



## MINK

### Sarah Hall

We knew from the November berries what the next months were going to be like. Everywhere they were hung and sprayed and clotted in bushes, ripe and red, like blisters and catkins of blood. The hollies haemorrhaged in autumn, and gave us ideas about selling genuine wreaths at The Hired Lad come December rather than staining ivy brobbs with sheep raddle as we'd done in previous years.

Rosehips clung on, plump, past their season, until the birds eventually went with them back to their nests. Yarrow and rowan, they hung out their own bunting as a warning. But it was the hawthorn that was the truest messenger, that made the hedgerows ruddy and fascinating; it was the hawthorn's year. The May blossom had also been good and everything after was too full and too fertile. It meant snow soon, hoar frosts that stopped the hearts of mice in burrows and hardened tree sap down the side of its white grip, and black ice. It meant the ground would only ever half-thaw towards spring, like dense meat brought from the pantry and moved from cold room to cold room.

There were other signs, read, as ever, by the older villagers. Skies at

summer's end looking heathered and smoked, which put us all to mourning, as if the clouds had settled up above the old border bonfires of the Picts. The moon's full eclipse in October. Along the Solway they said the salmon had run in early, and there were rumours that fishermen in January might have to walk over a frozen sea to Mann with their creels empty. The old saying that went - to whichever quarter a bull faced lying down on Allhallows, from there the wind would blow the better part of

winter. And Sarge Dickinson's Hereford had its withers turned to the north that day, I saw it as I passed by the paddock holding Magda's hand in one of mine and a black-singed lantern in the other.

North. The chill does not get more mardy in its delivery than direct from the pole. So the berries told us, and we knew it to be grave, but they were bonny in their prediction too and they lit the back roads for us with bright skin-light, even as the first flurrying daads came to the fells, the becks stiffened and closed, and the feathers of rooks began sticking to stone walls as they perched. The almanac adjusted, and the calendar seemed to lean forward, heavy with the weight of the plants' red peel.

Magda had not been well all year. She'd been bleeding too much, and there were knots inside her, under her arms, in her breasts and groin. They felt pliant and soft-gristled in her body like wasps nests when she put my fingers to them saying better I knew and wasn't afraid to touch her. And she was weary, weary well past her age. I'd washed her clothes for her, every day when she needed them changed and hadn't the strength to soak and scrub them herself. I hadn't minded it, she'd no mother to fill the tubs, and better me than one of the men in her family, to save her the laj and the blush.

Her father had taken her to the doctor twice that summer and nothing came of it for he was ignorant of what might cause the condition. There was an idea that one of the rosy glands of her brain was being interfered with, it was blooming too much, in behind her skull where it couldn't be reached, and that to me seemed most unfair. She was beautiful and birdy through her

bones, Magda, and the thought of moving those bones around nigh on broke my heart.

The doctor hoped things would settle down, that she'd even out. He talked of primrose oil and vervain, which was strange and superstitious for a man so versed in science, and known for scorning the apothecaries at the horse fair with their black bottles and jars. We knew from this reprieve the diagnosis was ill. Magda went with his suggestion though, and cut Simpler's Joy from the lonning by the cottage. She hung the weed in the chimney to dry. Hallowed by thou, if thou growest on the ground, she said as she gathered it up, stem by stem, as if ours was a century older and witches were abroad. Her hands softened from handling its oil and became strangely perfumed with a rich scent that set me on edge, a scent said to attract pigeons and rats, and eels to the resting place of the drowned if it was scattered on water.

I took it in mind that perhaps her body wanted a child and it was asking too hard. And I wanted to say that maybe something in her was objecting to there being no sign of a husband, nor any lean towards that breed, but I didn't say this to her. She was my friend and I loved her and it would have gone against us in the end. Whatever was wrong, it left her riddled with pods and as red as the November hedgerows. And I feared for her in a hard winter. All I wanted was to keep her warm.

With the bad news of Magda, the mink had arrived in the valley that summer too. We'd been free of them for several years and we were glad of it, and the councils were glad we had stopped pressing them to admit their presence in the north like a disease, always bent to say our complaints were for nowt but sooty ghosts. Some children came back from playing by the beck in June and said they'd seen a black otter, a little one, not paddling the current but riddling up alongside the banks like a stoat, and they undulated their curved hands to show the movement of the creature.

The farmers took note, reinforced coops and sheds, they cleaned gun

barrels at night and they waited. It wasn't long before we were finding carcasses, first hare and moorhens and dippers strewn in the gorse, then chickens and cats with their entrails left like curses on our doorsteps, their throats gnawed out. It was the mink's way. There was no thrift and tidy to the killing, nothing necessary or respectful.

