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30 May 1431

Rouen, France

It's no easy thing, to watch a woman burn. A young woman, who has seen only three more summers than yourself and claims the voice of God compels her actions. But there it is; the day's work. And she must harden herself to it.

So, on a May morning so fine its early sun has already chased Rouen's street dogs into shadows, Cecily has put on black velvet, sombre and rich. She has bound a rosary at her waist; a reminder to the French that God has answered the prayers of the English and delivered Joan of Arc into their hands. A reminder to her king that her loyalty is to him and to Heaven.

She waits now in the market square, her face to the pyre and sullen French anger at her back, for the signal that will tell her Joan is coming out to die. She raises her head when it comes, a trumpet call, high and vicious, and, beneath it, the crowd's murmur growing to a roar. Beside her, her husband Richard straightens his back, squares his feet. She swallows bile and does the same. The sun is hot enough, but that's nothing, she thinks, to the blaze to come. Have courage, her mother would say. Faith and courage can accomplish anything. Cecily wonders if Joan's mother told her the same. Likely someone did. In her glory days Joan put on armour and rode at the head of armies. With words alone she roused a fearful king and turned the tide of a war. Imagine. Now the

tide runs all against her, and she must find only the courage to die. Though Joan is England's enemy, Cecily wishes courage for her now.

Soon the ring of metal feet overwhelms the clarion, and the crowd parts for a wagon, its blade-bristling guard, and the prisoner bound upon it. It's the first time she's seen Joan and isn't sure what to expect. Just a pale, thin girl, it seems, head shorn and bloodied. It doesn't look like there's much fight left in her. The bright armour of Joan's soldiering days is long gone and today's thin shift, with the filth of a prison year upon it, is scant covering for a body that, some say, English soldiers have been allowed their way with. Though Richard says surely not, Cecily can believe it. The King's uncles have long wanted Joan dead. But they wanted her shamed, first.

Cecily sees Joan stumble as she's pulled from the wagon and thinks for a moment she will fall and knock herself senseless. And what then? But the guards press in to hold Joan upright, her body crushed between their bulk as they jostle towards the pyre, her arms pinioned behind her, her small breasts jutting.

The desperate parade passes close enough that Cecily can see Joan's eyes. One is closed by livid bruises, the other, white-rimmed and wide, is fixed on the crucifix borne high above her by a priest, leading the way to death and whatever might lie beyond it. Joan's lips are moving and Cecily recognizes the words of the Ave, falling stuttering and fast. She wonders what she prays for. Rescue? Or just an end to this?

I would pray for the death of every Englishman here, Cecily thinks. Then suddenly she is afraid, for no one can fathom the power of Joan's prayers, and Richard stands beside her, who has seen Joan tried and nodded his head at her sentence. Her breath catches and she pants, once, and he's holding out a hand to steady her. She raises a palm, shakes her head to signal no, then makes a fist to hide her fingers' trembling. He draws back, and she feels

his gaze follow hers to where the guards are handing Joan into the reaching arms of men who wait to receive her. They draw her up, bare legs flailing, then bind her and bring more wood, so that she stands deep among a thicket of staves.

She can no longer hear Joan's prayers so, out of pity and to guard her own soul, she speaks them with her, as the men clamber down and reach for their torches. At last the fire is set and the flames lick like dogs at Joan's feet and thighs. Cecily feels their growing heat against her own cheek as Joan's voice, steady at the last, rings out above her head,

'All I have done was by God's order.' Then, urgent, as the priest's arms falter and his burden dips, 'Hold up the cross of Christ that I may see it as I die!'

Cecily narrows her eyes against livid sparks as Joan's prayers give way to hacking coughs and shrieks, then sudden silence. She sets herself to watch as flesh burns, blossoms and falls away. There's grit in her eyes, sweat runs the cleft of her shoulder blades and, beneath her clasped hands, her stomach shrivels. But she won't flinch. She knows this is a test.

