

JIM CRACE

HARVEST

PICADOR

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TWO TWISTS OF SMOKE at a time of year too warm for cottage fires surprise us at first light, or they at least surprise those of us who've not been up to mischief in the dark. Our land is topped and tailed with flames. Beyond the frontier ditches of our fields and in the shelter of our woods, on common ground, where yesterday there wasn't anyone who could give rise to smoke, some newcomers, by the lustre of an obliging reapers' moon, have put up their hut – four rough and ready walls, a bit of roof – and lit the more outlying of these fires. Their fire is damp. They will have thrown on wet greenery in order to procure the blackest plume, and thereby not be missed by us. It rises in a column that hardly bends or thins until it clears the canopies. It says, New neighbours have arrived; they've built a place; they've laid a hearth; they know the custom and the law. This first smoke has given them the right to stay. We'll see.

But it is the second twist of grey that calls us close,

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that has us rushing early from our homes on this rest day towards Master Kent's house. From a distance this smoke is pale. No one has added greenery to darken it. But the blaze itself is less faint-hearted. It is rackety. It is a timber fire, for sure. But ancient wood. Long-felled. The years are in its smell. We fear it is the manor house that burns and that we will be blamed for sleeping through. We'd best prepare excuses now. So, if we heard the cracking of its rafters and its beams in our slumbers this morning, we must have mistaken it for the usual busying of trees and wind, or for the toiling of dreams, or for the groaning of our bones. Yesterday was harvest end, the final sheaf. We were expecting to sleep long and late this morning, with heavy shoulders naturally but with buoyant hearts. Our happiness has deafened us, we'll say. It was only when we heard Willowjack, the master's fancy sorrel mare, protesting at the smoke with such alarm, that we awoke and went to help, as help we must, for no one wants to lose the manor house.

Now that we have reached our master's paddocks and his garths, we can smell and taste the straw. The smoke and flames are coming not from his home but from his hay lofts and his stable roofs. His pretty, painted dovecote has already gone. We expect to spot his home-birds' snowy wings against the smoke-grey sky. But there are none.

I know at once whom we should blame. When Christopher and Thomas Derby, our only twins, and Brooker Higgs came back from wooding last evening, they seemed

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a little too well satisfied, but they weren't bringing with them any fowl or rabbit for the pot, or even any fuel. Their only spoils, so far as I could tell, were a bulky, almost weightless sack and immodest fits of laughter. They'd been mushrooming. And by the looks of them they had already eaten raw some of the fairy caps they'd found. I did the same myself in my first summer of settlement here, a dozen or so years ago, when I was greener and less timid, though not young. I remember eating them. They are beyond forgetting. Just as yesterday, the last sheaf of that year's harvest had been cut and stood. And, just as today, we'd faced a break from labour, which meant that I could sleep my mischief off. So in the company of John Carr, my new neighbour then, my neighbour still, I went off that afternoon to Thank the Lord for His Munificence by hunting fairy caps in these same woods. I'll not forget the dancing lights, the rippling and the merriment, the halos and the melting trails that followed anything that moved, the enormous fearlessness I felt, the lasting fear (yes, even now), or how darkly blue the moon became that night, and then how red. I wish I'd had the courage since to try to find that moon again.

Last evening, when the twins and Brooker Higgs jaunted past our cottages and waved at us with gill stains on their fingertips, I asked these merry men, 'Had any luck?' They bared their sack of spoils at once, because they were too foxed and stupefied to conceal them, even

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though they understood my ancient closeness to the manor house. I pulled aside the dampening of leaves and inspected their few remaining fairy caps, saved for later revels, I suppose, plus a good number of golden shawls, which, stewed in milk and placed inside a dead man's mouth, are meant to taste so good they'll jolt him back to life. Accounting for the bulk of their sack was a giant moonball, its soft, kid-leather skin already smoking spores, and far too yellowy and dry to cook. Why had they picked it, then? Why hadn't they just given it a satisfying kick? What kind of wayward lads were these?

Here's what took place. This is my reckoning, calculated without recourse to any constable or magistrate – and just as well, because this place is too far off from towns to number such judicious creatures amongst our livestock; we are too small, and getting smaller. Our final day of harvesting was not as joyful as it ought to have been, and not only because the crop proved so frugal in the ear. A gentleman we did not recognise was watching us reduce our barley field to stub; a visitor, a rare event, exciting and unnerving. We mowed with scythes; he worked with brushes and with quills. He was recording us, he said, or more exactly marking down our land, at Master Kent's request. He tipped his drawing board for anyone that asked and let them see the scratchings on his chart, the geometrics that he said were fields and woods, the squares that stood for cottages, the ponds, the lanes, the foresting.

