**The Crossing Of Herald Montjoy: A Short Story**

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A PIECE OF GROUND NEAR AGINCOURT, OCTOBER 1415

He does not have far to ride.

The distance between the two encamped armies is little more than a mile. They are so close that at night-time, in the cold stillness, each can hear the laughter of the other, and the swearing and the cries. They're like neighbouring farmers, eavesdropping in the moonlight.

The French are noisier than the English. There are far more of them, they have more liquor and they seem to know more songs.

Herald Montjoy walks out from the French camp, through the wood on the right towards Maisoncelles, and stands among the trees and listens to the English. He can hear a lot of hammering. He thinks the exhausted soldiers may be trying to make cabins out of elm. He remembers his little nephew, Roland, who has made a tree house. He loves Roland. Having no children of his own, he's tried to describe to Roland what he is. He has told him: 'A herald is a watcher. It's important to understand this. He oversees the conduct of armies, but doesn't really belong to them. He's not a man-at-arms, but a man apart.'

Then, a morning comes, salt-white with frost, when Herald Montjoy is summoned to the Dauphin's tent. The Dauphin instructs him to ride out across the fields to the English camp and inquire whether the English King is ready to ransom himself, to save his ragged army from certain defeat. The Dauphin's tent is sumptuous with blue and gold hangings. The Dauphin is doing body-building exercises all the while he is talking. As Montjoy leaves the tent, he hears him say to the Duke of Alencon: 'God, I'm fit.'

Herald Montjoy gets on his horse. The land he must cross has been ploughed and he's worried that the horse is going to stumble on the icy ridges of earth. A mist hangs on the fields, milky and dense and the herald wishes that this, too, wasn't there. This and the hard frost give the day such strange singularity.

A PIECE OF GROUND NEAR THE MANOR OF LA VALLEE, APRIL 1412

He did not have far to ride.

The distance between his parents' house and the manor where Cecile lived was little more than two miles. He and his horse knew every step by heart. It was mostly downhill. And he would see the house long before he reached it. And always his thoughts flew ahead of him and landed, gentle as birds, on Cecile's head and on her shoulders and on her feet in coloured shoes.

She was so . . . exceptional. He tried, on these journeys to and from her house, to decide what, if anything, she resembled - in nature, or in man's inventions. He wondered whether he could compare her to a lake of water lilies where silvery fish glimmered deep down. Or was she like a sundial, unerring, yet always speaking, in her adoration of ephemeral things, of time's passing?

He decided there was nothing and no one as strangely beautiful as her. Not even the landscape through which he and his horse had to pass, with its flowering meadows, its clear stream, its silent woods and its perfumed air. Not even his dreams, in which he sometimes gave himself wings and flew up into the sky and floated above France.

No. Cecile was more to him than any of these things. She kept honey bees in tall hives in her father's orchard. Her bee-keeping hat had a gossamer veil that fell to earth all round her and whenever Herald Montjoy dreamed of flying above France, there below him walked Cecile in her bee veil with nothing on underneath.

He knew he had to marry Cecile. He had to possess her: her body, her soul, her petticoats, her bees, her shoe cupboard. He couldn't wait much longer.

He was a handsome man, with dark soft hair and a curling lip, and he had no doubt that when he proposed to Cecile he would be accepted. He would say to her father: 'Sir, in two or three years' time, I aim to become Chief Herald of France. I do not think that is an unrealistic boast.'

AGINCOURT, OCTOBER 1415

His hat is a strange confection, indigo blue with loops of velvet that fall just above his left eye and bounce up and down as the horse canters.

This bouncing of his blue hat as he advances into the icy mist makes him fret. It's as if everything is conspiring to blind him on this frozen day. He finds himself wishing it were night, with a round moon to light the field and the songs and the hammering of the English to guide him on. He feels that under these conditions, he would see and think much more clearly: whereas, in this fog, with the forest petrified and silent close by, he feels confused and half-afraid.

He reins in his horse and turns him into the wood and dismounts. He sets down the weighty standard by an oak tree. He ties the horse to the tree.

He takes off his hat, runs a hand through his curly hair. All around him is the tracery of the night's frost, fingering every spine. He asks himself: Why afraid, Montjoy?

He is thirty years old, three years older than Henry of England.

Is everyone on this piece of earth afraid of the battle that is there and not there in every mind? Of the future battle that is coming or may never happen - there and not there, departing like a lover, returning like a fever . . .?

The Dauphin isn't afraid. 'Afraid? Bunk.' And then he admires his leg. 'The English won't last more than half an hour. If that.'