A bobcat or a martin would have dismantled wire and twine with precision, stealing from the pens and taking its prey back to the middle woods, eating all but the bitter liver and gall bladder, and it would have been almost forgivable, the damage done. But the mink were brazen and gluttonous, they were giversum wee devils. They broke in to our keeps with saw-teeth and claws, desecrating flocks and tearing up livestock as if it was nothing more than a raid, a savage revenge of some kind. They slaughtered only for the sake of it, for the slenderest taste of blood, and the waste was sickening.

We were too patient this time and left our defence too long, perhaps hoping they'd move on down the river and give trouble to another settlement, or perhaps waiting for the council to sanction a wider cull, the way our grand-folk had raised flares and hunted the Capple the breadth of the county. When it became clear the mink had taken hold we treated them as we always have, like an enemy, and we began starving the hounds.

Of this initiative my indignity could only approve, but my mind was turned yet to another cause. The warming of my bonny. I did not know how many mink it would take to make a coat for Magda, but a coat I would make for her. My pattern I knew would be haltered between practice and guess. Magda was slight, she barely filled her own small petties and dresses, she was barely there in the room past her eyes and her hair and the delicate whittle-back frame of her bones.

She'd never grown as tall nor as broad as I during our schooling and I had become used to feeling ever like the dool tree above her. The animals themselves were not large, not much bigger than the span of a griddle plate,

the males stretching one rim wider, and only the girth of the pelt could be used. I calculated it would take no more than fifty altogether, and probably less for the wee dot of the lass. Three to the elbow, six to the shoulder, for covering the thin spindles of her arms. Twenty dark panels to quilt the back, and the rest for the front, with two for two pockets for her vervain-stained hands. It would be rough at the joins and the sleeves and the hems for I was no proper seamstress. My fingers were not nimble, nor previously known to such skilled endeavour. I'd mended my brothers' moleskin breeches as my mother instructed me, with her thickest needle and strongest thread. I had darned and fixed buttons like any other daughter. It would be a rough-taggle jacket, like a tinker's or a poacher's, but I was certain I could make it for Magda, and swaddle her in it and keep her cosy. And so I set my mind firm to the anthology of vermin.

I rarely hunted. In truth I took less enjoyment from the sport than my brothers, William and Jonathan, who went out with the fox chase on Ladyday and Michaelmas, though on occasion I'd felt the tint of excitement when the dogs got close in their pack and the jack of their jaws increased. Our otter-hounds I knew could not manage the number of animals I wanted, though the bitches were young and fast and could dig at the banks in a fury when they caught the sound of a creature scratching inside the earth at the dead head of a warren, or when its musk belied it at the sneck of its lair. They'd lope all night if let loose on the fell, they were mighty grand workers.

The other farmers would not be interested in selling the pelts, they weren't of good enough quality to bundle up and send to Savile's by way of Carlisle. These were not original Norfolk-bred mink, shiny and sleek, and farmed above their natural size. Our mountains and moors had worn them down, kept them little, and dulled their coaly fur to sorrel. All the villagers wanted was to rid the dale of them, and collect up good batches of eggs again. No profit was involved. So I made an arrangement with the hunting

families for my bolts of mink. I bartered buttermilk and preserves, the last of our honey, and I lied to old Lanty Farrow that I'd court his son, Calum. I told them all to shout the hounds off early for the purpose of saving the hides.

And in the weeks to come I went out at dusk cocking a rifle, with my two elder brothers and the grey baying baiters, and the reek of their kennels drifting behind us. Our lanterns hung limp yolk moons out on the river and their flames let the gluts of red berries in the briar remind us the hardest of winters was on the way.

November passed us by, leaving sleet in the air and a rowky rot. The thorn trees dripped with cold tears, and their garish produce shrivelled away. On Sunday mornings the young ones tied ribbons into the branches of the churchyard yews like prayers for new life. By the middle of December I had half the quantity of mink I wanted, and it seemed good enough. My brothers, taken aback by my continual presence at the water's edge and reading a personal keenness to my ambition, agreed to hunt further on down steam. And we let the dogs quarry into the next valley, knowing it would be considered a favour come hay season next year, when help was needed to bail and stack.

As we hunted, I was struck by the talent of the river, for it ferried perfumes on its back and seemed to enhance everything than touched it. I smelled the mineral stones of its bed, the wet shag of the dogs when they shook after swimming, the clods of soil under their paws, and the bark of sour elders whose roots sipped at the marsh. Like the hounds I could even detect the waft of mink through the ferns, the brittle reeds, and between wall smoots. It was the binary scent of blood's soft iron and fusty secretion. There was a sense of utility and to these excursions for me, something other than the killing and clearing of pests, and I began to feel fortified by each evening's close, when we returned home with half a dozen slack, un-sprung animals in our sacks. I enjoyed the trek along the banks, away from the

smoky village, and the feral sounds in the darkness, the pants and whines, the shrills and screeches of nocturnal birds engaged in their own sharp procedures.

