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books

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# Hunger Stone Kat Dunn

MANILLA  
PRESS

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I

It is not the dead  
you should fear

IT STARTS WITH BLOOD.

In the middle of the night, I wake, like a hound scenting the fox, and place a hand between my thighs. It comes away sticky and dark.

I used to feel grief about it, once. Now, I am numb. A task my body gives me to dispense with: a rag, the awkward fumble with the safety pins and the belt that will lie against my skin for five days, bringing up rashes around my unused belly and hips.

There is an echo of a dream in my mouth, a copper taste on my tongue and the prickle of the skin of my throat. I cannot recall more.

Henry is sleeping in his room; I can hear his soft snoring through the dressing room that forms the connection between our two private spaces. I still think softly of him, too, though I have come to doubt the strength of his regard for me after so many years.

I squat over the chamber pot and arrange my business. The nightdress is not stained; nor are the sheets – such is my intuition at thirty, when as a girl of sixteen I ruined so many bedclothes that my Aunt Daphne made me sleep with the belt on for a week either side of my courses as

a precaution. I am mistress of my own house now, and I have sympathy for her pennypinching. If I had a daughter, perhaps I, too, would begrudge her any accidents, wish her to hasten into adult responsibility.

I have no daughter. I have no child at all.

Leaving a bloody splatter against the porcelain, I place the lid on the chamber pot and push it beneath the bed. This is no quiet loss; I have not lain with Henry in many months. There was no hope to lose.

As my head crests the bed, I see something.

So fleeting. Just a flicker of movement, and the soft creak of weight on the floorboards.

I go still.

What was it? Where?

There – the corner of the room, where the darkness seems deeper.

I hold myself as quiet as I can, waiting for it to come again. My heart is clenched tight.

On the mantel, the clock ticks out the dead seconds.

Nothing.

There is no movement, no sound of the boards.

Fear seeps away, and I feel foolish. This house makes noises; every house I have ever lived in has eased and groaned with the wind and the damp.

I will not sleep again; the pain woke with me, so instead I furl myself in the quilt like an oyster in its shell with no pearl to show for the grit that works through it. Pain and blood, grief and hunger.

To be a woman is a horror I can little comprehend.

Blood has marked much of my still young life. Bleeding at twelve – younger than my mother had expected, an advent into a new age of motherhood she had not anticipated so soon. The absence of blood on my wedding night – Henry searching for it on the sheets in the morning, and finding none, pricking my finger on a penknife to smear a bright stain for the servants to find and know he had done his husbandly duty.

The blood that came each month after. At first, a disappointment, then a fear, then a grief, then an inevitability.

I was good for nothing but blood.

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It is high summer, and the London house will have no more glory. We will close her up for the summer and retreat to the edge of Derbyshire and the new estate Henry has acquired, away from the smog of Sheffield proper. With ten years of migration, I am well used to the ebb and flow of the nomadic season, but there is still much to do. There are clothes to be mended and brushed, silverware and china to be counted and packed, clocks to be wound, dust-sheets to be hung across Chesterfield and sideboard. My desk is cleared, menus stacked and correspondence filed. There are no more invitations to be sent, no more seating plans to be decided. This anxious work of mine that has driven me for ten years, the precise and unassailable positioning of Henry and I both in the upper ranks of society, gives the meaning to my life, makes walls

and floors and borders in a borderless, insecure land. But it exhausts me. Once we settle in the country, a new round of social obligations will commence, but until then I am granted a reprieve: for a few weeks, it is enough for me to be only what I am.

I rise, aching and sluggish, and add a wrapper over my nightdress. The weather teases summer in bouts of bold sunshine and heat that sours the milk before it arrives from the dairy, then retreats in a flurry of grey skies and a heavy humidity that lies across the city like a fog. Between my curtains, there is a slice of white stucco and green bough. Our house is a fine building in the square near Holland Park, which Henry purchased from a drawing shown to him in Sheffield. We are surrounded by artists, about whom Henry is occasionally ungenerous.

Molly puts a slug of laudanum in my tea without my asking, and I am glad of it. My body is my enemy, and I will use every weapon in my arsenal against it. I breakfast lightly on kedgeriee and strong tea, and remain in my bedroom, tending to correspondence.

Molly returns sooner than expected, something in her hand. 'Miss Lamb has given her calling card.'

Cora. I should have known.

'I am out to all visitors today, Molly.'

I return to my letter writing, but Molly lingers at the door.

'Yes?'