His instructions reveal his nonchalance: 'Just tell the King to give himself up for ransom, all right, Montjoy? Then that sack of bones he calls an army can go home and litter up Southampton.'

He's been told to ride fast, to return quickly. The Dauphin's getting impatient with all the waiting. Montjoy has never disobeyed an order in his life, yet now he's in the wood, scratching his head, standing still, staring at the trees. He feels as if he can't make this crossing, but he doesn't know why.

LA VALLEE, APRIL 1412

He felt weightless on that April morning. He felt as if he could swing himself up off his horse and into the air. He was wearing a sky-blue tunic. The sun shone on those soft curls of his.

He was riding to La Vallee to ask for Cecile's hand. His mother and father had waved and grinned as he'd set off: 'Such a beautiful girl, son. So striking. We wish you joy and success.'

His thoughts, as always, had already landed on Cecile. They caressed her shoulder. They lay trapped like butterflies under her lavender-coloured cloak as she put it on and walked out of the house carrying a basket.

What was she going to put in the basket? Branches of blossom?

A thought is seldom trapped for long. It can travel anywhere. It can make decisions.

Montjoy's thoughts escaped from under the cloak. They walked with Cecile through the damp grass. They hid in the shadow of her skirts, high up in the darkness between her legs. They were touched in a caressing way as she took each step.

So then he had to slow his horse, dismount, walk to a stream, try to clear his head. 'You're running too fast,' he told himself. 'You're not her bridegroom yet.'

He knelt over the stream and cupped icy spring water and splashed his face. He gasped. There were days in a life so momentous they seemed to alter the size of the world. His heart felt as colossal as a cuckoo bird. The sky above his kneeling figure expanded and expanded, wider, fatter, closer to heaven than it had ever been.

He sat down on the grass. His horse grazed and flicked his tail at the spring flies. There are splendid lives, he thought. There is bravery and there is luck. There is ingenuity. A woman's shoe can be yellow . . .

There were yellow flowers at the stream's edge. Montjoy wasn't good at the names of flowers, but he sat there for a long while, admiring these particular ones.

AGINCOURT, OCTOBER 1415

In this desolate wood, Montjoy looks for something green, something that will be soft to the touch.

This fear that he can't name has seeped from his mind, down and down all through him and touched his heart like a ghost and then his sphincter, and now he's crouching down and defecating onto the dry bracken.

He can see nothing green, nothing soft to wipe his arse with. He has to scrape up handfuls of harsh bracken and fallen leaves and clean himself with these. As he pulls up his stockings, he feels like weeping.

The wood oppresses him. He'd come into the wood to find a moment's peace before he has to complete his ride to the English camp. But the wood feels dead.

Leaving his horse tied up and the standard leaning against the tree, he makes his way back towards the ploughed field under its curtain of mist.

He walks forward, his feet unsteady on the frosted ridges. He can sense, now, that the mist is going to clear and that the day may after all be fine. Already, there's more light on the field.

He looks down at the earth. He wonders who works this land, what crop he has in mind for the year to come. The loops of Montjoy's indigo hat fall over his eyes. He is standing now on the place where the very centre of the battle will be. Here, where his feet are, an English soldier will fall, his lungs pierced with a lance, blood bursting from his throat. All around him will lie his doomed compatriots, souls vanished into the air. This is the crop to come: in an ecstasy of death, this land will be seeded with the English. And it will be his task to count them - his and the English heralds - to make an orderly tally, even if limbs or heads are severed and fall some way from the torsos. All heralds must be precise. They mustn't look away. Afterwards, he will say to his nephew, Roland: 'I saw it. It took place near the castle of Agincourt. But you couldn't call it a great battle. It was too one-sided.'

He is aware, suddenly, that a lot of time has passed since he set out. Far ahead, he can hear the English resume their pathetic hammering. And this comforts him, somehow. His fear has lessened.

He strides back into the wood and unties his horse. The horse is trembling with cold. He slaps it gently to warm it.

He mounts and takes up his standard. He faces his horse towards the light soaking through the rising mist and rides on.

LA VALLEE, APRIL 1412

Sitting by the stream with the sun quite warm on his nose, Montjoy rehearsed his declaration of love and his offer of marriage.

He imagined Cecile standing with her back towards him, looking out of a window. He went down on one knee, but she hadn't noticed this. Her shoulders were very still. He said: 'Cecile, I think it must have been apparent to you for some time that I consider you to be the centre of my universe . . .'

He imagined her smiling - so now he's going to propose to me - but trying to conceal the smile.

