Bloodletting

A True Story of Self-Harm and Survival

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Extract

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Victoria Leatham takes us into the world of self-harming behaviours, one that can be occupied by princesses to poor university students. Cutting oneself to draw blood is a scary and scarifying act, generally driven by guilt, but often associated with tension reduction and a buzz, and thus potentially addictive. Psychiatrists recognise that Bipolar Mood Disorder can present atypically for a few years – via eating, obsessive and self-injurious behaviours – before settling into a more orthodox pattern. Leatham moves beyond such scratching of the diagnostic surface to superbly reveal the inner perturbation and some of the multiple determinants of such behaviours.

Professor Gordon Parker
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Prologue

Starving, binge-drinking and promiscuity are, for many people, just part of growing up. They were for me. I didn't do them all at once. The starving came first and the other two followed, several years later, when I finally managed to convince myself that the calories in alcohol didn't count.

> Parents don't like any of these things.
> But there are things they like even less.

When I was fifteen, hadn't had my period for six months and was unable to stand up without seeing stars, my mother took me to the doctor. It wasn't that she thought I was too thin – teenage girls diet after all – but that she was worried I was anaemic. I wasn't. According to our helpful family doctor, I would be just fine if only I ate more.

My mother and I drove home relieved, and life continued as before. I exercised, didn't eat anything that contained fat, butter, milk or sugar, and kept to myself. My mother and older brother argued; my

father worked. I did my best not to upset anyone and studied hard.

I was polite to everyone.

It wasn't until eighteen months later, after I'd had my wisdom teeth out, and was standing in front of the bathroom mirror, that I realised I wasn't fine. My collarbones stood out, my skin was greeny-grey, and it was difficult to stand up straight. I needed to eat.

Many months after that, by which time I'd finished school and had had a year overseas, I was able to have a piece of cake without then needing to exercise. I was at university by then, and everyone was eating. It was normal, and it was fun.

Of course, there was a price to pay. Suddenly, I wasn't the perfect child anymore. Out of the house at last, I was behaving badly and enjoying it. My grades slipped, my thighs grew and I didn't ring home.

My mother was horrified. Hadn't they brought me up properly? Didn't I care? Didn't I have any respect for them? I even ignored the most important of the house rules, number three: 'smile before you speak'. Did I not care what other people thought? How other people felt? What had happened to me?

What had happened? I was growing up, that was all. It wasn't so very complicated.

The real problems hadn't even started. They didn't start until after I'd finished uni and had been dragged to the doctor one afternoon. I explained the problem: I wasn't happy. I was tired, I was listless, I lacked concentration, I wanted to sleep all the time and, and, and. I didn't need to say anything else. She prescribed Prothiaden, an antidepressant.

It wasn't the answer

Chapter One

I had no idea that the simple act of running a sharp blade across my wrist would change everything so completely.

I couldn't pretend anymore and I didn't care. I sat on the kitchen floor of Helen's house and cried. I knew that I was crossing a line. If I used a knife against myself then I would have transgressed to such an extent that everything else I did, and was ashamed about, would fall away to nothing. I'd be outside the normal social boundaries, in a place where the rules no longer applied. The idea, while frightening, was also extremely seductive – it would mean a sort of freedom.

I wasn't after happiness anymore. I just wanted to survive.

Though I'd toyed with the idea of cutting myself before, I never seriously thought I'd be able to do it. It goes against nature. It goes against that primal self-preservation instinct. If you accidentally brush up against a hot iron you don't leave your arm there. You move it away, as quickly as possible, and you rush to

put ice on the burn to numb the pain. But that very pain can bring relief.

Relief was what I was looking for that day, and I didn't care how I got it. What I wanted – what I needed – was a pain that I could see and deal with. I couldn't cope with the mess inside me any longer and cutting myself seemed to be the best solution. I knew that it would work. What I didn't know was that I was about to engage in a behaviour that was not just dangerous but highly, highly addictive.

I knew I needed help. I had left five or six messages for Alex. He didn't want to be involved with me any longer, but I was desperate. I didn't know who else to call; no-one else knew what I was going through. I didn't believe he was out – he was just screening his calls. So I kept ringing. Sooner or later he'd have to pick up. I thought it would help just to hear his voice.

Finally he answered. He sounded annoyed. 'What do you want,Vic?'

'I just wondered if you wanted to do something later. Maybe I could come over?' I was pleading with him. If we saw each other and talked, maybe, maybe, things would improve.

'No, I don't think that's a good idea.'

'Why?'

'Basically, I don't want to see you. Not today. Not at all. I've got my own problems, I don't need you adding to them. Don't call me again. And don't expect me to change my mind and call you. I won't. In fact – and I wasn't going to tell you this, but it's probably better that you know – I destroyed your phone number last night.'

And that was pretty much it, really.

Spending time with Alex had undoubtedly been making matters worse, but I was addicted to his attention – albeit sporadic – and at least when with him I wasn't alone. We'd known each other for years and had kept in touch as we'd got older, sleeping with each other from time to time, but not having a relationship. He had the kind of Nordic looks that are hard to ignore: grandmothers loved him and gay waiters drooled over him. But underneath the angelic features and charm, there was an angry, aggressive intelligence and intolerant, dismissive attitude toward most people.

Alex had never pretended to love me, or even care about me, but nevertheless he wanted me. Not when he was sober of course; if I touched him then, he'd flinch. It was when he was drunk, or stoned, or high, that I was of interest. This was enough for me.

A week or so previously, we'd been drinking and had done a line or two of speed. It was summer. The temperature was over 35°C in Sydney's inner west and it was stifling inside his house. It seemed like the only relief we'd get would be in the ocean, so I let him drive my car through the city and across to Bronte Beach. Neither of us thought twice about the fact that we were under the influence. The influences, plural. Not only did we think we were indestructible, but we didn't care about the rest of the world.