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He was a pleasant man, I'd say. No more than thirty years of age and dressed much like the master, not for labour but for the open air, in sturdy boots, breeches, a jerkin, and a plain cap without feather, brooch or badge. His beard was shaped and honed to a point with wax. I have a narrow trowel that matches it. A townsman's beard. A wealthy beard. And he was lop-sided when he moved, with a stiff arm and shoulder on his left. His was a body not well suited to the balks and bumpy edges of a field. He was a stumbler. And there was, I thought, a trace of past illness in his expression as well as in his step. But I've never seen a man more ready with a smile. We could not help but stare at him and wonder, without saying so, if those scratchings on his board might scratch us too, in some unwelcome way.

Still, there was essential work to finish yesterday, whatever our distractions. If we hoped for sufficient grain to last the year, we'd have to deserve it with some sweat. This summer's yield was not yet good enough. Plenty, here, has wed itself to Leanness. At the lower, shaded limits by the dell and on the more neglected stony slopes our plants have proven miserly. They grew as short, askew and weakly as our limping visitor and so were hardly worth the reaping. But the higher field, which we left standing till the last, has always looked more sprightly – and more promising. Since spring we've waited with our fingers crossed as our better barley steadily renounced its green and let itself go tawny. From

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the lane, looking down towards the tracery of willows on the brook, the top end of our barley meadow, bristling and shivering on the breeze, showed us at last its ochres and its cadmiums, its ambers and its chromes. And the smells, which for so long in this slow summer were faint and damp, became nutlike and sugary. They promised winter ales and porridges. The awns and whiskers of the barley's ears were brittle and dry enough to chit-chat-chit every time they were disturbed, nattering with ten thousand voices at every effort of the wind or every scarper of a rabbit, mouse or bird. They said, 'We've had enough. Our heads are baked and heavy now. We're dry. Bring out your blades and do your worst.'

Reap and gossip. That's the rule. On harvest days, anyone who's got a pair of legs and arms can expect to earn supper with unceasing labour. Our numbers have been too reduced of late to allow a single useful soul to stay away. There's not a hand that will escape the brittle straw unscratched. The children go ahead of us, looking for the grey of any thistle heads that have outstripped our rust-gold barley, then duck below the level ears of grain to weed out nettles, teasels, docks; 'dealing with the grievances', we say. The broadest shoulders swing their sickles and their scythes at the brimming cliffs of stalk; hares, partridges and sparrows flee before the blades; our wives and daughters bundle up and bind the sheaves, though not too carefully – they work on the principle of ten for the commons and one for the glean-

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ing; our creaking fathers make the lines of stooks; the sun begins to dry what we have harvested. Our work is consecrated by the sun. Compared to winter days, let's say, or digging days, it's satisfying work, made all the more so by the company we keep, for on such days all the faces we know and love (as well as those I know but do not like entirely) are gathered in one space and bounded by common ditches and collective hopes. If, perhaps, we hear a barking deer nagging to be trapped and stewed, or a woodcock begging to make his hearse in a pie, we lift our heads as one and look towards the woods as one; we straighten up as one and stare at the sun, reprovingly, if it's been darkened by a cloud; our scythes and hand tools clack and chat in unison. And anything we say is heard by everyone. So there is openness and jollity.

The harvest teamwork allows us to be lewd. Our humour ripens as the barley falls. It's safe to spread the gossip noisily, it's safe to bait and goad, Who's sharing wives? Which bearded bachelor is far too friendly with his goat? Which widower (they look at me) has dipped his thumb in someone else's pot? Which blushing youngsters are the village *sparcs*, that's to say those children who've been conceived in one man's bed and then delivered in another's? Who's making love to apple tubs? Who's wedded to a sack of grain? Nothing is beyond our bounds, when we are cutting corn.

So it was hardly a surprise yesterday that once 'Mr

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Quill' in Master Kent's close company was attending with his survey sticks and measuring tapes to the shape and volume of our fallow field and so beyond hearing, we wondered, out loud, whether our visiting townsman had ever overcome his undisguised deficiencies to secure himself a willing wife. Was he a husband yet? And, if he was, what blushing pleasures might Mistress Quill take from such staggering and stiffness and from having such a likeness of her hairy private part upon her stumbling lover's chin? 'I'd like to take a scythe to him,' said my neighbour John. Another said, 'I'd rather take my wooden staff to her.' And then of course the bawdiness increased with such play on the prospect of caressing Mr Quill's three-cornered beard and Mistress Quill's twin attributes that every time that evening and in our company he ruminated with his hand around his chin, as was his habit, the women there could barely plug their grins while their men looked on, biting their lips. 'And have you noticed his white hands?' one of our village daughters asked. 'I wonder if he's ever dirtied them . . . other than to . . .' No, she would not finish. What she had in mind did not seem possible.