It seems an age, but at last the fire is sated, and into the hush it leaves behind, Joan's body sags and falls with a soft sigh of ash.

Cecily looks down at last, swallows hard and blinks sore eyes.

Richard turns towards her. 'Come away now,' he says. 'It's done.' He moves to wrap an arm about her waist.

She stalls him, placing her fingers, still warm from the fire, on the back of his gloved hand. 'I stood firm.'

There's ash in his hair, his face is pinched and smutted, but he manages a wry smile. 'Firmier than your husband, I think.'

That morning she'd confessed to him her dread of it. He'd said she needn't go. That he himself did not relish the burning of women. She shook her head. No. We go together. It must be seen that we can watch the King's enemies die, and not falter.

And there, across the still-smoking fire, beyond the greasy stink of Joan's death, the child king's uncles, the Dukes of Bedford and Gloucester, stand shoulder to shoulder.

Watching.

She raises her chin, and then, having measured the depth of Bedford's slow bow, the slide of Gloucester's eyes, lets Richard raise her hand, turn her about, lead her away. The crowd parts for them and, as if their leaving is a signal, begins to disperse.

Englishmen murmur and pat each other's shoulders as they go, well done, well done.

Frenchmen, penned in to witness this defeat, slip between guards who part their pikes to let them pass and chide, 'Go home now, and take a lesson from this.'

Cecily watches them go. What lesson should she herself take? she wonders. Only that if a woman takes up arms, she must be very sure of winning.

2

16 December 1431

Paris

With Joan dead, England's king can come to his French crowning. It's been a long wait. A hundred years of battling and scrapping, winning by inches, then losing again. The fifth Henry, this one's father, came close after Agincourt, but coughed up his guts on another battlefield before he could drag his bony arse to the throne. He handed the task to his brothers, Bedford and Gloucester. A deathbed promise wrested from them both: hold England, win France. Make my son king of both.

Now the day is come and the incense-drenched air above Notre Dame's high altar is riven by the Sanctus bell, calling God to come lay hands on his anointed. As the cathedral's vast spaces fall silent on the dying chime, Cecily dares raise her eyes to where, beyond a sea of bowed heads, her Uncle Bedford, the towering scarlet cardinal, lowers the long-contested crown of France on to the child Henry's head.

Henry himself is a shimmer of white, his ten-year-old arms outstretched, his bare breast sheened with chrism, his face tear-swept and rapt. His mouth falls open in a small round 'oh' as the weight of a kingdom falls on him. She shivers at it. Dear God in Heaven, is this how kings are made? Henry raises his head in a shaft of sunlight, blinks in its dazzle. Her eyes, following his, are caught in the glare of a second crown, that of England. Henry's by right since he was six months old, now held aloft in Gloucester's arms.

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The cardinal's voice rings out. 'Henry, the sixth of that name, King of England *and* of France.'

The glad words draw a tidal sigh of amens. When the cardinal turns to acknowledge them, Cecily knows herself seen, the only upturned face, watching holy mysteries as if she has a right to know God's business. She expects his look to be a chastisement. He is her mother's brother, after all, and no less sharp. But his eyes crease at the corners and, almost, he smiles, as if to say, there you are Cecily, bold as ever.

Among the slow-moving coronation procession, Cecily passes out through the cathedral's great west door, beneath the lofty tympanum, where Christ Triumphant, serene and indifferent, presides over the judgement of the dead. Emerging into winter sunlight, she feels the sanctity of the church fall away as the world, sharp with frost and conflict, rises up to meet her. She knows today's crowning marks no end to war. It's little more than a gesture, grand and provocative, tip for tap, for now France has two kings. Two years ago the mad king's son, last of the Valois line all thought finished at Agincourt, gave offlicking his wounds and rode on the back of Joan's holy vision to his crowning in Rheims. He's down for now, but no one thinks he's finished.

Gloucester, stalking ahead of them, grows into his brother Bedford's ear. 'Today sends a message to Charles the Pretender, Charles the Bastard, Charles the thrice-cursed bane of our lives. England still has stomach for the fight, and the true heir of Agincourt comes to stake his claim.'

