

Bad blood

Isabella Martin

For as long as I can remember, men were something the three of us were unable to incorporate into our lives organically. We didn't care for men, didn't care about them. We were not controlled or swayed by their action or inaction, worked outside a paradigm of their violence and coercion. For us, men were like a language learned out of obligation; we could speak and understand enough man to get by. What we did care for were those desires that lured them to self-destruction. Exploiting their illusion of self-control became an addiction, a way of life.

* * *

When we left our old home, we knew we could never go back. We spent days traipsing the mountains in search of squat or cave, sleeping rough, going feral. And with the selfcentredness of bad children, began to think we were cursed, destined never to find a place that fit our needs.

Give a house a chance and it will find you.

Tucked in the crag of harsh rock sat the cavity of what once was a cottage. Our house protruded from the breast of the mountain like an unwanted child. Perfectly parasitic. It had a roof that buckled in the middle, eaves pregnant with time. Inside was barren and empty other than the queen-sized bed that jutted from the corner. All springs and termites. At night,

the cottage was inhabited by darkness. Cracked windows yawned in the new dust of the day.

In the beginning it wasn't easy, working with the systems of darkness. Our eyes were used to the false confidence of artificial light, unfamiliar with the harsh clarity of urges in the absence of technology. Bella became frustrated she couldn't play her music, that we couldn't remember the words. Sometimes I'd find her cradling dead rabbits, humming to them without purpose or joy. Georgie grew stir crazy at night, moments of stillness haunted her into agitation, memories of the past scuttled over her spine a swarm of insects. I was swept along by their unease; became fixated on the spaces between joinery, from ceiling rafters to the vectors of veins in Bella's eyes, the way Georgie's right elbow connected at a scar. It wasn't healthy. Fear was strung through the dark cottage like a broken harp.

Time has an uncanny way of unravelling resistance. Before long we learned to work with the ebb and flow of darkness and dirt, our bodies in sync with the land. We grew into our cottage like three incisors in its toothless smile. We danced around the house naked when we felt like it, and the room was full, with the sound of flesh and stone slapped together. Bella said it was a house with real soul. Georgie, that she'd never found peace quite like this!

On warm days, we would climb to the top of the mountain, trace its ridge serrated like the back of a perturbed cat. The snap of twigs and knees buckling underfoot roused shivers in me — the way they split through silence. We would sit naked on top of boulders the size of bison, Bella reading to us aloud. We drank in her words, savoured the flick and curl of long fingernails on paper.

When the pack of stray dogs arrived on the porch yelping in distress, we let them stay. They too were females on the run; hunted down by the male dogs, terrified of stomachs pitted with the stone of their young. We were hospitable and they were in need.

We promised we wouldn't let what happened in the past happen again, wouldn't let our food ruin us like it had. This place ignited a new sense of trust in ourselves. Female energy groaned from every tree trunk, whipped through the peaks of the mountains. It heaved in the potatoes that suddenly began to burst from the soil around us, the rubble pregnant with radishes, the tampons balled up in the drainage systems. For a moment, we almost forgot the way we craved tendons, and muscle and flesh only weeks ago.

Things were perfect here.

I think we're finally getting over it, said Bella one day. Her whisper, quivered with a wild unsteady confidence.

* * *

The night the travellers arrived Bella and I were sat engrossed in the campfire, in the wordless thought it conjures. Georgie was off ripping around in the forest, looking for trouble. I remember the embers spitting life over a horizon bruised by dusk, the way it does when something is about to happen. Sometimes it's easy to know.

Georgie returned flanked by three men, and with the madness in her eyes that comes from tearing through forest alone. Knees torn to shreds. Words burning so hot in her mouth they came bubbling out. Said she'd picked up three travellers in the bush, asked us if they could stay, after all it was getting dark.

The nights had been unreasonably harsh of late and the town was ten miles away. She spoke rapidly and without pause. Introduced them all as their wrong names. These were the kind of men that could withstand weather; built like scaffolding, arms and legs were roof-rafters. An ex-soldier, musician, and a tradesman, not that we cared. They too were covered in dirt, only they wore it differently. If our dirt spoke of kinship with the land, theirs spoke of a desire to conquer it.

It had been weeks now since we had eaten something we shouldn't .