It was only when the gentleman returned in the fullness of the afternoon and stood at our backs on the bristle of the field to quantify and measure us that we began again to wonder what awaited these treasured neighbourhoods and to feel uneasy. What was he wanting from our soil, what were his charts securing? We

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saw his finger wagging on the count. We heard him numbering, until he reached the paltry fifty-eight that represented us. We know enough to understand that in the greater world flour, meat and cheese are not divided into shares and portions for the larder, as they are here, but only weighed and sized for selling. Was Mr Quill the confirmation of the rumour that had gone about our doors that Master Kent was in such narrows now he was a widower that he would need to measure and sell our land? No amount of openness and jollity could raise our spirits once that fear took hold. Our observer's ready smile was menacing.

We were slow to broadcast our alarm. But we tackled our last barley stands more silently, less lewdly – and more scrupulously, as we were being watched. Now each barking deer or woodcock call was a warning. Each darkling cloud reminded us how nothing in our fields was guaranteed. We only muttered to ourselves, too anxious to raise our voices loud enough to reach our neighbours down the reaping line. Some of the younger men set faces which declared they'd defend our acres with their lives or with the lives of anyone that crossed them. The usual silent swagger. Rather than speak up, they turned their anger on the pigeons and the rooks, and on a handful of our master's near-white doves, which had descended on the stub and were already robbing fallen grain that, by ancient gleaning rights, should have been ours. These 'snowy devils', their out-of-season

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whiteness making them seem even more coldly pea-eyed and acquisitive than their grey and black companions, were feasting on our bread and ale, they said, and sent the children to use their slings or shower them with handfuls of grit or yell the thieves away, anything to evidence our tenancy. The air was full of wings and cries. So our final harvesting gained ground.

By my account, once our complicated working day was done and all our flat-eared barley was gathered in and carted away, the Derby twins and Brooker Higgs, unmarried men in a village dismayingly short of unmarried women, set off for the woods, while most of us, the rest of us, restored ourselves at home, took stock. We shook our heads and searched our hearts, until we had persuaded ourselves that Master Kent was too good and just a man to sell our fields. He'd always taken care of us. We'd always taken care of him. Besides, what was the evidence of any sale? A bearded, skew-whiff gentleman? A chart? The counting of our heads? No, we should not be mistrustful. We should face the rest day with easy hearts, and then enjoy the gleaning that would follow it, with our own Gleaning Queen the first to bend and pick a grain. We should expect our seasons to unfold in all their usual sequences, and so on through the harvests and the years. Everything was bound to keep its shape. That's what we thought. We were calm and leisurely. But, unlike the three bachelors, we had not found and eaten fairy caps and then concocted ways of getting even

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with the thieving birds, especially the white ones from the master's cote. Nor had we stumbled on a moonball, fatter than a blacksmith's head, but too tindery to eat. Such a dry and hollow moonball is good, as any tree scamp knows, for taking flames from here to there. It's good, if you are so inclined, while everybody sleeps and only night's black agents are at work, for taking fire into the master's yards.

Of course, those fairy-headed men did not intend to kill so many of the master's doves. Or even mean to start a fire. Their plan was only to create a little smoke and drive the birds away. But when their moonball lantern was pushed before first light into the loft, amongst the bone-dry chaff and litter that the doves had gleaned and brought inside for nesting, it wasn't long before its smoulder took to flame and the flame, encouraged by the frenzy of flapping wings, spread along the underside of roof beams, fed by timber oils, and found the top bales of that summer's hay. A bird will stay away from smoke. So these doves could seek the corners of their loft, or beat themselves against the roofing laths, or try to peck an opening. But who truly knows what doves might do in fires? Perhaps, a dove will simply sit and coo, too foolish to do otherwise, until its feathers are singed black, until its flesh is roasted to the bone. Whatever happened, this is certain: the stable yard this morning smells of undeserving meat. And the twins and Brooker Higgs have woken to the worst dawn of their lives.