The dukes press on to be closer to their king, and Richard's face, when it turns to hers, is wry.

She takes his arm, leans close. 'The message might be more convincing if the heir of Agincourt was not a puling child who threw his insides up over the ship's rail an hour out from Dover. Or if he went to his weapons practice more enthusiastically, or more often, than to prayer.'

He threads her arm through his. 'We must hope Charles's spies don't hear of such things.' A smile. A wink.

Stepping into the carriage that will take them to the coronation feast, Cecily pauses a moment. Ahead of her the shimmering king, on a horse well chosen for a sovereign, but towering for a half-grown boy, steps out through a banner-waving crowd. All most splendid. Then she turns, looking back to where the business of the day reclaims the cathedral square. Beyond it and the encircling river lie the unfathomed byways of Paris. England's hold there, she knows, is tenuous and challenged. If she walked those narrow streets today, she'd hear low French voices, surly, resentful, biding their time. She wonders about Charles down there in Rheims. Is his courage burned to ash with Joan's bones, or does she walk his dreams now, urging him on?

She draws up the weighted velvet of her gown, steps inside the curtained carriage, takes a seat opposite her husband and folds her long white hands.

'So, it's done, Cecily. At last.'

'By God's will,' she answers.

Granting him a small smile, she leans back against the cushions and closes her eyes. In her private darkness she calculates the value of all she has learned since coming into France: that the will of God, which has called all things into being, might turn a child into a king, a girl into a warrior, or a body into ash. And that any man – or woman indeed – may, according to their courage, shape His will to their purpose.

That night the company dine listlessly on roast goose. No one's hungry, though they've barely eaten all day. They'd been too nervous to breakfast well that morning and the food at the coronation banquet, though impressive to look upon, had made poor eating. Pungent sauces masked fish dishes that were overcooked and cold when brought to table. Glistening

pastries hid meats grey with fat. The French lords had complained among themselves, muttering under their breath about the incompetence of English cooks. 'All show and no substance,' Cecily called it, sniffing. 'It wouldn't have happened at home.'

In her mother's household, the language of food spoke through the senses to the heart: see what we have, how we can sustain you. Don't you want to be one of us? It had spoken to Richard, clearly enough. He's wanted very much to be one of them ever since, in his twelfth year, eight years an orphan and adrift, he was brought north through foul December weather into the warm brilliance of Raby's great hall at dinner.

The royal courier, who'd ridden graceless and hunched ahead of him for the two-week journey, pushed him towards Cecily's father, full of charm. 'Your new ward, my lord. I bring him and the season's greetings from the Lord Protector, the great Duke of Gloucester.'

Richard raised his eyes, ready to be resentful. Then his vision was filled with the sight of Ralph, Earl of Westmorland, rising from the table and striding towards him, tall and smiling, with his arms thrown wide. 'Ah, you're in out of the cold now, Richard. Get that wet cloak off and come eat. Formalities later.'

It was the first time he saw Cecily. From the space hastily cleared for him, and with the blade of his hunger blunted, he raised his eyes from the warm cup that soothed his chilblained fingers. The earl was talking, bright and fast, down the table, to men who seemed hungrier for his attention than for the food before them. Nearer, a girl, no more than nine, stared fixedly at him from beside the chair of a lady rich in silk who, with her hand lying soft on the earl's sleeve, stared likewise, as if measuring him for clothes. The girl blinked her grey eyes, reached up to whisper into the lady's ear, then returned to her staring.

The lady smiled softly down on the girl's head then turned another smile, less loving, more knowing, on him. 'You're welcome, Richard. My daughter Cecily says so.'

Richard came, in time, to idolize Cecily's father. Ralph Neville replaced the uncertainties of a childhood shadowed by treason with the reliable virtues of a well-governed household. Among the young men drawn together under Ralph's affinity, he found a place within a finely ordered discipline, where loyalty and good endeavour brought rewards he understood. The rules were simple. He could keep them.

