/13pt Sabon
Printed by Bell & Bain Ltd., Glasgow

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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As a child I thought about numbers a great deal. The memories we have of single thoughts and actions we had in the first few years of life are very clear cut: they provide the first opportunities for self-awareness, whereas events shared with other people can never be isolated from the feelings (of admiration, fear, love or loathing) that those others inspire in us, feelings which, as children, we are far less able to identify or even understand. I, therefore, have particularly vivid memories of the thoughts which steered me into scrupulous counting exercises every evening before I went to sleep. Shortly after my brother was born (when I was three and a half), my family moved into a new apartment. For the first few years that we lived there, my bed was in the largest room, facing the door. I would lie staring at the light which came across the corridor from the kitchen where my mother and grandmother were still busying themselves, and I could never get to sleep until I had visualised these numerical problems one after the other. One of these problems related to the question of having several husbands. Not the possibility of the situation arising, which seems to have been accepted, but on the circumstances themselves. Could a woman have several husbands at the same time, or only one after the other? In which case, how long did she have to stay married to each one before she could change? What would be an 'acceptable' number of husbands: a few, say five or six, or many more than that, countless husbands? How would I go about it when I grew up?

As the years went by, counting husbands was substituted

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for counting children. I imagine that, finding myself under the seductive spell of some identified man (in turns, a film star, a first cousin, etc.) and focusing my wandering thoughts on his features, I perhaps felt less uncertainty about the future. I could envisage in more concrete terms my life as a married young woman, and therefore the presence of children. More or less the same questions were raised again: was six the most 'acceptable' number or could you have more? What sort of age gap should there be between them? And then there was the ratio of girls to boys.

I cannot think back to these ideas without connecting them to other obsessions which preoccupied me at the same time. I had established a relationship with God which meant that every evening I had to think about what he was going to eat, so that the enumeration of the various dishes and glasses of water which I offered him mentally – fussing over the size of the helpings, the rate at which they were served, etc. – alternated with the interrogations into the extent to which my future life would be filled with husbands and children. I was very religious, and it could well be that my confused perception of the identities of God and his son favoured my inclination to counting. God was the thundering voice which brought men back into line without revealing himself to them. But I had been taught that he was also, and simultaneously, the naked baby made of pink plaster which I put into the Christmas crib every year, the suffering man nailed to the crucifix before which we prayed – even though both of them were actually his son – as well as a sort of ghost called the Holy Spirit. Of course, I knew perfectly well that Joseph was Mary's husband, and that Jesus, even though he was both God and the son of God, called him 'Father'. The Virgin was indeed the mother of the Christ child, but there were times when she was referred to as his daughter.

When I was old enough to go to Sunday school, I asked to speak to the priest one day. The problem I laid before him was this: I wanted to become a nun, to be a 'bride of Christ',

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and to become a missionary in an Africa seething with destitute peoples, but I also wanted to have husbands and children. The priest was a laconic man, and he cut short the conversation, believing that my concerns were premature.

Until the idea of this book came to me I had never really thought about my sexuality very much. I did, however, realise that I had had multiple partners early on which is unusual, especially for girls, or it certainly was in the milieu in which I was brought up. I lost my virginity when I was eighteen – which is not especially early – but I had group sex for the first time in the weeks immediately after my deflowering. On that occasion I was obviously not the one who took the initiative in the situation, but I was the one who precipitated it – something I still cannot explain to myself. I have always thought that circumstances just happened to mean that I met men who liked to make love in groups or liked to watch their partners making love with other men, and the only reaction I had (being naturally open to new experiences and seeing no moral obstacle) was to adapt willingly to their ways. But I have never drawn any theory from this, and I have therefore never been militant about it.