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In any other place but here, such wilful arsonists would end up gibbeted. They'd be on hooks in common view and providing sustenance to the same thieving birds they'd hoped to keep from gleaning. But, as I've said, these fields are far from anywhere, two days by post-horse, three days by chariot, before you find a market square; we have no magistrate or constable; and Master Kent, our landowner, is just. And he is timid when it comes to laws and punishments. He'd rather tolerate a wrongdoer amongst his working hands than rob a family of their father, husband, son. Of course, the burning down of the master's stable and his cote, the loss of hay and doves, is not a felony that should pass unpunished entirely. If the perpetrators are identified, they can expect a beating, followed by a lengthy sojourn sleeping rough, beyond our boundaries. Some of their family stock – a pair of goats, perhaps, some weaner pigs – might well be claimed in recompense. But their lives will never be at stake, not here. So maybe it is better for the bachelors to hold their nerve, come out to fight their own fire, seem innocent, and hope that everyone will take the blaze to be an act of God. Bad luck, in other words, and not a soul to blame.

But Brooker and the twins are not practised at deceit. They'd not succeed as players on a stage as so many other renegades and cut-throats do, escaping justice in a guise. Their guilt is on display for everyone to see. They are too noisy and too keen, especially when Master Kent himself

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comes down, wrapped in the sleeveless mandilion his wife wove for him in the winter of her death, and stands in shock beside his rescued mare, well back, beyond the heat, to watch his stable disappear. His home and peace of mind are scorched. The guilty men do what they can to make him notice them, make him see how loyal and tireless they're prepared to be on his behalf. Unlike the rest of us, Master Kent included, they'll not admit to at least some errant, childlike fascination with the flames, the old and satisfying way they turn such solids into ash and air. Instead, they lead the rush to bring in water from the pond and cisterns. They make too great a show of beating back the flames with spades. The blaze has made their tongues as dry as hay. They show no fear. It is as if their lives depend upon the quenching of this fire.

Of course, they are the ones – and Brooker Higgs especially; he is the orator – who organise the hunt for those responsible. It is clear at once – as soon as he suggests it – that nobody is ready to believe his claim that such a fire was caused by chance or by the natural overheating of a rick. A good rick's as solid as a cottage, bricked with sheaves. It can sweat, and bake itself. But what could have kindled it? There was no lightning overnight. No one burning farm waste close by sent a vagrant spark across the master's garths. No one slept in the stable block by candle-light. The master cannot be accused of having gone up amongst the doves with his tobacco pipe. No, this was done maliciously. Brooker

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is nodding his agreement. Whoever caused 'this Devil's work', he suggests, pointing at the black remains of the ricking ladder, which only this morning he and his own accomplices leant against the stable wall for access to the dovecote, probably intended to make off with the master's doves. To eat. Now who amongst them has so empty a stomach that they would need to steal a neighbour's food? Why only last evening the master himself said he would kill a calf to mark the end of harvest and their election of the Gleaning Queen. So who amongst them would steal and eat a dove and then find themselves too glutted to enjoy the veal? No, the finger of suspicion points not at a villager – the very thought! – but at a stranger.

There're newcomers, come out of nowhere to the edges of our wood, somebody says, precisely as Brooker hopes they will. This informer waves his hands towards the far side of the fields and that other damper, blacker plume of smoke that all of us with eyes have seen this morning on our way to save the stable. From where we stand their smoke is still bending darkly on a breeze across the treetops.

'We'll call on them, I think,' says the master mildly. 'We'll call on them to test what answers they provide, but not before we've dampened everything and made my buildings safe.' He looks around and shakes his head. This has been a blow for him, another burden to survive. His eyes are watery. Perhaps it's only smoke that makes

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them watery. 'Well . . .' he says, looking towards the smudgy sky above the newcomers, and lets his comment hang. He means that he is heavy-hearted at the thought – the logical suspicion, in fact – that the second plume of smoke will lead him to the dove-roasters. And then he knows his duty will demand a firm and heavy hand.

I understand that this is the moment when I should raise my own hand and say my piece, report the dry moonball. Or at least I should take Brooker Higgs aside to nudge him in the ribs. But I hold my tongue instead. A moonball isn't evidence. Nor is bad playing. Besides, I sense the mood is to let this drama run its course and die back with the flames. Today's a rest day and we want the air to clear – to clear of danger and to clear of smoke – so that we can enjoy ourselves as we deserve. This evening there's ale to drink, there's veal to eat, and we will choose the prettiest to be our Gleaning Queen. I'm sure I'm not the only one who elects to hold his tongue and does not, as he should, put up his hand. We do not wish to spoil our holiday, nor will we value bales of straw and doves above our neighbours' sons.