'She's talking to Mr Crowther in the hallway – he was coming in when she arrived.'

Of course she is. Cora knows how to make herself at home anywhere. Though she is more than half a decade younger than I am, it is one of many talents she wears lightly, which come at so high a cost to me. Pretty, accomplished and reassuringly conventional, the world seems to rotate around her every whim and delight. Sometimes, I feel too aware of her friendship granting reflected glory.

I do not look up. 'Let him deal with her. I am occupied.'  
Molly bobs and slips away.

I am riled at the intrusion, too much in pain to be generous to those who lay endless demands at my door. On my writing desk is a tin of pastilles, and I put three into my mouth at once, letting the overwhelming rush of sugar blunt my mind.

To business: Henry's secretary has arranged a first-class compartment on the Midland Railway and our departure from St Pancras is set for the morrow. I do not know what to think about Nethershaw, the moorland estate for which that I am now responsible. I have seen but one smudged photograph of its exterior: a long, low stone edifice of medieval and Tudor foundation that, unlike its distant neighbours, Chatsworth and Lyme, has not been wrapped in a Palladian façade. Its arched windows and crenelations give rise to images of monks and knights, an England we have long fled. Its position on the rising bank of hillside, leading to what is called in those parts an 'edge' – here, Hungerstone Edge, flanked by Stanage and Burbage Edge – seems a bleak, alien landscape to me.

Until now, we have summered in rented houses in fashionable areas, but Henry is not satisfied. He wants his name on deed and register: on the marriage banns that joined my ancient family to his, and on the contract leasing four thousand acres of Derbyshire.

If I can become a woman in no other way, then I shall make it this: I am an unerring general in the campaign for our social standing. No rule of etiquette is obscure to me, no occasion too difficult to host.

I ignore the scatter of calling cards that arrive throughout the morning and think instead of the shirts and petticoats that came back from the laundry with scorch marks, the new gown that the dressmaker has yet to deliver and my summer hat that on second look seems a little out of style. Is there time to order a new one before we go? Or should I give instruction to a milliner in Sheffield? No, it must be London. The steel wives of Sheffield will all have hats from the same establishments in York and Harrogate. I must come with the London fashions of this year, 1888, and not a single thing that speaks of a moment earlier. That is what Henry bought in me: taste, refinement, high birth and good blood.

I take a moment to write a letter to my hatmaker with my request: whatever is considered the appropriate fashion for a married woman of thirty to be made up in my size and sent north.

A little before the luncheon bell, I dress. I have kept a tea-gown apart from the rest of my wardrobe, which has already been packed into trunks. This one is striped pink Liberty silk over a light corset, with a train trimmed in black

velvet and a boned collar that sits tight around my throat. I am a beauty. It is well known. My eyes are cornflower blue and my skin like spilt cream. When we were courting, Henry would take down my hair from its pins and wind its heavy locks around his fingers like honey around a knife.

I was pretty then; I am beautiful now. My waist has thickened and my figure filled in the decade since our wedding, but it has only flushed my looks further into delight. There are perhaps some graces to being un-mothered. My body is as unused as a dress not yet worn, and so remains as crisp and fresh as the day it was bought.

When I descend, it is to the hushed tones of a voice seeking privacy. Henry is in his study, and I linger outside, straightening a vase of dried flowers.

‘ . . . grand gift . . . no . . . surprised.’

I can picture him, mouth cupped close to the telephone receiver, teeth yellow-stained by coffee and port, glistening with spittle when he runs his tongue across them, as he does when he is addressing a matter of urgency or importance. The telephone itself was installed only a few weeks ago – the first on the street – and Henry was as delighted as a school boy with a new toy, delaying the workmen at every turn so their cart could be observed outside our house the whole day.

It is our ten-year wedding anniversary in three weeks. The tin wedding. Perhaps Henry is telephoning Cutlers’ Hall to insist the year be renamed steel.

We have spoken of no plans, but the words *gift* and *surprise* linger with me as I pass from the sheet-covered

house into the tranquillity of the garden. The dining room was amongst the first to be prepared for our absence, so we must take our final meals at the iron table on the terrace or else like breakfast, on a tray in our respective rooms. Or at least *I* must – Henry will dine at his club or at a chop-house no doubt.