He learned soon enough that he'd been brought into Ralph's household by a business transaction, but as time fostered his understanding of it, he found himself content with its terms. By the mercy of King Henry V, who brought the axe down on his father's traitorous neck, he retained rights of inheritance to the Earldom of Cambridge and the Dukedom of York. But only a royal affirmation at Richard's coming of age will turn those rights to reality, and that merciful king is long dead. His brothers, today's king's uncles, would have preferred the orphan tipped into a ditch with his father's headless corpse. Instead, he's spent his childhood between pillar and post, passed like baggage among men who despise him, unwanted, knocked about, scorned. Until Ralph said to Gloucester, let me have the boy. I'll make a king's man of him and give him to my girl.

Richard was married to Cecily within months of his arrival at Raby. He stood beside the grey-eyed girl in the castle's gilded chapel while the priest muttered and his bride, stiff in her finery, listened earnestly and repeated the words put to her.

'That's done then, Richard,' said Ralph, leaning down to look him in the eye and laying a steady hand on his shoulder. 'Serve well, please the King, and you'll get a dukedom for my daughter.'

He watched over Ralph's shoulder as his young bride was

led away by her nurses. When she turned and smiled at him from the doorway, he felt his heart settle.

Richard has spent the last three years serving his king. Called to court and the King's company to have his loyalties tested. First in England, now in France.

'Traitor's get,' Gloucester had called him, that first day. 'Prove me wrong.'

Richard has made it his work to do so.

The dukes of Gloucester and Bedford sit opposite Cecily now, picking at the cooling carcass of the bird and passing a wine jug between them as they talk. Their wives have their heads together at the far end of the table. Cecily doesn't know if they're planning a skirmish or comparing the skills of their dressmakers, and doesn't much care. Like Richard, she's watching the dukes, wondering what their next move will be and what it might mean for them.

She's been Richard's wife for eight years now, but in truth their life together began when they boarded ship for Calais. These eighteen months in France they've been every day together, and the family that shaped them has shaped them to fit. They're natural allies. Watchers and listeners both. Thinkers, planners, weighers of words. They've seen their chance for a place in the world, and joined hands to grasp it.

From London to Calais, Rouen to Paris, Cecily has observed her husband's careful diplomacy, his ready ear for the boy king's prattling, his studied deference to Gloucester's barking complaints, his quiet conversations with Bedford, his readiness to be helpful, his aptitude for work. She's watched him wrack his conscience over Joan's trial and execution, troubled by its savagery but knowing it to be the price of royal approval.

'I don't like it,' he'd told her, that morning of the burning. 'I'd rather find the men who put her up to it.'

She'd shrugged. 'She's the woman in front of those men,

Richard. If French hopes live in a virgin maid, then a virgin maid must die.' A finger on his chest, chiding. 'King's man.'

She's smoothed his way, in so far as she could. She's courted the wives of both dukes, who now call her friend. She speaks with Gloucester of books and music; subjects he'd expect a woman to speak to him of. With Bedford she reminisces about her father and his, the loyal earl, his beloved king, now reunited in Heaven. He has softened at such times. He is a man who can be moved.

In Rouen, in the days after Joan's burning, Bedford's wife had come to her, threaded their arms as they walked the castle walls. 'I think they should be friends,' she said, 'your husband and mine.' That night they dined together, all four and no other. They talked of the young king's father, the greatness of his legacy, the preservation of his son.

'I will make it my life's work,' Richard told them, his voice earnest, his eyes steady and clear. He means he will forswear his own blood, flowing to him through his Mortimer ancestors from Edward III's second son; richer than young Henry's, descended from his third. Bedford had nodded and, when they parted, pressed a hand to Richard's shoulder, while Duchess Anne kissed Cecily's cheek, and smiled against it.