In fact, my hand – the left – is too damaged to be raised. I was amongst the foolish volunteers who tried to roll some of the burning bales into the yard towards the line of water buckets so that we might save at least some of the master's winter feed, his great bulging loafs of hay. I soaked my neck-cloth in a water pail and tied it round my mouth against the smoke, and then, with neighbour

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Carr at my side, went into the stable block beneath the cracking timbers to see what we could save. We put our hands and chests against the closest bale, braced our legs against the paving flags, and pushed. The bale lurched forward, only half a turn. We braced to push again but this time my one hand plunged into the burning straw and smouldered for a moment. My fingertips are burnt. There's not a hair below my wrist. My palm is scorched and painful beyond measure. I have to say a roasted man does not smell as appetising as a roasted dove. The damage is severe. The skin is redder than a haw. I do my best to chew the pain, to not create a further spectacle. Still, I am not starved of sympathy. Even the master himself takes me by the shoulders in a hug to show his pity and concern. He knows a farmer with an injured hand is as useful as a one-pronged pitchfork. No use at all, especially at harvest time. No wonder I am more concerned at the moment with my own flesh than with any stranger's. Now I have to go back to my house and make a poultice for the wound from egg white and cold flour. Then a pinch of salt to pacify the blisters. I will have to be an invalid today. Today, at least, I will have to sit and watch the world. Whatever's bound to happen when my neighbours reach those newcomers who've set up home on the common outskirts of our fields will happen without me.

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THE VILLAGE IS AFLAME, but not with fire. This morning, once the master's stable blaze was deadened and so drenched it could hardly cough a puff of ash, my neighbours were in a bold and rowdy mood. The air was swarming with anxieties. With Master Kent, mindful of his horse's dung, riding politely at their rear on his recovered mare, they took the carting lane beside the manor house and strode with devilry in their steps – the kind that can flourish only on a day when there's no other work to do – towards the one remaining twist of smoke. Some of them were armed – or is it fairer to say *equipped*? – with sticks and staves, and 'meaner implements', John Carr reports. We're not a hurtful people, hereabouts. But we feel naked without tools. And it makes sense in such a distant place as this, where there is little wealth and all our labours are spent on putting a single meal in front of us each day, to be protective of our modest world and fearful for our

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skinny lives. Master Kent may own the fields. His titles, muniments and deeds are witness to the truth of that. The manor comes to him by right of marriage, through the old master, Edmund Jordan, and his only daughter, Lucy Kent, both deceased and buried not a hundred paces from my home in the church-yard with no church.

But what are documents and deeds when there are harvests to be gathered in? Only toughened hands can do that job. And Master Kent, for all his parchmenting, would be the poorest man if all he had to work his property were his own two hands and no others. He'd be blistered by midday, and famished ever after. What landowner has ever made his palms rough on a scythe or plough? Ours are the deeds that make the difference. No, our ancient understanding is that, though we are only the oxen to his halter, it is allowed for us to be possessive of this ground and the common rights that are attached to it despite our lack of muniments. And it is reasonable, I think, to take offence at a ruling – made in a distant place – which gives the right of settlement and cedes a portion of our share to any vagrants who might succeed in putting up four vulgar walls and sending up some smoke before we catch them doing it – and to see these vagrants off, beyond our cherished boundaries. It's true, of course, that some of us arrived this way ourselves, and not so long ago. I count myself amongst those aliens. But times have changed. Our numbers have decreased in the years since I arrived as my master's manservant.

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Stomachs have fallen short of acres. We've lost good friends but not had much success with breeding their inheritors or raising sturdy offspring. We're growing old and faltering. Harvests have been niggardly, of late. There're days in winter when our cattle dine and we do not. Why should we share with strangers?

Anyway, what can you tell about a newcomer from smoke, except that he or she is wanting? Or demanding? We've heard from the occasional pedlar, tinker or walk-through carpenter – who's hoped, and failed, to make a living in our midst – how there are cattle thieves beyond the woods, how travellers are stopped and robbed, how vagabonds and vagrant families descend upon a settlement to plunder it, like rooks and crows, and then move on. We have to ask ourselves, why have these people arrived just as the harvest is brought in. Is this another act of God? Bad luck, in other words, and not a soul to blame? A saint might think it so. A saint might want to welcome them and shake them by the hands. But we, more timorous than saints, might prefer to keep our handshakes to ourselves. Besides, to touch a stranger's flesh is dangerous. Do not embrace a soul until you know its family name, we say. We have been fortunate this year. No deaths from plague and only one appalling death from sweating fits so far. But contagion is known to be a crafty passenger, a stowaway. I can imagine hidden sores and rashes on the backs and buttocks of our visitors. And I can see why blaming them for what the twins and

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Brooker Higgs have done might be a blessing in disguise. No, I was glad to be at home this morning and not amongst my neighbours, even though it meant I missed first sighting of this creature who has so charred us with her fire.