He said: 'And really so it is. Or rather, it's more than this: you have actually altered the way I see the world. Before I met you, my life seemed so small, so circumscribed. But together, you and I could become masters - or rather, I mean, master and mistress - of a fine destiny.'

He decided it was wise, or at least diplomatic, to ask Cecile at this point whether she, too, felt the earth transformed by his presence at her side. And he imagined that she turned from the window and came running to him and pulled him to his feet and said: 'Yes, Montjoy. Yes. I feel the earth transformed.' And then he kissed her.

The kiss was so heavenly that Montjoy, alone by the stream, let it last for several minutes. His eyes were fixed on some vacant spot, unseeing. Above him flew thrushes and finches. Fleets of minnows sailed by him in the water.

When the kiss was over, Montjoy looked around him. At dusk, he would ride back this way with Cecile's promise to be his wife locked inside him like money locked in a box. And always, after today, when he rode this way, he would feel that this was hallowed ground - the spongy grass, the yellow flowers, the icy stream - because it was here that his future came to meet him.

A bee buzzed by him.

He got to his feet. He and the bee were moving to the same enchanted, perfumed destination.

AGINCOURT, OCTOBER 1415

One of their scavenge-parties, sent out to gather nuts and berries and firewood, sees him coming with his flying banner from far off. Two of the party stand and gape at him; two others start running back to the English camp.

They make him feel smart, these bedraggled English, carrying bundles of sticks. His blue hat no longer feels ridiculous, but slightly stylish. He bounces high in the saddle.

He is memorising the Dauphin's instructions: 'Look, Montjoy, the thing is perfectly simple. The English can't possibly win. We outnumber them five to one. If they can't understand this simple arithmetic, do a demonstration with pebbles or coins or any damn thing that happens to be at hand. They are about to be overwhelmed. What a marvellous word. Overwhelmed. I love it. Right?'

And now, as the mist disperses, he can begin to see the English camp. It huddles in among some thin trees. Just as he'd envisaged, the men have made themselves hovels from sticks and bracken. There are a few threadbare tents. Smoke rises from a dozen small fires. He can see soldiers grouped around them, trying to warm themselves. They turn their white faces towards him.

Montjoy has never been to England. He has been told that one corner of it lies under water, but that elsewhere there are great forests, older than time. And these men that he sees look half-drowned to him, or else, with this pallor they have, appear like people who live perpetually in a wooded darkness.

He slows his horse. Like grey ghosts, English soldiers have crept out of the trees and stand staring at him. What honour for France can there possibly be in slaughtering people already half dead; what honour for the heralds to oversee such a massacre? He thinks of Roland. In the tender privacy of the boy's tree house, Montjoy had once said to him: 'Roland, there are two things that have counted with me in my life and one of them is honour . . .'

But his thoughts are interrupted, because now he realises that a group of men-at-arms is approaching him. They have formed themselves into a square. In the middle of the square, Montjoy can glimpse something bright. It is the crown on the King's head.

Montjoy takes off his hat. He dismounts. Carrying the standard and leading his horse, he moves forward on foot. And in this moment (he can't say why) a fragment of his earlier fear lodges in his heart and he sees coming towards him, as if in a dream or a vision, not Henry of England, but his beloved Cecile, wearing a garland of yellow flowers round her hair.

He falters. Then he urges himself on. He is aware, now, that hundreds of the English ghosts have come out of the trees and are gazing at him.

He bows to the King. When he looks up, he sees a squarish, bony face and a complexion less pale than those around him. The regard is soft and the voice, when he hears it, is gentle.

'Well, herald?'

'Sir,' says Montjoy, 'I've come from the Dauphin. He and all the nobles urge you to consider your position. They estimate that your army is outnumbered by five to one and they feel that, to save your men from certain death, the best course you can follow is to give yourself up for ransom . . .'

Montjoy sees one of the men-at-arms belch silently. He decides that two things keep these people from fleeing back to Calais: drink and the presence of their King.

'What is your name, herald?' asks the King.

'Montjoy, Sir.'

The King smiles. The men-at-arms appear to stare through Montjoy to the piece of ground over which he has just travelled.

Still smiling, the King says: 'Montjoy, say this to Prince Dauphin. We would like to remind him that there are very few certainties on earth. Extraordinarily few. When I was a boy, I kept a stag-beetle in an ivory box. I used to speak to it. And one evening, it spoke back to me. Until that time, I'd been absolutely certain that a stag-beetle was unable to talk.'

The King laughs. The men-at-arms turn their anxious eyes from the field and look at their monarch. 'So you see,' said the King, 'One never knows.'