In the days since, Bedford has called Richard to him often, shown favour, talked to him of a campaign that will follow the King's crowning, as if he might have a part in it. He has introduced him to his captains, William de la Pole chief among them, who is between them in age and easy company. Bedford, who is inclined to be dour, laughs easily in William's company. Sometimes, now, all three laugh together. Her cardinal uncle, Cecily notes, is close by at such times, nodding, pleased. He's close now too, seemingly intent upon his dinner, pretending not to listen.

Now the wine jug comes to rest and Cecily's eyes are drawn

to Gloucester as he turns their way, pulls his napkin from his shoulder and clears his throat to speak. He's fourteen months Bedford's junior but it could be fourteen years at least. The urbane lord who spends his days managing Henry's English kingdom looks decidedly less careworn than weather-beaten Bedford, who has spent the last ten years and more fighting for his French one.

'Richard, Gloucester says, 'once Christmas is done we leave Paris. Head back to Calais. My brother stays in France, of course, but you and I will have the King safe home before St George's Day.'

She glances at Richard, notes his caution and surprise. 'I'd thought,' he says, carefully, 'we'd stay longer in France. Let the King be seen in his kingdom.'

Cecily knew Bedford's hope had rested on Henry's continued presence, wonders why he's acquiesced. Perhaps he's concluded, just as she has during these months in Henry's company, that France wouldn't be much impressed by him.

'He's needed in England,' Gloucester growls. 'You've work there too,' and he turns away, down the table, to join his wife. She feels in her own breast the sigh Bedford heaves as he draws his hands down the length of his face. He looks up at them with something attempting to be a smile. 'It's for the best,' he says. 'For all of us. For you, certainly.'

Richard watches Gloucester walk away then turns back to Bedford. His hopes, Cecily knows, had rested on staying here to serve with Bedford; to prove himself loyal beyond Joan's burning. 'I'd thought,' he says, 'to help you push Charles back from Rheims.'

Bedford shakes his head slowly, and sighs. 'Thank you. But what my brother means is that our king has decided to reward the good service you've already given. You're to wait no longer for your inheritance, Richard. Go back to England. Take possession of what's yours. Attend the King. Leave France to me

a while. It will call you back soon enough.' He draws out his chair, pulls himself to his feet, then turns to them again with a final thought. 'I've convinced my brother you're a right-thinking man, Richard. Please don't prove me wrong.'

'I will not.'

Behind Bedford's retreating back, the cardinal raises a glass to his niece, taps his nose and then returns to his plate. His gesture signals both conspiracy and congratulation, and is as welcome to her as a dukedom. She turns her head to hide a grin, then collects herself, tightens her hold on Richard's hand, shakes it and leans close.

'Well, my lord. That was all very unexpected.'

He looks dazed, so she leans closer still.

'Now you are Duke of York at last, would you like to take your duchess to bed?'

His smile comes quickly then; the open one that only she ever sees.

They've learned each other's bodies here in France, as they've learned each other's minds, and find they are attuned. Cecily has discovered that, in loving, as in everything, boldness is rewarded. When Richard shakes beneath her hands and cannot speak but only reach for her; when he is buried in her and senseless with it, her heart exults and, in tenderness then, she draws him close, holds him till he calms. He tells her she has spelled him with love. She stretches her body beneath him, moonlit and pale, and says she has no need of witchcraft.

Tonight's love is exultant, the talk after, just the same; both set skin alight and leave them breathless. They're conjuring new futures, redrawing their lives with word and touch. They'll be home before winter ends, a summer before them in which to work.

'Two main administrative centres -' Richard pushes damp

hair from his eyes and raises his hands, expansive – 'Ludlow in the west, Fotheringhay in the east.'

She nods, slow. 'I see you've given this some thought.'

He sketches it out. To the Welsh border fortress of Ludlow the vast revenues of their Mortimer estates across Wales and Ireland will flow. From Fotheringhay, in the Nene's verdant valley, they'll manage their English holdings. 'And from there it's just a few days' ride to London and the court. What do you think?'

