

Crispin: The End of Time

{ by Avi }

“If you can go no farther than where you are,
God has shown you your destiny.”
(Attributed to St. Cyril)

France, 1377 AD

.1

Bear was dead.
That sweet and kindly man, the wisest I had ever known, the one I considered friend, teacher, and even father, was gone. Would that I could be half so fine. God keep his saintly soul!

Though I no longer had a father or a mother, I had, thanks be to God and Bear, a name: Crispin. And since I was bound to no land, kin, lord, or for that matter, any man, I considered myself free. As long as I could keep myself out of bondage, I'd be true to Bear's teaching. And so it was that beyond all else, I was determined to keep my freedom.

I had but one friend. Her name was Troth. She had sailed to France with Bear and me from England. It was during that violent voyage and its aftermath that we met with such misfortune and Bear's awful death.

With his going, I was Troth's sole companion as she was mine. Our ages were much the same—far too young to be alone.

But there was more than that: since Troth's twisted face brought rejection and fear, and garbled her speech—which I could best understand—I held myself as her shield. Was that not what Bear had done for me? I would do no less for her.

Bear had told us about Iceland. He proclaimed it a land without kings, lords, or armies. Men—he said—lived free there. If we went, we too could be free.

Though Bear's death burdened Troth and me with grief like stones upon our backs, we decided to go to that Iceland. God knows it was folly to seek a place when we did not know where it might be, other than "far north," as Bear had once said. But we took courage from a notion he had taught us: God offers many paths from which we may choose. If we put faith in ourselves, He would travel with us to the ends of earth—and beyond.

And so we headed north, walking countless miles along narrow paths, through dense forests and by fallow fields. We passed through deserted lands, places ravaged by disease, poverty, and the endless wars between the French and English. Ruins, graves, and desolation lay everywhere. It was as if God Himself had fled.

For the most part, we tried to keep to woodlands, avoiding roads and villages. Our greatest fear was that being young and without protection, we would be forced into some kind of servitude. But in the wild woods wherein we wandered, we were in equal dread of thieves and brigands, the brutal outlaws who preyed on hapless travelers. All of which is to say we never felt completely safe.

From time to time, we did meet people: sore-footed pilgrims, peasants with their dirty bleating sheep, chapmen selling ribbons and simple shards of saintly relics and now and again an impoverished knight with his small troop of rusty-helmeted soldiers. They spoke languages unknown to us.

I tried asking about "Iceland" in hopes that someone might speak English, or at least recognize the name of the place and tell us how we could get there. The only response we received was empty stares. Looking beggarly—which, by Saint Francis, is how we must have appeared—we were for the most part ignored.

Though not big—nothing like Bear—I was taller than Troth. We were both thin, our bruised bodies filthy, our feet bare, our clothing mostly tattered. Troth, with her dark and staring eyes, and her broken face, which she tried to hide with her long hair, often drew uneasy looks.

For food, we depended upon her knowledge of wild plants, the names of which I did not know—things taught to her by Old Aude, the midwife-healer who had raised her. Once I caught a scrawny rabbit, twice, pigeons, which fed us for a winking while. So it was we ate little, though flies and fleas feasted on us.

With every passing day, our hunger and weariness increased. The farther we went the less we knew where we were. It was growing colder, too, with more leaves underfoot than on trees. In all of this Troth did not utter a complaint, but I grew ever more aware of her growing exhaustion.

Then one night after a daylong trudge, Troth threw herself down and cried, “I wish I’d never left England!”

I hardly knew what to say. “We can find our way,” was my dull reply.

She sighed. “Crispin,” she said gently, “we don’t even know where we are.”

“But we know where we’re going,” I insisted. “Once we reach Iceland, we’ll be safe. We’ll live free. It’s such a peaceful land there’s bound to be plenty of food.”

At first, she said nothing. Then in a voice seeped in sadness, she said, “It was peaceful with Aude.”

“Troth, she was killed. We had to flee.”

“But before, my days were calm,” she went on, as if she were talking to herself. “We helped others when we could.”