We parked and walked down to the beach which, while pretty and sheltered, has notoriously strong surf. This afternoon was no exception. Normally, I'm scared of large waves and either go in when it's flat or just paddle at the shoreline. On this day and in that state, however, nothing worried me and I simply dived in. Alex was a strong swimmer, so didn't think twice.

We both swam beyond the breakers, he easily and me with some difficulty. For a few minutes we bobbed about looking back at the beach, physically tired but elated and refreshed.

Then, all too quickly, we found ourselves caught in a rip. We were being pushed toward the rocks. I tried to grab hold and haul myself onto them between the surges of the crashing waves. Ahead of me, Alex managed to do just this.

But it wasn't as easy as it looked, as the rocks were slippery. I couldn't get a hold, so was repeatedly thrown against them, and then dragged back into the ocean. After what might have only been a few minutes, I gave up. I just couldn't do it. The alcohol and drugs made drowning seem like a reasonable response, so I relaxed and calmly accepted my fate.

And then I felt someone grabbing my arms. I was back on the rocks, being dragged across them by Alex. He glared at me, annoyed that he'd had to help at all. I had drawn attention to us, and he'd ripped his knee open. I saw blood oozing from under a flap of white skin. Upset, bruised and scratched, I was otherwise unhurt. But it hadn't helped things between us – he couldn't even look at me as we walked up to the car.

As we drove home, now cold and sober, it appeared that Alex actively hated me. Perhaps this should have upset me; it didn't. Instead it seemed a natural and fair reaction. After all, I hated me too.

Alex wasn't an ideal companion perhaps, but he understood me. Now he'd gone I had to cope alone.

The idea of cutting myself had first occurred to me the previous year. I'd had yet another argument with

my mother and was feeling guilty and inadequate. I was also very angry – with both her and myself. As I drove into town afterwards, sobbing so hard at times that I had to pull over to the side of the road, I remembered the knife on the kitchen bench. What if? I thought. I imagined cutting my wrist, and as I did so, I began to feel calmer. I even smiled to myself. Not that I'd ever do it, of course.

That image came back to me as I sat on the floor at Helen's house. I had to try it. Normally I would have been at college but I had a few days off. Helen was at work. Outside, it was sunny and warm. Somehow that made it even worse. Made everything much worse.

What I wanted was a simple response. I didn't want to feel, that was too difficult. I wanted to hurt, I wanted real, tangible, physical pain. That I could understand.

I stood up, and there it was. The breadknife. It was lying on the sink, inviting me to pick it up. As I looked at it, my stomach muscles tensed. I was still crying but now it was for a different reason. I knew that once I'd done this, I wouldn't be able to go back.

I reached out, and then held it for a minute above my wrist. My hand was shaking. This wasn't something I should be doing. This was not a good idea. But I'd started the process, and, I told myself, I had to follow it through. I tried to think clearly. How hard did I have to press so as to draw blood but not hit an artery? Was it easy to hit an artery? What if I did? What if I accidentally went too deep?

Then I'd deal with it, I told myself calmly. I was going to be fine.

Gritting my teeth, I put my forearm on the bench and quickly ran the blade across it, pressing as I did so.

There. It was over. It was done.

The tension lifted instantly, and I focused on what I had to do next. I wiped down the bench with a dish cloth, found a towel in the bathroom to wrap around my arm, and set off towards the nearest doctor's surgery.

I left the cloth scrunched up on the kitchen bench.

It wouldn't be fair to suggest that my flatmate Helen was unpleasant. She wasn't. On the contrary, she specialised in nice, neat and clean. Surrounded in a cloud of smug contentment, she was well groomed and well behaved. She'd smile sweetly at me in the mornings, and be polite to my friends. Still, she made it clear that this was her house, I was a lodger, and she didn't approve of me. This wasn't about Helen, but by leaving evidence lying around, I involved her. I don't know what I wanted her to do.

So, my wrist wrapped in a not-so-white-anymore towel, I walked across the park to the university medical centre. I felt – and this took me by surprise – exhilarated. My blood was pumping and I had energy. The grass looked greener than usual, and the sky bluer. There were ducks in the pond.

The doctor, who I'd seen before, didn't criticise me or ask me why I'd done it. Instead, as she was injecting the area with a local anaesthetic – which seemed ironic in the circumstances – and carefully sewing up the wound, she simply told me not to do it again. I should come back to see her if I felt I wanted to and, even if that meant coming in daily for a while,

that was fine. As I left, she told me it wasn't a good habit to get into – and that it wasn't something likely to impress a future mother-in-law.

I laughed. I couldn't imagine anyone would ever want to marry me. 'No, I won't do it again,' I told her.

When I got home, the house was quiet and the dish cloth was gone. And I felt better. Much better. My wrist hurt, but not badly. It was more a low-grade ache than a sharp pain, just enough to remind me of what I'd done. The bandage was another reminder. For the first time in months, I felt together. Sharp. In hurting myself I had at last found a way to release the pressure.

But it was more than that. I was now different. I felt different. I'd discovered a way to control my feelings. Just because self-mutilation wasn't deemed 'an acceptable coping mechanism' didn't mean I was going to stop doing it.

Over the next few days Helen and I saw a bit of each other but she didn't refer to the incident. I thought this was a good thing until she came in to the kitchen as I was having breakfast one morning and told me to leave. It just wasn't working.

It hadn't been a good week, but now I had become someone my parents could really be ashamed of, someone who'd done something that was so far from their experience, and so outside their range of understanding, that they couldn't even talk about it. In some ways, I wasn't unhappy about this.