'Sensible. Fotheringhay, when we wish to be close to the King. Ludlow, when we want to escape him.'

He slaps her thigh, his touch light. 'Shush!'

'What?' She grins, stretches her own arms with languid ease. 'And in each place we will build a church. Great engines of prayer for the house of York. And, I suppose, feigning prim, for the good of the realm and the health of our most sovereign lord.'

He laughs down at her as she throws off the covers to let the night air cool her body, then runs a hand between her breasts.

'Will it always be so with us, do you think?'

'What?'

'Oh . . . I don't know. Love and talk.'

'Business and pleasure?'

He nods.

'Yes. Providing I don't die of thirst.'

She's pleased, then, to watch the slide of muscle across his bare shoulder as he leans to pour wine from the flagon by the bed. She raises herself on her elbows and he lifts the cup to her lips. She sips, then watches as he drinks; follows the sinews of his throat as he swallows, sees the sheen of sweat in its hollow. The wine's redness glistens on his mouth and she kisses him, relishing its sweetness and his warmth. He smiles, drinks again, stretches beside her, resting the cup lazily on his breast. Dawn isn't far off, and they are, at last, sated. All this talk of building.

'I wonder when we'll have our first child,' she says. Then laughs a little, hesitant. She's thinking of Gloucester's childless wife. And of Bedford's, who has been married eight years and never felt her womb quicken.

'We'd best be about it if we're to equal your parents. Your mother gave your father fourteen children.'

'Oh, did she? I thought my father gave them to her.'

'I expect you're right.' He's grinning. His free hand strokes her flank.

She takes it, threads his fingers with hers. 'I would hate to be barren.'

His voice turns soft, his face serious. 'It's not likely.'

'No. No, it is not.' She pulls herself upright again, leans in and grins. 'You will give me many children.'

'Well, I must do something. I suppose, to make up for my lack. I am only I, while you . . . well, you are most rich in relations.'

'I don't care. You're most rich in titles!' She's gleeful, straddling his waist, ready to love again.

But now he turns pensive.

'I think perhaps . . . I wonder sometimes if I might have had such a family. Had my father lived. Had he not been a traitor.'

'Or had he been a better one.'

He's shocked, and she sees it. She kisses his hand, smiles into his palm, then looks into his face, intent. 'A man is only a traitor if he doesn't win. My father, too, was one, if you choose to call him so.'

'Your father! Your father was loyal to Lancaster all his life. Always Richard will defend Ralph against any slander. Even his daughter's.'

'Yes, yes. But Lancaster wasn't always king. My father crowned Lancaster when he put young Henry's grandfather on the throne. But to do it he broke his oath of fealty to the king he helped depose.'

'Was it a sin, do you think?' Richard has made Ralph his lodestar, can't bear to think it's led him wrong.

She slides off and lies beside him. He turns to face her.

'No.' Cecily is emphatic. 'Ask my mother. She'll tell you. God might anoint kings and bring them to their thrones, but He can't keep them there.' Then she whispers, conspiratorial. 'Only nobles like yourself can do that.'

Richard laughs, but he can't look at her. He doesn't remember his own father, only the shame of him, and that Ralph called him a faithless dog. 'Then God save kings from rebellious nobles.'

'Yes, of course. Good kings. But if a king is weak, as that one was. If he's a fool and sets the country at odds.' When he looks away, grimacing, she reaches a finger, turns his face to hers again. 'It's simple. God's appointed order: king, nobles, the people, each ruled by the other in turn.'

'And if a king can't keep God's order, then the nobles must restore it. I know.' He shudders. 'But it's a desperate road...'

'That must be walked at times of great need. Or there's only chaos, and there the Devil reigns. There's duty in kingship, Richard. Not privilege alone.'

The boy king's grandfather knew that. He held the nobles in balance with a careful mixture of censure and reward, fear and patronage, for the fourteen years of his reign. Then he passed the banner to his son, the fifth Henry, who united them in conquest and gave them Agincourt.