I sat outside the cottage with my injured hand resting open on my knee, its palm turned up, and let the fresh air salve the wound. It was a rare event to have the row of dwellings to myself or, that's to say, to share them only with our poultry and our pigs. The quiet was curative, but it was also chilling in a way to survey, from the oaken bench I built myself from timber that I felled myself, the makeshift byres that once were family cottages. There was the creeper-throttled derelict next door to the Carrs' home, which when I first arrived was never free of voices; and then the unkept garden at widow Gosse's place, where her husband used to stand and boast his colworts and his radishes, his double-marigolds and thyme; and, after that, set away with its own path, the rubble of the tenement where Cecily, my wife, was raised. No, we have tenancy to spare, and could easily provide some newcomers a place to live, if the village was only minded to be less suspicious of anyone who was not born with local soil under their fingernails. Some extra working hands might be of value in the coming days, especially since my own left hand will be of little use and we are so hard-pressed for younger men and

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women. I rapped my good hand on the bench until my knuckles hurt. I did not deserve to feel relaxed.

These are the moments when I most miss greater places – the market towns, the liberties of youth, the choices that I had and left behind. My land-born neighbours now are ditched and fenced against the outside world. They are too rooted in their soil, too planched and thicketed, to be at ease with newcomers. They are not used to hospitality and do not want to be. There's not a village, sea to sea, that receives fewer strangers. In all the years since my and Master Kent's arrival not one other new soul has settled here for long, or hoped to. Who, after looking at this place and with no secret interest or association, would choose to make a home amongst these frowning residents? But I am now part of it and part of them. I have become a frowner, too, and I have learnt to make do with the Kindom of close relatives, where anyone who is not blood is married to someone else who is. One family's daughter is another's niece, another's aunt, and yet another's daughter-in-law. And if you're not a Saxton or a Derby or a Higgs yourself, you have a score of relatives who are. We live in a rookery. A cousinry, let's say. And just like rooks we have begun to sound and look the same. So many grumps, so many corn-haired blondes, so many wavy, oval beards, so many beryl eyes, so many thickset arms and legs, that no one needs to mention them, or even notice them, unless reminded by an out-of-pattern visitor like me. But even I have found

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myself with thickset arms and legs, though I arrived as thin and gawky as our Mr Quill.

The latest dwelling on our lands is by all reports a poor affair. Our hurried newcomers have only dragged some fallen timber from the wood and woven out of it, uncut, a square of fences better suited to restrict a pair of pigs than to house a family. These walls are fit for men who prefer to crawl rather than stand. They're pargeted with earth and leaves, and roofed with the kind of sacking that can stop neither the light nor the rain. Is this den enough to confer squatting rights? No one is sure. Though if it is, foxes, badgers, even moles could lay claim to their common rights and help themselves to fowl and fruit and firewood from our land. But then it is not expected that these newcomers, these funguses that seek to feed on us, these dove-slaughterers, will choose to stay amongst us for a second night once they've discovered how thin – and dangerous – our welcome is. They'll travel on. We'll walk them to our boundaries and set them on the way, glad to be of help.

The open hearth that sent up such a green-black plume at dawn was dead by the time my neighbours and Master Kent arrived at the shadowed clearing near The Bottom, where our land is cliffed by woods. Even Mr Quill had lurched along behind them, his parchment book in hand, as ever with such gentlemen, making notes and marking shapes and hoping not to be excluded from the dramas of the day. Though the smoke had run

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its course and some tidy housekeeper had already kicked away the remaining ashes and twigs, the confirmation that my neighbours were expecting – and Brooker and the twins were praying for – was on the ground for all to see. Bird bones, gnawed clean. Christopher Derby, the elder of the twins and usually the quieter, pointed at the remains with all the authority his index finger could muster and said, ‘Our dear guests’ meal. One of the master’s birds.’ Last night the newcomers had evidently gnawed on dove, as if they were ‘great lords at banqueting’, though by the looks of it, according to my neighbour, John Carr, who took the trouble to push his inspecting toe through the scraps and leftovers, this dove had dark feathers, short bones and a yellow beak. None of my other neighbours wished to be dissuaded, though. It was easier to believe that by a further cunning the arsonists had disguised their plunder as a blackbird.