“Aude’s wanting to help caused her death.”

Troth glared at me reproachfully. “Wouldn’t you care for the sick? We helped Bear when he was sick.”

“God’s truth,” I admitted.

She closed her eyes. “Once Aude told me that the biggest worlds can best be found in the smallest places. Crispin, I don’t need this . . . huge world.”

Though I so wanted to care for her, I barely knew how to care for myself. “What would you have us do?” I said in exasperation.

“We need to learn how far Iceland is. Maybe . . . maybe it’s too far.”

I tried to push aside my own qualms by saying, “When we get there, it’ll be worth everything.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what your everything is.”

“Troth!” I cried. “What else are we to do? We’re lost! We can’t speak the language! The only thing Bear left us was his words. His . . . his promise. His pointing north.” I held out empty hands. “That’s all we have!”

Troth said nothing for a long time. Then in a small, plaintive voice, she said, “We have to find out where we are.”

“We can try,” I agreed, exhausted.

“Anything is better than what we’ve been doing.”

The next day we started to search for some place to rest and eat, where we might discover the way to go. Four days later, we came upon a small village, the first we’d seen in many days.

It was there our lives completely changed.

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It was late afternoon when we reached it. There wasn’t much to see. A narrow lane made its crooked way through a cluster of small timbered houses, all in poor repair. A few oxen, ragged sheep, and some scrawny chicks wandered free. Thin smoke rose from chimneys. Here and there were cabbage crofts, and farther out were narrow fields filled with stubbled grain. I saw a broken plow, a wagon with three wheels and an old and crowded cemetery before which stood a small stone church. The whole village was tainted with the smell of rot and poverty.

The only unusual thing was that on the hill that overlooked the village a large stone building with red roof tiles stood. At one end was a bell tower with a cross. I assumed it was another, bigger church. There seemed to be other buildings behind it, but I couldn’t see them well. It did not matter: our interest lay in the village.

There were people about, mostly older men and women, plus some children. Their drab garb and weathered faces told

me they were peasants. Offering no sign of welcome, they stared suspiciously at us from their doors.

If I had been with Bear, we would have entered the town with me playing the recorder and him dancing and juggling. By bringing rare merriment to such meager places, we always managed to earn a little bread. Alas, Troth and I had long lost our instruments. As for dancing, we had neither strength nor spirit. We needed to beg.

At length I spied an old man sitting on a bench before an open door. As I approached, he stared at me with red, runny eyes, but made no movement nor offered any greeting.

“God be with you, master!” I called, making a clumsy bow.

He gazed at me.

“In the name of Jesus,” I said louder, “our hunger makes us beg for bread.”

He continued to study me in silence. Then, pulling at his ruddy, grizzled chin with a bent hand, he barked, “*Parlez francais!*”

Of course: he spoke French, and I only had my English. Stymied, all I could do was put forth cupped hands in a begging gesture. “Food,” I said, and touched hand to mouth. “Food.”

“Food,” he echoed, without seeming to comprehend.

Other villagers began to edge near—if none too close—and considered us with uninviting looks. A few were holding staffs. One man clutched a rusty sword.

Alarmed, Troth drew near me as I tried to show our peaceful intent by more bowing, touching my belly, and holding out my hands. “Food!” I kept repeating to now one and then another.

A ragged boy—shoved by an elder—came forward. He halted at what he must have considered a safe distance. Even at that, he looked at us with disdain, wrinkling his nose as if disgusted. Someone shouted at him. With a hand gesture, the boy beckoned to us and headed away. Not knowing what else to do, we followed. The other people remained behind, but kept watching us.

The boy led us up the hill to that large church we had first seen. As we drew nearer, the building seemed to grow in size, far bigger than I had realized. I saw no ornamentation. Windows were few. The stone walls were covered by entangled

green vines out of which bats flew.

We were taken to an entryway, a massive pair of tall wide doors built of bolt-studded wooden planks, which were rounded at the top. On one of the doors, a large and rusty iron face of some fearful beast was attached. From its gaping, toothy jaws hung a knocking ring.