They're quiet now, Cecily and Richard, side by side in the loving bed. They are both thinking the thing they cannot say yet; what of young Henry? Can he do it?

3

September 1435–March 1437
London, England

Bedford warned that France would draw them back. Daily now, Cecily hopes it won't. Since Henry came home from his crowning it's been a war of attrition across the Channel. Four years and both sides are exhausted. At last, an offer from Charles; England can keep its French territories if Henry will surrender his French crown. Gloucester spits and curses. Young Henry prays three days for guidance, before declaring that, though he craves peace above all things, God has made him king of France, so fight on. And Bedford does, till he falls from his horse to his sickbed.

While the good duke buses himself with dying, the cardinal goes to Arras for talks with the French king. Fruitless, of course. Charles says he won't come to the negotiating table until there's a crown for him to take away from it, so Cecily's uncle is quickly home again.

This morning he'll take his no-news to the King. But first, he walks with his niece and her husband in Westminster Gardens. It's late September, but summer is slow to give way to autumn and Cecily is chafed by the sun's heat, sullen on her back. She notices how tattered the flowers are. How the trees seem full of dust.

The cardinal's face matches his steady stride. He looks to her like a man who'd hoped for better but expected worse and so is sanguine. It's just one more move on the chessboard for

Edward. A feast for the starving.

She lets her heart ride to him on the crowd's roar.

And now he's here, dismounting, setting his foot to the step;
her vision is full of him, hampered only by the mist of her
breath on the cold bright air. She holds out a hand. He takes it
and kneels. She thrills to the warm hardness of his lips on her
fingers, then she's in his embrace, his head lowered to her
brow, his cheek burning against hers.

'Give them to me, Edward,' she whispers in his ear. 'The
butcher Clifford. That bitch the Queen.'

'In good time, Captain Mother,' he promises.

She looks out across his shoulder through a sudden sting of
tears and it seems, for a moment, that three suns shine again
in the sky, that fickle trick of Heaven's light that Edward seized
upon in battle and harnessed to his will. She will make it his
blazon.

'You are the sun in splendour,' she tells him, and gives him
over to the glory of the crowd.

Epilogue

On 29 March 1461, Palm Sunday, between the Yorkshire towns of
Towton and Saxton, Edward defeated his enemies in England's
bloodiest ever battle. Around a tenth of the fighting-age population
took to the field. Almost half of them died.

He fought under his banner of the sun in splendour, and was
crowned beneath it as King Edward IV on his return to London, on
28 June 1461. As Cecily promised, the sun became his blazon and the
symbol of his reign.

Before leaving London to secure his victory, Edward had given
Cecily sole command of his household, effectively making her England's
regent during his absence. From the day of his coronation, she no
longer styled herself Duchess of York or Dowager, but as Cecily, the
King's Mother.

Afterword

Writing Cecily

This novel's been a long time coming. The seed of it was planted in childhood, by a mother for whom history and story were two sides of the same coin. I later met a history teacher who shared that conviction.

The Manor wasn't a terribly progressive school back in the 1970s. A secondary modern on a north-eastern council estate, it went comprehensive the year I passed the Eleven Plus. It typically turned out boys for the steelworks. Its girls would go to the chicken factory or build telephone exchanges for Siemens. Women's work, you see. Nimble fingers. We lived across the road, so geography dictated I go. Mum wasn't best pleased. 'She should be going to the grammar.' That was one fight Dad wouldn't back her in. A union man and a socialist from cap to boot soles. Anyway, she knew he was right. I think so, too.

It worked out well enough. Keith Hill taught fifteenth-century history like it happened yesterday, brought its long-dead characters to life and set them walking the corridors of my imagination. 'So why do you think she did that?' he would ask. 'What was in his mind when . . .?' My final exam mark wasn't that impressive. I was a bit woolly on dates and politics, but *very* strong on character motivation.