'What did the beetle say, Sir?' asks Montjoy.

'Oh, I don't remember. Just a word or two. It was the unexpectedness that struck me. So there you are, herald. Your Dauphin can believe in his certainty or not as he pleases. It makes no difference to us. We will not be ransomed.'

The ghostly faces have clustered near to the King and are trying to listen to what he's saying. They stare and blink in the sunlight so foreign to them. They scratch their bodies through their clothing.

'God go with you, Montjoy,' said the King.

Montjoy bows. The King and his men-at-arms turn round and walk away. Montjoy replaces his blue hat on his dark head.

LA VALLEE, APRIL 1412

There was the house. There were the doves, like winged thoughts, on the roof. Smoke drifted up from one of the stone chimneys.

Montjoy was still rehearsing his proposal as he dismounted and handed the reins of his horse to a servant. Then the servant informed him that Mademoiselle Cecile and her parents had gone to visit a cousin struck down by a tumbling weathercock. They were not expected back until late afternoon.

In the tableau Montjoy had seen in his mind, there had been morning light at the window where Cecile stood while he told her about the alteration to his world. And he liked things to proceed as he'd imagined them. So now he hesitated: should he leave or should he wait?

He decided to wait. The servant led his horse away. He sat on a stone wall and stared up at the sky. Then, he walked to the orchard where the apple blossom was in flower and stood near to Cecile's beehives. The traffic of bees to and from them absorbed his attention for a long time. He kept picturing the honeyed world inside. He decided that the thing in nature Cecile most closely resembled was a cluster of bees. She moved in ways that he couldn't fully understand and yet all the while there was purpose in her.

Cecile discovered him in the orchard. He'd fallen asleep in the sun and was dreaming of the sea. When he woke and found Cecile standing above him, he believed, for a fragment of a second, that she was a ship in sail, moving past him and on. She was laughing. Montjoy realised how ridiculous he must look, asleep in the grass like a peasant boy. He scrambled to his feet, straightening his tunic, running a hand through his hair. Desperately, he searched for words.

Before he found any, Cecile held out her hands for him to take. He noticed then that her face was very pink and her eyes wide. She was wearing a white dress.

'My friend,' she said, 'I'm so glad to find you here. So happy. That you should be here - and sleeping like a child - is somehow perfectly right. Because I'm in such a state. You can tell just by looking at me, can't you? I'm in such a state of pure joy.'

'Are you, Cecile?'

'Yes. And you are just the person I want to share it with. You've been such a sweet friend to me and now I can tell you my wonderful news. What day is it? I'll always remember this day. Always and always. Now ask me why.'

'Why, Cecile?'

'Because the Duke of Granvilliers proposed to me this afternoon. I'm going to be married. I'm going to have a wonderful life.'

Cecile let go of Montjoy's hands and went dancing off round the orchard, twirling her arms above her head. Montjoy saw that the shoes she was wearing that day were also white and it occurred to him that the grass would soon stain them. The grass appeared dry, but it wasn't. He could feel its dampness on his buttocks and against his shoulder blades and all down his spine.

AGINCOURT, OCTOBER 1415

Returning at a canter, Montjoy soon leaves the smells and sounds of the English camp behind. He doesn't stop to look at the field or the wood. He isn't thinking about the battle to come, but about the kind of voice a stag-beetle might possess. Up in his tree house, Roland makes up different voices for the wind and the stars. Some of the stars don't speak, only yawn.

The Dauphin is at lunch with all his favourite counts and dukes. They're eating blackbirds.

'God, Montjoy,' says the Dauphin, 'you've been an age. What happened?'

Montjoy is very hot after his ride. He can feel sweat in his hair.

'I'm sorry, Sir,' he says, 'I did explain to the King how far he's outnumbered, but - '

'But what?'

'He refuses to be ransomed. He seems willing to fight.'

The Dauphin picks up a blackbird and bites it in half, crunching the little bones. He speaks with his mouth full. 'Did you explain it properly? Five to one. Did you show him?'

'There wasn't an opportunity to show him, Sir. His mind is made up.'

'Well then, he's a fool,' said the Dauphin. 'A bumptious fool. It means that he's now going to die. Simple as that. Every single one of them is going to die.'

The Dauphin eats the second half of his blackbird. He spits out a piece of bone and wipes his mouth. 'Get me the Constable of France, Montjoy,' he says. 'We'll get all this over with tomorrow. I'm tired of being here. And the food's ghastly. Off you go.'

Montjoy backs out of the Dauphin's tent. He feels tired. He feels he could lie down anywhere and sleep.