The men assured us it was okay if we said no, but that the place looked like it could do with some work; rattled off skills they thought would appease our feminine incompetence.

We said we'd be good, whispered Bella, eyes hungry with betrayal. But our senses prickled with intrigue. We were all young and impulsive. Besides, said Georgie, we could do with a bit of extra cash.

We charged them rent. They paid their dues and we played innkeeper for a bit. We were kind and fair.

The men slept on the floor, like animals. Figures swallowed whole by the shadow of our queen bed. On that bed we would lie like royalty, twisted in a pile of limbs governed only by the rotting timber frame. In the evenings, we painted our toenails, concealed in a mushroom cloud of mattress dust; the rustle of long nails on leg hair like a snake parting grass. In the mornings, we would wake to the thick scent of rust and lust. Sunlight exposing the crimson sheen of blood leaked on the beds by the female strays.

We used the men for what they're worth. They warded off the male dogs, hordes of them that now surrounded our

cottage, pining for female ripeness. They fished the black eels that heaved in the streams, slit them lengthways, turned them to meals. Plant a seed in a man's head and he'll do anything you want, said Bella.

But harmony is only surface deep. The air itched with desire like an unhealed wound.

On the travellers' last night Bella suggested a party to celebrate. Nothing outlandish, just a bonfire, maybe open that bottle of something local we stole from town. We put on our finest silks bought from the cheapest markets. Brassy gold bangles, with chipped paint clamoured at our wrists. Anywhere else we would be overdressed but here we set the rules. We wore the silk like skin. Bella said we look glam. Georgie, like hunters.

Alcohol unravels self-restraint.

Soon enough we began to slip into our own language; a series of cackles, we gasp for breath. Strangled by laughter. We watched the faces of the travellers growing blank with a burgeoning impatience. Urges fermenting inside them like something going bad in a glass jar. Eyes drawn to our breasts like magnets. Before long we were playing their game. We allowed the conversation to hover around the men like a moth and they, the only source of light in the room.

The ex-soldier boasted of stories of wars in faraway lands, how it felt to kill a man. He used the words cunt, fuck and slut so often they lost their sting. I watched the way his eyes travelled Georgie's body, the way he listened only enough to keep her talking.

Do go on, said Georgie, wide eyed.

Bella had the musician salivating on her every word. Pock-marked cheeks and scraggly hair. She spoke of her yearning for real music, her record player. Stroked him with a finger-like toe. He looked at her like she was something he had dreamed up, made of everything he could ever want or know. I watched the tradesman watch himself. Savoured the way he spoke to me through the reflection in the window, engrossed in the inky pool of his own image. I've always had a thing for vanity.

The crack of trees blowing beyond the balcony ached of elbows, knees. Bone and gristle. Fire flickered hungrily on faces like forked tongues. Georgie inhaled the joint through my fingers, her head resting in my lap. I'm afraid this isn't going to work out, she whispered. The inky trees shuddered into motion as if in agreeance.

We went to bed hungry and called it a night. In the end, we would have the one who asked for it.

* * *

We woke to the ex-soldier pulling at Georgie's ankle, drunk hands fumbling he peeled her from the bed with the ease of a hangnail. Whispered in her ear that he'd seen her looking at him all night, that she was going to get it. Come to the forest with me, he begged.

Georgie looked at me; eyes crocodilian. She unhooked her hand from the elastic of my underwear and slipped it into his outstretched one, as if this is what she was born to do. Bella and I said that we'd really quite like to come along too, how incredible it would be to be taught about this land by someone who knows it.

His presumption was all the permission we needed. We followed like bitches on heat. The night sky yawned over us like a balloon stretched too tight, and he pointed out the stars as if we'd never seen them before. Talented, Bella cooed.

Beautiful, just like you, he said to Georgie, her small frame quivering with excitement. She offered him her grubby hand to kiss. She got the first taste.

We ate the whole thing.

The dogs helped too, licking at where the seams of him used to be. Georgie plucked a bone from puckered lips and belched.

We burned what little remained. A sacrificial fire lit up the dark sky like a warning to the rest.

As daylight began to seep through the trees we sauntered home, binge-crazed and bloated.

We packed our bags in the simmer of dawn, counted the rest of the money earned from the innkeeping and took whatever else we could find. House hunters again.