I wait for Henry with my eyes closed, willing away the pain in my stomach, frustrated by my weakness. The table on the terrace has been laid with the worst china for luncheon, the gold leaf flaking from the rims, along with a set of Sheffield steel cutlery from Henry's Ajax Works, and a selection of dishes repurposed from dinner last night: a little pressed beef, a coil of tongue, a small pot of shrimp beneath the oily plug of butter that seals them in, a dish of mashed potatoes, a shining glass of jelly, stewed fruit, cheeses and biscuits. It is proper; I am pleased. I think of Aunt Daphne and her swollen knuckles rapping the etiquette book. *An elegant disorder is perfectly distinct from a vulgar confusion.*

My plate is too empty, and there is so much I want, but I must not start without approval. There is a note of my half-remembered dream in the metallic taste in my mouth – perhaps a storm is coming, the low pressure bringing the blood to my tongue.

Instead, I consider the grass that will need trimming and the flower-beds tending while we are away. It is difficult to maintain control of such wild things without constant vigilance. This table, too, needs work. The green enamel paint has begun to peel in the crook of a curlicue

in the wrought iron, and beneath it, specks of rust have taken hold. I worry at it with a fingernail. I have given little thought to our anniversary, and it troubles me that, of the two of us, Henry is the one to hold it in mind. I had not expected him to wish to celebrate, for it has been well over a year since he last visited my bedroom of a night – but perhaps some new mood has seized him.

I am struck by a sudden idea, and while I await Henry, I return quickly to my room and fish amongst the contents of a small, engraved box I keep at the back of my clothespress. At last, I retrieve the letter, the paper soft with wear. The postmark is dated a little over ten years prior: our courtship. I write a quick note – *my darling, yours from the start* – and go back downstairs.

As I'd hoped, Henry has gone to the lunch table, and I slip into his study to leave the letter on his desk. It is nothing really, only a trinket, but I am glad to do it.

A piece of paper catches my eye, different from the others around it: the handwriting is tentative, the letters unevenly formed, as though the writer is unfamiliar with ink and nib.

*... dangerous working conditions ... care given to human life ...*

Several words are underlined: *demands, ultimatum. Violence.*

'Lenore?'

Henry's voice cuts through the house, and I startle, sliding from the study as noiselessly as I can. My husband is a man who values nothing if not his privacy.

A balmy July morning has brooded over with cloud, and it is not quite warm enough to eat outside, but luncheon is already laid. I arrive at the table as the first spot of rain hits my wrist.

I look to the skies. 'Shall we move indoors?'

Henry is irritated, already loading slices of beef and a spoon of mashed potatoes onto his plate. 'It will pass, and I am hungry.'

Not even the thick cloud can dull the glossy shine of Henry's hair or wash the colour from his cheeks. I have seen him look as handsome in a crumpled nightshirt and tousled hair as in a top hat and tail-coat. Sometimes, when we are seen together at an assembly or dinner party, I am struck wordless that *this* is my husband. To know myself so envied.

I take the potted shrimp and excavate them with the point of my knife. There is a trencher with fresh bread, and I take a slice upon which to smear the salty shellfish. Henry watches it disappear between my lips, and his mouth twitches in distaste. I slow my eating.

Henry demands fresh tea, for the pot on the table has gone cold, and as we wait for Molly to return, I look at the oak at the end of the garden; it must be a relic from before these houses were built, its canopy as high as the rooftops. While we are gone, a man will come and cut it down, for there have been complaints that it blocks the light.

Molly brings the tea.

As I reach to pour it, Henry says, 'I am hosting a shooting party for my new investors.'

I send a cup to shatter on the paving stones.

'A shooting party?' I ask, staring openly. 'Do you speak seriously?'

He holds my gaze intently, daring me to speak of the past that hangs in the air between us.

'Why would I not?'

I cast down my eyes. 'Of course. When can we expect our guests?'

'Don't be ridiculous. It's a shooting party, Lenore. When do you think?'

I hesitate. 'The twelfth of August is very soon.'

The Glorious Twelfth, the opening of the grouse shooting season, is but two and a half weeks way. I looked again this morning through the documents detailing the Nethershaw estate: an unspeakably large swathe of moorland is tied up in the holdings, and a certain amount of it is the habitat of grouse and pheasant.

Henry laughs. 'You will hardly be preparing all the food yourself – I am sure you can cope with giving a few instructions to the staff.'

It will be a great deal of work and require the renovations to be redirected to the guest rooms. Very well. I am more than capable.

Molly has come with a dustpan and brush for the shattered cup. I take my napkin instead and kneel with her to gather the shards. Blood speckles the pale cloth – I have cut myself: a neat parting of skin on the tip of my index finger. I put it in my mouth, suckling the sting with my tongue.