LA VALLEE, APRIL 1412

Out of politeness, he had to pay his respects to Cecile's parents before he could leave. They told him that the Duke of Granvilliers had hinted at his intention to marry Cecile back in January. Cecile's mother said: 'We're very flattered. This is a very good match.'

Montjoy wanted to say: 'I love her better than the Duke. She alters my earth. I'd sleep with her in my arms. I'd buy her any number of pairs of shoes.' But he kept silent and only nodded.

Then he rode back along the way he had come. The sun was going down and glinted red in the fast-running stream. He tried not to think of anything at all. When he got to the clump of yellow flowers, he looked the other way. His horse stumbled on a stone and he wished he could become that stone and feel nothing.

Montjoy's parents were eating dinner when he arrived back at the house. They looked up expectantly from their soup and put down their spoons.

Montjoy stood in the doorway and looked at them. For the first time in his life, he envied them with an aching, fathomless envy. They had lived side by side contentedly for thirty-one years. They still shared their bed.

He put a fist up to his mouth. Through the clenched fist, he said: 'Cecile's not in my life any more. So please don't mention her again. She's in the past and I don't want to speak about it. It or her. I don't want to talk about any of it. Ever.'

He turned and left the room before either his mother or his father could say a word.

AGINCOURT, OCTOBER 1415

He has been summoned by the English King, three years his junior.

It's getting dark. The rain that came in the early morning has stopped and a white moon is rising. And under the white moon lie the French dead.

He and his horse have to pick their way among corpses. There's a shine on them and on the fouled earth where they lie.

For the second time in Montjoy's life, he asks himself, as he rides on into a gathering dusk: 'Why was something as terrible as this not foreseen by me?'

He remembers the Dauphin's mockery: 'They won't last half an hour.' He remembers his own imaginary words to Roland: 'You couldn't call it a great battle. It was too one-sided.'

He's a herald. Heralds ride in the vanguard of events. They announce. They watch and assess. They bring the expected after them. But not him. Despite his eminence, despite his optimistic name, the unimaginable follows him like a shadow.

He doesn't know precisely how this day was lost. He tried to follow what was occurring. He kept weaving in and out of the wood, trying to see, trying to get a picture. He heard the English arrows fly. He saw a cloud of arrows fall on the first line of cavalry, heard them clatter on helmets and backplates, like hailstones on an army kitchen. He saw some horses go down and their riders fall, helpless as saucepans in their armour, kicked or trampled by hooves.

Then he saw, as the first line rode on, the English men-at-arms fall back. They fell back in a ghostly way, just as, before, they emerged from the wood - one moment there and the next moment not there. And where they'd been standing, facing the French cavalry, on the very place where they'd been, now there was a line of stakes, newly sharpened, pointing out of the ground. There was a thick fence of them, a thousand or more, three or four deep with room in between them for only the most insubstantial men.

He knew the horses would rear, would try to turn, would do all that they could not to be thrown onto the stakes. But many of them couldn't turn because in their massed charge, flank to flank, they were coming on too fast and so they exploded onto the fence and the riders were pitched forward into the enemy's arms.

One of the other heralds had told him at dawn: 'The English are eating handfuls of earth. This means they accept their coming death and burial.' And he'd felt pity for them, as violent as love. Now, Montjoy's horse carries him awkwardly, slipping and staggering in the mud, through the field of the French dead. The dead appear fat with this white moon up, casting bulky shadows. Montjoy covers his mouth with his blue glove and tips his head back and looks for stars. There is one in the west, yawning, and he thinks again of Roland in his tree house and then of all the souls of the French struggling to cross the chasm of the sky.

He won't give an account of the battle to Roland because then he would have to answer too many unanswerable questions. Why did the first line of French cavalry turn round and collide with the men-at-arms coming forward? Does this mean that some of the French foot soldiers died before they even reached the English line? And then, when they reached the line, what happened that so many died so quickly? Were they packed together so tightly in a mass that they couldn't fight properly? Was the mass, shouting and pushing and afraid and confused, soon walled up behind its own dead?

It had rained so hard all through the battle, the heralds' task of seeing had been impeded.

All Montjoy can hope now, as he nears the English camp and hears voices singing, is that time will bring him understanding.

He rides on. He must make a formal acknowledgement of defeat to King Henry. He hopes that his voice is going to be strong, but fears that it may sound weak and small, like the voice of a stag-beetle in an ivory box.

He feels exhausted. In his exhaustion, he aches no longer to be a man apart, but a man going home to his wife with a gift of crimson shoes.