There was no sign of any living bones about the den, and when its overnight inhabitants were summoned with a shout and beating implements to give an account of themselves, no one appeared. Brooker Higgs was the first to raise his stick and strike the dwelling on its roof, expecting, with a single blow, to bring it to the ground and earn himself some cheap applause. His stick produced an unexpected clonk as dull and firm as a bag of chaff, but the roof, after seeming to adjust itself, fell in. What thickset man cannot bring down a length of sacking? But the hurried timber walls were stouter than they looked.

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Other men stepped forward with heavier tools and would have finished the task had not, before the second blow, a pair of strangers – a young mop-headed youth with a feathery, novice beard and a shorter, older man, the father, probably – stepped out of the trees with long-bows raised and drawn to the ear. In common with every other man about these parts, they clearly knew how to loose an arrow if called upon. They seemed baffled rather than belligerent. They looked, in other words, more innocent than any of us would have liked. Their squinted eyes and furrowed foreheads said, ‘What kind of villainy is this that takes a cudgel to a poor man’s home?’

The twins and Brooker Higgs no longer wished to be numbered amongst the front rank of their more aggressive neighbours, and not only because the strangers’ arrows seemed to be pointing at Brooker’s chest. He was the only one who’d done any damage yet and so was the most deserving of some punishment. He heeled his way into the crowd until his chest was not the first in line, and then – no fool – he let himself drop shorter. The women called their children to their sides and also backed away. The widow Gosse, I’m told, fainted and fell into some nettles. The other, more stalwart men made narrow with themselves, turning their shoulders to the arrow-heads and tucking their elbows into their waists, protecting their soft organs.

Master Kent dismounted from Willowjack and stood behind her. He was not being cowardly but sensible.

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The men spread out, widening the strangers' target and already calculating in their heads that the odds were on their side, that twenty sturdy men standing on their own God-given land with sticks and even one or two keen sickles were more than a match for two newcomers and a pair of arrows. As soon as those two arrows were released, no matter what damage they might do, the game was over and the beating could begin. As I've said, we're not a hurtful people. We are, though, fearful, proud and dutiful. We do what must be done. But at this moment, so I'm told, the mood was murderous. Two poacher-arsonists were facing us with bows. We'd never known such disrespect and brazen sacrilege. The day had darkened suddenly.

Mr Quill, for such a malformed man, showed the greatest bravery. Or was it simply courtesy? He clumsied forward wearing that ready, foolish smile which had kept us company in yesterday's field. For a moment it was thought he meant to strike the den himself and earn the recompense of being augered through the heart by a hardened poplar arrow-shaft. Indeed, one of the strangers turned his bow on Mr Quill, secured his hold on the fletchings and string, and said in an accent no one there had heard before, 'Step well away.' But the master's chart-maker did not step well away. He had other plans. What those plans were, my neighbours never discovered. Four or five of them took advantage of what they would later describe to me as Mr Quill's shrewd diversion.

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While he distracted them with his determined smile, holding out his palms to show they had nothing to be fearful of, our bolder men edged closer to the newcomers. Two more steps and it would be done. If Mr Quill was sacrificed in their attempt, then that might be a price they could afford. He was no cottager. They hadn't grown used to him. No matter that his scratchings would be incomplete. I will not say they may have thought his death convenient.

This was the moment that the woman showed her face. No witnesses are in any hurry to blot out the vision of her rising from the den. She had been hidden and confined below the sacking roof all along, I'm told excitedly by almost everyone who saw it. She is the burning topic for this evening. While her men – no one knows yet what kinship there might be between the three of them – were concealed amongst the trees, she was evidently sitting up inside her crude dwelling and peering out between the branches and the earthy daub at what I have to call a mob. She will have wondered at the anger they brought with them, their fearsome staves and sticks, the glinting silver of their sickle blades. She will have seen a stocky young man with the stone-green eyes of a cottage cat step forward and bring his clonking stick down on her roof – and on her skull. The face that showed itself was running wet with blood, and her black hair was further darkened with a wound.

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The whole encounter was transformed by blood, I'm told. What was a routine stand-off between two sets of men, two sets of *armed* men, both ready to defend themselves incautiously, had in a trice become an occasion of shame. The woman's wound was too red and fresh not to take notice of. Indeed, the blood was marking her cheeks, like tears. At once the village women began to call out for restraint. Their men did not attempt those two more steps. They let their weapons fall away into the undergrowth or hang loosely from their hands. Again it was Mr Quill who didn't do what he was told. Despite the closeness of the bow, he moved forward awkwardly, pulled aside the topmost branches of their den, put out his hand and helped the bloody woman step into the light.