There were five of us, three boys and two girls, and we were finishing our lunch in a garden on a hill above Lyon. I had come to see a young man I'd met recently while staying in London, and I had taken advantage of the fact that a friend's boyfriend, André (who was from Lyon himself), was driving down from Paris. On the way, when I asked if we could stop so that I could have a quick pee, André came and watched me and stroked me as I squatted. It was not an unpleasant situation but it did make me feel slightly ashamed, and it was perhaps at that precise moment that I learned to side-step my embarrassment by burying my head between his legs and taking his cock in my mouth. When we reached Lyon, I stayed with André and we went to stay with some friends of his, a boy called Ringo who lived with an older woman whose house it was. The latter was away, and the

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boys had made the most of this and organised a little party. Another boy came and brought a girl, a tall, lanky tomboy with very short, coarse hair.

It was in June or July, it was hot and somebody suggested that we should all take our clothes off and jump into the big pond. I heard André's voice saying his girlfriend wouldn't be bashful in coming forwards, and his words sounded a little muffled because I did indeed already have my T-shirt over my head. I forget when and why I stopped wearing underwear (even though as soon as I was thirteen or fourteen my mother had made me wear an underwired bra and a panty girdle on the pretext that a woman 'should be held in place'). In any event, I was naked almost immediately. The other girl started getting undressed too, but in the end no one went in the water. The garden was exposed; and that is probably why the next set of images that come back to me are in a bedroom, me nestled in a tall, cast iron bed, all I can see through the metal bars are the brightly lit walls, aware of the other girl lying on a divan in one corner of the room. André fucked me first, quite slowly and calmly as was his manner. Then he stopped abruptly. I was overcome with an ineffable feeling of anxiety, just long enough to see him moving away, walking slowly, his back arched, towards the other girl. Ringo came and took his place on top of me, while the third boy, who was more reserved and spoke less than the other two, rested on one elbow beside us and ran his hand over my upper body. Ringo's body was very different from André's and I liked it better. He was taller, more wiry, and Ringo was one of those men who isolate the action of the pelvis from the rest of the body, who hammer without smothering, supporting their torso on their arms. But André seemed more mature to me (he was in fact older and had served in Algeria), his flesh was not so spare, he already had less hair, and I liked going to sleep cuddled up next to him with my buttocks against his belly, telling him we were a perfect fit. Ringo withdrew and the one who had been

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watching and stroking me took his turn even though I had been resisting a terrible urge to urinate for some time. I had to go. The shy boy was piqued. When I came back he was with the other girl. I no longer remember whether it was André or Ringo who took the precaution of telling me that the shy boy had only gone to 'finish off' with her.

I stayed in Lyon for about two weeks. My friends worked during the day and I spent my afternoons with the student I had met in London. When his parents were out, I lay down on his cabin bed and he would lie down on top of me, and I had to be careful not to knock my head against the shelves. I was still inexperienced but I regarded him as still more of a novice than myself from the way he furtively slid his still slightly limp cock into my vagina, and the way he so quickly slumped his face down onto my neck. He must have been sufficiently preoccupied with what a woman's reaction might and should be to ask me whether the sperm projecting onto the walls of the vagina produced a specific sensation of pleasure. I didn't know what to say. I didn't feel his penetration that distinctly, whereas I certainly can distinguish a viscous little puddle spreading inside me! 'Really, that's strange, no special feeling?' 'No, nothing at all.' He worried more than I did.

The little gang would come and wait for me late in the afternoon at the end of the road. They were happy and playful, and, spotting them one day, the student's father said with a cordial note in his voice that I must be a hell of a girl to have all these boys at my disposal. In fact, I had given up counting. I had completely forgotten my childhood investigation into the permitted number of husbands. I was not a 'collector', and I thought that the boys and girls that I saw at parties mauling and being mauled, and mouth-to-mouth kissing until their breath gave out with as many people as possible so that they could boast about it the next day, were somehow offensive. I was happy simply to discover that the

