

A Hunger of Bellas

My father killed and ate the first Bella.

She also had blue eyes.

It's odd to see a landrace with blue eyes. Most pigs have dark eyes that create that signature 'beadiness,' but Bella's were as blue as a Myna bird egg. I was introduced to her as I took my first, unsteady steps into the great outside. Having escaped from the piglet pen, I found her snuffling about the shoes on our patio, her squiggly tail sticking out between my fuchsia gum boots. At the sound of my approach, she withdrew, and in a mutual moment of something like recognition, we each paused and simultaneously squealed in delight. From then on, we grew together like two peas in a pod; running as our legs grew surer, wrestling in the tall grass, exploring the boundaries of the property, and wading through the shallow waters of the dam when mother wasn't watching. In the December heat I would shuck my clothes every chance I got and rest my knobby chin on Bella's bristled spine as we let the sun soak through our bones to warm the ground beneath us.

I remember those days, refracted through the soft sheen of childhood, almost as if we were one being. Pig and girl, restless and inseparable.

Until we weren't.

My father cooked and ate her the day after my seventh birthday.

The neighbour's sheep were lambing then, and my father had gifted me the runt of the flock a few days prior, as an early birthday gift. I was fascinated by it. I had never seen anything so helpless. All it did was stand there shivering and mewling pathetically for its mother.

Almost immediately, those pitiful cries irked my father. I knew he regretted giving it to me. He grumbled incessantly.

Damn thing sounds just like ya! Always crying! Gives me a bloody headache! Knew it was a mistake to give it to ya!

It was not hard to tell when he was frustrated.

My father was a vocal man, fond of voicing his displeasure. So fond, in fact, that his presence in our farmhouse was the reason I had spent much of my childhood outside; fleeing the first moment my little legs could carry me. Out in nature, I quickly found that the land had no tantrums. It did not care whether you sat a certain way or spoke a certain way. To a child so

closely acquainted with severity and disappointment, the wilds of our vast property were a wellspring of wonder and solace.

And - perhaps its greatest quality - the land had Bella.

One thing about landrace pigs is that they can grow very big. Fattened by love and my bias as chief swine-feeder, Bella grew and grew and *grew* until she barely fit inside her crate and monopolised an indecent amount of the shared pen.

In an act I now consider of sinister intention, or otherwise incredible oversight, my father left my new, noisy lamb in the pen beside Bella's overnight on the eve of my birthday, while he *decided what to do with the damned thing*.

With the transfer of the lamb to the pen beside hers, Bella's bigness proved fatal.

On the morning of my birthday, I was awoken by an intoxicating scent; one I will never forget. It made my insides rumble with hunger. By the time I realised it was the smell of roasting meat, it was too late. Both Bella and the lamb were dead. Out in the garden, below my window, their carcasses rotated slowly on a set of crudely constructed spits; one small and one much, much larger. The rumbling pain in my stomach shifted from hunger to nausea like a spark down a wick.

According to my father, in a show of unprecedented aggression and violence, Bella had rammed her gargantuan body into the little lamb repeatedly overnight until she had crushed the miserable creature to death. Finding the lamb's mutilated corpse earlier that morning, my father *obviously* had no other choice but to kill the culprit.

He had shot Bella three times in the head. Then, with the callous mettle of fathers and farmers everywhere, he had put her, and the lamb, on to roast rather than waste the meat.

Later that afternoon he stripped her flesh and over the course of the week, he ate her whole, leaving only a pile of bones where I once had a friend.

Oh, of course he rattled out a series of justifications -

It was not safe to have such a feral animal around his little girl. Once an animal goes bad it doesn't come good again. He'd get me another pet, a better one, as long as it was small and quiet.

- But I knew the truth. I had caught him watching Bella and I together frequently with that familiar dark look he often wore when he caught mother and I dancing around the kitchen or laughing at the table. *No respectable girl slobbs around with a pig all day*. The sheer number of times he had said that to me. Well, now I no longer could. He had made sure of it.

And the walls of my pen became that much smaller.

So, by the time the second Bella arrived in my fourteenth year, I was a lot lonelier and a lot more restless.

The second Bella's real name was Isabella Yates, but no one where we lived ever used their full names. *Isabella* was too hard to yell across a field. A name like that got caught in the mouths of our untrained teachers.

As it happened, the Yates were wealthy barley farmers. Only a little older than me, Bella's parents had sent her to us as a farm hand, or housemaid, while her mother recovered from cancer in a big city hospital for a considerable sum. My father never would have gone for it had he not also owed Mr Yates a debt for three years' worth of his crop, which at times had fed not only our pigs, but the three of us also.

The second Bella did not have hooves, or a squiggly tail or a bristled back. A portly thing, her brown hair was cropped shorter than I had ever seen a girl's, and she had big blue eyes that drooped down at the edges and were fringed with thick black lashes. Though such features may sound pleasing, the bigness and droopiness of her eyes was disconcerting, their intensity altogether too much. They reminded me of a cow's eyes. More than once I witnessed mother avoiding eye contact with Bella in conversation, busying herself with something menial and looking anywhere else.