What were they to make of her? She was not beautiful, not on first encounter anyhow. She had what we might call (behind her back) a weasel face, wide-cheeked, thin-lipped, a short receding chin, a button nose, and eyes and hair as shiny, dark and dangerous as bella-donna berries. What caught our women's eyes at once was the velvet shawl she wore round her shoulders, an expensive lordly weave in heavy Turkish mauve and silver thread. Their instinct was to call out, Mind your Cloth. Her blood was bulbing on her little chin and might soon drop to spoil the velvet. Their second thought declared, She's dressed beyond her station. A woman of her kind could not possess a shawl such as that without first stealing it. Even Lucy Kent, the master's wife, had never owned a

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shawl such as that. Indeed, a shawl such as that, so far as anybody could remember, had never crossed the village boundaries before. It's not surprising, then, that so many of our wives and daughters widened their eyes in envy, hoped to feel the weight of it between their fingers, and wondered what their chances were of wearing it themselves.

The village men were not so taken by the cloth. They noticed it, of course, and how it added a becoming colour to the scene. They could imagine making use of it, laid out in the hidden corner of some field, far from their wives. But, as men will, they were assessing her by standards other than her clothes. They surveyed her, hoof, horn and tail. And then they surveyed her two men. What they saw was someone who might happily infect their dreams, a wide-hipped woman who was enthralling to behold in ways they never could explain and all the more so for not being beautiful or statuesque but rather someone within reach, and someone who was defiantly – and irresistibly – proud. She held up her head, flared her nostrils in disdain, pursed her lips, and did not even dip her gaze as she was helped by Mr Quill beyond the province of her broken home. She'd be, they thought, more than thirty years of age and so it was unlikely (and preferable, of course) that either of the men was her husband. The elder was already grey and balding, her father possibly, though any facial likeness was obscured by beard; the other was a man at least ten years younger

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than the woman, but equally as black-haired as her. A brother, then. This was a family. And it was safe to say the daughter of the house was still available, despite her age. She was a widow, possibly, with all that implies: she would be seasoned and experienced; she would have an unslaked thirst for company. In a village such as ours, where women die before the men, there are plenty of my neighbours who will have seen at once a tempting opportunity. While the women might have cast her as a subject of their kindom or a partner for their sons and might have nieced and cousined her, glad to have their breeding stock enlarged by some black hair, the men there will have chambered her and nested her the moment that she showed herself. Surely that could hardly count as sin. The local women were like land – fenced in, assigned and spoken for, the freehold of their fathers, then their husbands, then their sons. You could not cross their boundaries, or step beyond your portion. But this one, this incomer, was no better than any other wild quarry on common ground. Like any pigeon, any hare, she was fair game.

Still, the written law should be obeyed. Our Master Kent, who had yet to show his presence and authority, mounted Willowjack again and brought her forward until he reached the clearing by the den, where the three newcomers and Mr Quill were standing like skittles, not uttering a word. I sympathise with Master Kent and what he chose to do. He understood that something out of

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reason had occurred and something out of reason had to put an end to it.

‘Put those aside,’ he said, indicating the two long-bows. ‘This is not a place for ruff . . .’ He would have called them ruffians had not the woman widened her eyes at him. ‘This is not a place for rough manners,’ he resumed.

She laughed. ‘Those are the only manners we’ve seen since we arrived,’ she said. ‘What shame is it that you shake sticks at us?’

‘I’m not shaking any sticks at you,’ the master said. ‘Nor shall I do so. But you two, sirs’ – he pointed at the woman’s men – ‘must pay for dining out last night on fowl that don’t belong to you . . . we’ve seen the picked-clean bones . . . by contemplating better manners in the pillory. Let’s say one week. And let your offending bows be put underfoot and snapped in two. And each of you should have your head shaven, to mark you out as . . . well, suspicious travellers.’

One week, disarmed and bald? A modest punishment. And one which by happy chance would keep the woman on our land and separated from her men for long enough for every village hand to try his luck with her. She spat at this point, only at the ground between the horse’s hoofs but still a shocking act and one that Master Kent could not ignore without losing face.

‘Count yourself as fortunate we do not boast a broader pillory,’ he said, not looking at her in case she widened

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her eyes at him again. 'And be thankful that we are too gentle here and careful of our water to duck you in our village pond. But you will lose your hair together with your men. And in the time it takes to lengthen you might consider your disdain for us.'

This time her phlegm reached Willowjack and left a rosary of pearls across her flank.