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delicious giddiness I felt at the ineffably soft touch of a stranger's lips, or when a hand fitted itself over my pubis, could be experienced an indefinite number of times because the world was full of men predisposed to do just that. Nothing else really mattered. I had nearly lost my virginity earlier to a boy I had met who made quite an impression on me. He had a slightly drooping face, huge lips and very black hair. No arm or hand had ever covered so much of my body surface as when I lay trapped by the sweater he had pulled up over my head and the sides of my knickers that he held taut across my groin. That was the first time that I had felt myself to be in the grip of pleasure. The boy asked me, did I 'want more'. I had no idea what that might mean, because I couldn't see what 'more' I could possibly have. In fact, I brought the session to an end and, even though I continued this flirtation, meeting up with him regularly in the holidays, I never thought to take it further. Neither was I particularly taken with the idea of 'going out with' someone – or with several people. I fell in love twice and with both men any physical relationship immediately became impossible: the first one had just got married and, anyway, showed no interest in me at all, the second lived a long way away. I therefore had little desire to hook up with a boyfriend. The student was too bland, André was as good as engaged to my friend, and Ringo had a long-term partner. And in Paris I had the friend I had made love to first, Claude, and he seemed to be in love with a bourgeois girl who could utter such poetic sentences as 'touch my breasts, they're so soft this evening', without letting him go any further. This example had quickly, if rather confusingly, taught me that I could not be classed as a great seductress, and that my place in the world was therefore not so much amongst the women, facing the men, but alongside the men. Put simply, there was nothing to stop me constantly renewing the experience of tasting a different saliva every time, and blindly feeling with my hand for a form that would always be unexpected, a surprise.

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Claude had a beautiful dick, it was straight and well-proportioned, and the memory I have of those very first couplings is a feeling of fullness, heaviness as though all of me had been stiffened and filled. When André unzipped in front of my face, I was amazed to find something smaller, and more malleable, because, unlike Claude, he was not circumcised. A dick which is constantly exposed demands to be looked at, it provokes sexual excitement with its smooth monolithic contours, whereas the foreskin that you can play back and forth, uncovering the glans like a great bubble forming on the surface of soapy water, elicits a more subtle sensuality, its suppleness bending in waves to the partner's orifice. Ringo's dick was more like Claude's, the shy boy's more like André's, the student's belonged to a category that I would recognise later, those which, although not necessarily larger, are covered in a thicker outer layer, making them feel immediately more substantial in the hand. I discovered that every kind of dick required different movement, different behaviour from me. And just as every time I had to adapt to another kind of skin, another complexion, different degrees of hairiness, different amounts of muscle tone (it goes without saying, for example, that not only do you hold on to the torso above you in a different way if it is smooth as a stone or filled out with the beginnings of a bosom or obscuring your view with a thatch of hair, but also that these images do not have the same resonance in your imagination. As a result, with retrospect, I seem to have been more submissive with the clean cut or slightly rugged bodies that I perceived as truly male, whereas I took more initiative with heavier bodies that I feminised, however big they may have been), by the same token, the constitution of each body seemed to induce its own stances.

I have pleasant memories of a very wiry body with a slender shaft which rammed into my arse as I offered it up into the air, thrusting in a series of jerks, and as if from a distance without any other part of my body really being

touched, apart from my hips held in his hands; conversely, I didn't like it – not that I ever tried to get away – when fatter men, to whom I was nevertheless attracted, covered me too fully and, matching their behaviour to their corpulence, they tended to give smoochy kisses and to lick my face. In short, I entered my adult sexual life in the same way that, as a child, I went into the tunnel on the ghost train, blindly and for the pleasure of being jostled about and grabbed as chance would have it. Or, you could say, swallowed up by it as a frog is by a snake.

A few days after I got back to Paris, André sent me a letter to warn me, tactfully, that we all had the clap. My mother was the one who opened the envelope. I was sent to the doctor and banned from going out. But from then on my own sense of propriety, which had become extremely intransigent, no longer tolerated the fact that I lived with my parents now that they could imagine me in the act of making love. I ran away from home, they brought me back; eventually, I left for good to go and live with Claude. The clap had been my baptism; after that, for many years, I lived in mortal terror of that scissoring pain even though it struck me as being nothing more than a distinguishing sign, the shared fate of those who fuck a lot.