My father rarely ever spared her a glance. On the day of Bella's arrival, while she unpacked her belongings in the spare bedroom up the hall, he had thrown open the front door as mother came down the stairs to meet me in the kitchen. *Something ain't right with that one.* And that was that.

I had no such qualms. Her eyes reminded me of a cow's eyes in shape, but their colour, that was all Bella.

We were fast friends. That first month the two of us traversed the property under the guise of our vague duties, mine daughterly and hers a precaution against becoming burdensome.

Unmoored by her mother's sickness, and overwhelmed by her new lodgings, she was frequently quiet. But where I walked, she walked. Where I wandered, so she did too. We never spoke, but some unspoken language existed between us anyway, thrumming beneath the surface and stringing her to me like a leash.

From then on, we grew together like two peas in a pod; running with our hands entwined, wrestling in the tall grass, pacing the boundaries of the property, and testing the deeper waters of the dam where father wasn't watching.

And he had begun watching Bella and I by then.

Having noticed our closeness he would appear from a barn or take a scythe to a field beside where we lay or happen across our nighttime walk with that same old look stark on his face. Following the silent codes of propriety, the dam was the only place he wouldn't dare look.

Suffice to say, Bella and I swam a lot that summer.

Shedding our clothes like skin, I was confounded by the shape of her. I had never seen knees with those little indentations, or such flimsy nipples, or such sturdy looking thighs. When she bent over to take her shoes off, the bones of her back protruded from her spine as if something were trying to get out. As she stood again, they would disappear. The sight sent a little thrill through me that I couldn't explain. When I told her about what I had noticed, she blushed deeply and submerged herself in the water. The action surprised me. I hadn't meant it as an insult. Not *at all*.

After that, I never said anything of the sort again. I only watched her, keeping my comments, and my thrills, to myself.

At least until I couldn't anymore.

On the morning of my fifteenth birthday, Bella, who stayed in the room across the hall from mine, knocked on my door.

It was a gentle knock, meant for me alone. When I answered, she tiptoed into my room and placed a wrapped gift on the bed, barely concealing a grin. I shot her a delighted look, conspiratorial in my silence, and unwilling to break the spell of the moment by waking mother or father. I had never received anything other than new clothes on my birthday, so the thought of opening the non-descript package exhilarated me.

After flinging my arms around her in a grateful hug, I took Bella by the hand and tugged her onto the bed with me as I unwrapped the gift.

It was a small, hand-stitched lamb. A jolly bow adorning its little neck, and a vapid smile embroidered as its mouth.

Immediately, I remembered the little lamb of my childhood. It took all of me to keep my expression glad. But Bella sensed the tension.

‘Do you not like it?’ she whispered.

I looked to her and found the despair in those huge eyes utterly overwhelming.

I forced a wider smile.

‘I love it!’ I whispered back placatingly, but my voice sounded strained even to me.

As her eyes dropped, heavy with embarrassment and hurt - and so immeasurably *blue* - I couldn’t bear it.

Leaning forward, I pressed my mouth to hers.

She gasped.

With that sound, the same thrill I felt watching her undress overtook me and I let it, taking the opportunity to deepen the kiss. The movement pushed her further onto the bed, and relenting, she let herself fall back into the covers. As she did so she landed clumsily atop the gift, squashing the lamb beneath her as we crossed mouths. It smiled up at me as I brought my body over hers, letting the thrill lead me as I started to tug at her clothes, exposing the flesh of her shoulder.

I undressed her quickly, voraciously, my eyes flickering over her erratically as I noted all my favourites things about her. Nipples, knees, thighs. My attention caught there. I sucked in a sharp breath.

But I had no time to overthink it as I was ripped off Bella like a suckling from its mother. My father’s giant hand gripped me so tightly by the back of the neck that I could not even make a noise. Bella stared up at me for only a second, crimson and aghast. Then my father’s voice rang out. A single word.

Get!

She scrambled for her night clothes and dashed from my room without a word.

Only the lamb remained, malformed by our combined body weight, forced to smile.

A beat of silence extended for so long it was nearly painful.

I always knew there was something wrong with ya.

My father gritted finally into my ear, tightening his grip threateningly, before flinging me so hard across the room that I hit the opposite wall. I slumped to the floor, breathless from both the sin and the punishment. He began a string of vehement exclamations as he slammed and locked my bedroom door – a mode of discipline I had endured myriad times in my childhood- but in my disarray I couldn’t hear them. They echoed through the house in his wake.

I tried to slow my heart, and collect my thoughts, but all I could see was a pair of blue eyes, staring at me, as if imploring me to act. In help, or love, or protection, or longing, I did not know.

Pig or person, I did not know.

They simply stared.

While I sat there and cried.

It is there that the story of my Bellas finds its unfortunate conclusion. Of the many things I know now that I did not know then, there are two truths that I feel compelled to mention.

The first is that I would never see Bella again.

The second, more sinister truth, is that my father was right.

In the confines of my room that day I realised there *is* something wrong with me.

Because if he hadn't intervened, I would have done it. I wouldn't have been able to help myself.

Portly or not, silent or not, Bella was perfect.

She was so plump, and so pink, I would have eaten her whole.