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Harvest

Written by Jim Crace

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Jim Crace

HARVEST

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Happy the man, whose wish and care
A few paternal acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air
In his own ground.

'Ode on Solitude', Alexander Pope

1

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,

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

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

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.

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

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-

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 *spares*, 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

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

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

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

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.

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

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

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

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

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.