At first the lads would check on me, looking back to make sure I was not stumbling or cowp't over on the uneven ground, but I managed fine and did not complain of the chill wark to my forehead. I could set the hounds, and call them to heel. I wore my father's high leather gloves to retrieve the snarled bodies from the loud, taut circle of tails. Twice I shot mink as they escaped the pack and ran for the cover of dusk, the blunt crack echoing up the fells and scars. In the distance, the guns of the Dickinsons and the Harrisons and Thompsons replied. And it was me who eventually shot Tan, the second oldest of our hounds, when she was bitten through her jowl and the wound turned septic and she was dying, pity-eyed and unable to stand or take water. For her part she had nipped the neck of eight wretched scrawls, and we would miss her.

We hunted clear down to the Eamont, until the current slowed, and great sandstone cliffs rose from the swirl and there was no place for the creatures to burrow. It was good of my brothers to aid me like this, and with the contributions from the other families it seemed every day I would open the door to a fresh body caught the night before.

It was a strange Christmas advent for Magda, the collection of beasts, though she knew nothing of my plans and probably thought me to be saving for a lavender cushion as her gift, or a coral brooch like the one she had admired in the watchmakers in Penrith after visiting the doctor. While others tied up mistletoe and stirred wishes accompanying nutmeg and brandy into their suet pudding, I skinned vermin, stiff-peeling the fur off them like unripe fruit and scraping away white fat with a bowing knife. I did not bother paunching the lile bandits, they were not destined for any pot. The pink bodies I left in a heap by the woodshed to wither and freeze, wondering what to do with them and feeling my mess was about equal to

that of the dreadful mink themselves. Eventually my father suggested I take them along in a barrow as fodder for the pigs up at High Hullock Howe, and I did so, glad to be rid of them.

It would have been best to let the pelts air and dry before stitching them together. There were correct treatments I knew this coat would not enjoy in its making. But time was short and the weather was worsening with two snowfalls in a week, and a late Helm wind off the Pennines, which left the eastern villages sorely distressed by drifts and folk righting the tall hedges that protected their houses. The light in the cottage waned with the shorter days, so I worked early, from seven o' clock until nine, as soon as the sun supported it, before turning my hand to other chores.

It was a raw effort for the fingers, pulling the hide straight and piercing it with line, and as soon as it began to take shape the coat became heavy to hold and stitch. My hands ached by the time I was done and I often fumbled throughout the rest of the day. My family might have thought it a curious or silly occupation, or singular-minded, but they knew Magda was dear to me and in poorly-health. They paid me the courtesy of not questioning my disposition or remarking upon my extravagance, and they allowed me the space to work and to hang the item in the high stairwell. Jonathan even suggested bone for the buttons and polished up three squared pieces, and I attached them carefully to the placket.

I was neither truly myself nor any other person during this time, and if I felt downcast and had to unpick a line then I imagined my bonny girl's brant collarbones and I remembered the lavish gore of the berries through the autumn hedgerows. With every prick I made in the mink's pelt, I wished Magda well again. And when the cotton snapped I grasped the bobbin and quickly tied the thread tight again. By Christmas Eve I was finished, though I came late to Midnight mass from brushing the coat down and inspecting it a final time, with every candle and lamp lit to illuminate the parlour, and I received a disapproving look from the seated congregation. But I did not

care if they sucked their cheeks at me. I felt joyful and useful. And I sang the last carol as merrily as it was meant.

Magda was as delighted with the coat as she could be. She got glisky when she saw it the next morning, swinging from a hanger in my hand, and said I was too kind, too swollen and ripe of heart, and she kissed my cheek and hugged me to her until I coloured violet. And though it remained a little gamey, and it was never neat or delicately fixed, she wore it all through to spring and commented each time she did so how fine it felt about her shoulders. As warm as fresh-boiled sotter loaf, she said.

She looked like a portion of silky night wearing it, and I did wonder sometimes if I hadn't reached down a charmed and dangered well of pitch to draw it out, contracting with a gazetteer of spirits. For I knew I had lived that season in a deathly place, an old mettlesome place, beaten and brayed by its occupants time and again, and again now letting loose the perfume of its corpses.

After so many hours treading the banks with the dogs and my brothers, intent on my purpose, some red purpose I did not truly understand, I missed the river at dusk. Often on clear evenings that harsh predicted winter I would walk out over the frozen earth to greet the teal twilight coming in. And sometimes I walked with Magda by my side, if she felt strong enough to come, taking her hand in mine when she brought it out of the warm dark pocket.

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