The boy stood on his toes, grabbed the ring, and thumped the door three times. Next moment he turned suddenly and spat at Troth's face. "*Laide!*" he cried and bolted down the hill. I spun about and started to give chase only to have Troth grab my sleeve and hold me back.

"Let him go," she said wearily, and wiped the spittle from her face.

I put my arm around her trembling shoulders. She said no more.

Not knowing what else to do—shivering from cold and distress—we waited by the door. By then the moon was just above the trees. Quite huge, its brightness turned the night clouds blue. Overhead, bats flitted about in rapid, erratic flight. From a distance, I heard the hooting of an owl. I kept glancing down the hill, fearful that other villagers would come and accost us.

A bell rang out loudly, enough to make me start. Shortly after, I heard the grinding sound of a turning lock. One of the double doors opened a crack.

Peering out of darkness was a woman's face—nothing but her face. Startled, it took me a moment to realize it was a nun in her long black habit, her pale face encased in a wimple. The burning candle she held in her hand revealed that she was tall, her face bore many lines, and had eyes that seemed hard. Her mouth suggested firmness.

She lifted her candle, the better to look down at us. Under her gaze, Troth—as usual—shifted her hair to hide her face.

"God be with you, Sister," I muttered, not knowing what else to say.

The nun's eyes widened slightly. It was a few moments before she said, "Are you . . . English?" The words were spoken haltingly, with some puzzlement.

Elated she spoke our language, I made another bow. "We are, in Jesus' name," I said.

The nun eased the door a little more open, but didn't relax her gaze. "Who are you?" she demanded. "How do you come to be here?"

"It's a long tale," I replied in haste. "The shorter part is that—coming from England—we were struck by a storm, the ship all but destroyed. We reached land only to have our father die. Somewhere south of here. Since then we've been wandering, trying to leave this land. Forgive us, Sister but . . . we don't know where we are."

She considered my words in silence. "Are you," she asked, "trying to return to England?"

"To Iceland."

Her eyes narrowed. "I've never heard of such a place."

Troth sighed. My heart sank. All I could say was, "If it pleases, Sister, we're in great need of food. Bread would be a blessing. Then we'll be happy to go on."

"Where was your home in England?" she asked.

"A tiny village," I said. "Not unlike this one. Called Stromford."

She gave no sign of recognition but said, "Tell me your names."

"Crispin," I said.

"And you?" she said to Troth.

When Troth shrank back, I said, "This is my sister, Troth."

The nun frowned. "Troth is not a Christian name."

"With permission, it's hers."

"Can't she speak for herself?"

"Her face has been broken since birth," I said. "She'd rather I speak for her."

The woman considered Troth again before turning back to me. "To whom do you belong?" she asked.

I tried to stand tall. "No one."

"You're too young for that," she snapped. "Have you run away?"

"We haven't!" I cried, and when she made no reply I said, "It's true by all that's holy. Forgive me, Sister, we're very hungry. We haven't eaten in two days."

"Did the people in the village give you anything?"

I shook my head.

“Strangers are rare here,” she said, her voice somewhat softer. “They hate the English. Her soldiers have come through this area and destroyed much.”

“Sister,” I pleaded, “we’ve nothing to do with such things.”

The nun pursed her lips. Then she said, “Very well. You may come in.” She held the door open.

“Begging your pardon, Sister,” I said. “Will you give us some food?”

“My name is Sister Catherine,” she said, her voice becoming hard again, her eyes glowering. “I am the hosteller of our convent. It’s my duty to provide for guests.”

Leaving the door open, she disappeared into the darkness as if to leave the choice to us.

Troth and I looked at each other.

“We’d best go in,” I said, staring forward.

Troth stood her ground. “Crispin—she knows nothing of Iceland.”

“She has food . . .”

“But--”

I gave Troth an encouraging pull and we stepped inside. Once we did, Sister Catherine slipped behind us and locked the door.