‘Like a nut in its shell’

In the biggest orgies in which I participated, from that time on, there could be up to about 150 people (they did not all fuck, some had come to watch), and I would deal with the sex machines of around a quarter or a fifth of them in all the available ways: in my hands, my mouth, my cunt and my arse. Sometimes I would exchange kisses and caresses with women, but that was always less important. In the clubs, the proportion was far more variable depending, obviously, on the clientele but also on the customs of each place – I will come back to that. It would be much more difficult

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to make an estimate of the evenings spent in the Bois de Boulogne: should I count only the men that I sucked off with my head squashed next to their steering wheels, or those with whom I took the time to get undressed in the cabins of their trucks, and ignore the relay of faceless bodies behind the car doors, one hand manically rubbing up and down their cocks in diverse stages of erection, while the other hand dived into the open car window to energetically knead my breasts? Today, I can account for forty-nine men whose sexual organs have penetrated mine and to whom I can attribute a name or, at least, in a few cases, an identity. But I cannot put a number on those that blur into anonymity. In the situations I am describing here, and even if there were people I knew or recognised at an orgy, the confused succession of embraces and couplings was such that if I could distinguish individual bodies, or at least their attributes, I could not always distinguish the people themselves. And even when I refer to the attributes, I have to admit that I did not always have access to all of them; some exchanges are very ephemeral and, if I recognised a woman by the softness of her lips, I would not necessarily recognise her touch which could be fiercely energetic. Sometimes, I would only realise after the fact that I had been fondling a transvestite. I was abandoned to a hydra. Until, that is, Éric broke away from the group to prize me out of it, in his own words, 'like a nut from its shell'.

I met Éric when I was twenty-one, not before his existence had been 'announced' to me; some mutual friends had frequently assured me that, given my predispositions, he was just right for me. After the holiday in Lyon I had continued having group sex with Claude. With Éric, the regime intensified, not only because he took me to places where I could, as I have just shown, make myself available to an incalculable number of hands and penises, but more particularly because the sessions were well organised. To my way of thinking, there has always been a clear-cut difference between, on the

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one hand, the more or less improvised situations which lead a group of people to redistribute themselves amongst the beds and sofas after a dinner, or which induce an excited gang of friends to drive around the porte Dauphine in their car until they make contact with other cars and all the passengers end up intermingling in a large apartment, and, on the other hand, the soirées curated by Éric and his friends. I preferred the inflexible sequence of the latter, and their exclusive goal: there was no rush and no tension: there were no outside factors (alcohol, demonstrative behaviour . . .) to impede the flow mechanics of bodies. Their comings and goings never strayed from their insect-like determination.

Victor's birthday parties impressed me the most. At the entrance to his property there were guards with dogs, talking into walkie-talkies, and I was intimidated by the crowds of people. Some women had dressed for the occasion, they wore transparent blouses or dresses, I was envious of them, and as people arrived and met up, sipping their champagne, I stood to one side. In fact, I only really relaxed once I had removed my dress or my trousers. My true clothing was my nudity, which shielded me.

I was amused by the architecture of the place because it was similar to the décor of a then very fashionable boutique on the boulevard Saint-Germain, called the 'Gaminerie'. It was, on a larger scale than the boutique, a cave, with its attendant cells, fashioned in white stucco. This 'grotto' was underground and its only source of light came from the bottom of a swimming pool on the floor above. Through a pane of glass which formed a sort of vast television screen, we could see the succession of bodies diving in from the upper floor. I am describing a place in which I have never moved through a great deal. The scale of things had changed around me, but my situation was not very different from what it had been the first time, with my friends in Lyon. Éric would settle me on a bed or a sofa in one of the alcoves,