If you ask who was the stand-out figure for me then, I'd have to say Richard III. The hunchback, the tyrant, the child-murderer. I'd been about to write him off. 'But was he?' Keith Hill asked. 'Who says so?' And that was the moment when the story/history penny truly dropped. The past, I realized, isn't

fixed, definitive or singular. It's the raw material of story, open to interpretation, investigation, retelling.

Long after school, history remained a passion, Richard III an abiding interest. But, increasingly, it was the strong women whose stories entwined with his that commanded my attention. I'd met most of them in my reading, but couldn't escape the nagging sense that one of them was eluding me. Where was Richard's mother? The bare bones are obvious enough. She was Cecily Neville, granddaughter of John of Gaunt and his mistress-come-wife, Katherine Swynford. Her own mother, Joan, though born a bastard, rose to become a countess. But, in all the novels and biographies I'd read, I'd never really encountered Cecily. *Why?*

Well, you might say Shakespeare 'did for Cecily', no less than he did for her son. Her appearances in his history plays are brief. She has no political agenda, exercises no power and serves no purpose other than to curse her misbegotten offspring. Shakespeare's summation of Cecily is simple: old, pious, embittered and dull. No wonder historians and novelists marginalized her for five hundred years. There were more interesting women to write about. Bigger fish to fry.

Really?

Cecily lived through eighty years of tumultuous history, never far from the beating heart of power. She mothered kings, created a dynasty, brought her family through civil war. She met victories and defeats in equal measure and, in face of them all, lived on. Last woman standing. There *had* to be a story there, surely?

I was now in my thirties, heading up European communications for an American multinational. I remember no other women at my managerial level, few enough in the company at all. I was learning first-hand how women exercise power in environments dominated by men. Cecily seemed to be getting closer. Within a few years I'd leave to set up my own

business, which I ran for twenty years. But I'd made myself a promise. For now I had to make my way in the world. That done, I'd find Cecily's story. I'd tell it.

So, in 2017, age fifty-five, I stopped work, started a creative writing MA at Warwick University and gave myself two years to bring Cecily to the page.

At the same time – serendipity – the historian and specialist in medieval women, Joanna Laynesmith, published a biography of Cecily. I read it and begged her to have lunch with me. We talked through to dinner. I compared what I'd long suspected about Cecily to what she knew. Matched my storyteller's intuition to her meticulous scholarship. In the days that followed, the shadow figure of Cecily came gradually into focus. Here was a woman who could give any of us a lesson in how to operate as a woman in a man's world.

I'd long understood that the journey towards female emancipation hasn't been a steady upward progression. Medieval women, especially those of the aristocracy, or in what we might today think of as the middle classes, had freedoms their Victorian counterparts, or even our post-war mothers, could only dream of. They could own property, run businesses, take up trades. Widows, especially, could achieve significant economic independence. Men ruled, certainly, but in the margins women could exercise agency, assume authority, push boundaries. Women of Cecily's status, with huge households and vast estates, would be responsible for enterprises similar in size and complexity to mid-sized FTSE companies. They were, in short, women of business.

At the same time, they'd be expected to support their husband's political career and advance their family's interests within intricate and hierarchical social networks. Above all, they were expected to breed. Failure at that negated all else. Come now, did you really think it was only twenty-first-century women who were expected to 'do it all'?

Cecily excelled on all these fronts. But that was just the

start. She not only lived through seismic political and historical events, she *shaped* them. A lifelong dynast, she engineered her husband's bid for the throne and, when that failed, her son's. She was brazen enough to maintain a cordial exchange of letters with Henry VI's queen while, at her husband's side, planning a rebellion. Bold enough when defeated to barter for her children's lives with an enemy king. In the aftermath of her husband's death, it was her London home that became the centre of Yorkist planning as her son fought his way across England to claim his crown. And, when he left the city to fight again, he had the good sense to leave the management of his kingdom in no one's hands but hers.

Old, pious, dull? I don't think so.

Cecily lived more than five hundred years ago, in a pre-Reformation, pre-feminist, male-dominated world. And yet, without question, she is a woman we can feel kinship with today.

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