

Horror Story

By Kirstin Innes

The hotel felt like a place where bad things had happened, she'd decided. Something chilling about the uniformity of its too-long Soviet-functional corridors, their flickering lights. She'd pulled the shower curtain back sharply on the bath in the first room they were assigned, having seen vague dark shapes piled behind the damp-spotted opaque. Bodies, she'd thought, severed limbs, maybe.

– It is only moss, her roommate had said, bending over and poking the dirty khaki growth covering half of the enamel. It was the first time she'd spoken, although they'd come up in the elevator from the foyer together; Claire hadn't actually realised she could speak English. They'd stood together in the bathroom's damp air, eyeing each other.

Vasvija's head was shaved close all over, dark fuzz prickling out. All week, she'd worn the same green velour tracksuit top, its pile sticking out from her skin at the same angle as her hair, like a wolf on the defensive. She kept a sharp, feral smell zipped into it.

Underneath – Claire had seen her out of it twice, now, and they'd been sharing a room for four days – she wore the free t-shirt handed out by the conference organisers, a t-shirt they designed for men, in clashing colours; that big ugly logo screened cheaply over her wide, flat chest. Her eyes were massive, startlingly pale in her head, too, and there was something strange clouding them. Impossible that they were the same age – she just didn't *look* like people Claire knew, at home.

– Well, we'll need to ask for another room, Claire had said, in the bathroom, on the first day. We can't wash in that. It's not hygienic.

Vasvija had grunted, picked her frayed boy's backpack up off the bed she'd marked as hers, and plodded out into the corridor.

The curtains were drawn in the second room, which seemed to be fizzing with static as the light went on. The manager flicked his head at the window and said something fast. Goran translated, anxiously.

– He says there is a. There will be. Much noise? There will be men, working outside.

Because you are female you will need to keep the curtains closed.

– Building site, said Vasvija. There is a building site.

All three of them looked at Claire.

– Okay, she said. She tried to smile at the manager, put her thumbs up. He just wheeled off, back towards the lifts. Goran looked even more worried.

– You will be at lunch in an hour?

He ran after the manager. The door slammed, shutting Claire and Vasvija in together. The hair on Claire's arms prickled.

– I just felt that we couldn't wash in there, she said. In my country, it's okay to complain if you don't like the room. Sorry. I'm sorry.

Vasvija flopped down onto her bed.

– Okay, she said, and put her thumbs up, before turning her back and curling herself into the wall.

They'd been welcomed onto the stage with bagpipes that night, at the launch – apparently it was a Serbian instrument too. That familiar wheeze and drone, the pitch, and then it tipped into something twisting and Eastern. Music to charm snakes to. On the ceiling of the hotel's shabby function room, a huge chandelier began to pick up the whine, each overly ornate arrangement of crystals shaking.

– Well, I've never heard the bagpipes played like *that*, Dr McKenzie muttered to Dr Wood, and they chuckled together, rich meaty men's chuckles. Goran stepped up to the microphone, his fat smile back in place again.

– Visiting all the way from Scot-land! he'd said, then something in Serbian. Dr McKenzie, Dr Wood and Claire had turned their heads one at a time, at the words that sounded most like their names, and made their way to the stage to smile and wave. Goran had said something else and the pack of young Serbs who seemed to make up the majority of the conference had laughed, clutched each other.

The delegates, from Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia and Serbia, were almost all her own age, she'd noticed, roughly under thirty. Claire had only been asked to two conferences before, but she still knew this was unusual. It was like a whole generation of academics had just *vanished*. Dr Wood and Dr McKenzie were the oldest delegates there, apart from a big, silent Serb, Dr Maljivic, whose hair hung greasily over his face, skin grey and covered in cold sweat, his eyes wild. He was the only delegate not to have provided an English translation of his work.

– His name *actually is Igor*, too, she could imagine herself telling Jamie, back on their sofa, and they'd laugh about it together.

The nightmares hadn't started until the second night, but they were the worst sort, so realistic she wasn't sure they weren't true. Sometimes it was the corridors, but more usually she was in the room itself, and there was another presence there, something animal, something lurking in the corners of the room, shuddering, whimpering to itself to lure her in. She'd always wake up just before it pounced, sweating in the man-made fibres of sheets she was pretty sure hadn't been changed since they'd arrived, to hear Vasvija breathing jaggedly, darkness pooling in the corners. In the mornings, the threatening apescries of the builders outside woke her up long before Vasvija's alarm clock.

She wasn't getting much sleep.

– It's spooky, this hotel, isn't it, she'd said to Dr Wood, after she'd sat with him at breakfast one morning, and he'd nodded down at her.

– Typical of the Yugoslav Soviet style, of course. 1960s.

He reached across her for the coffee pot.

– You know, of course, that it was the Serbs who came up with the idea of the vampire? She shook her head, and he looked pleased with himself, warmed to his theme, her lecturer again.

– Oh yes. *Vampyr*. The bloodless being. Invisible.

Four days in and their room was heavy with the smell of Vasvija. Claire suspected that she had her period, because of that metallic, iron-rich undertone. The curtains stayed closed and no fresh air was getting into the room; humidity levels were at an all-time high for the area apparently. Claire could feel her clothes wilting.

Vasvija didn't even seem to wash. Really. Claire had bought litre bottles of mineral water from the kiosk in the main square and lined them up along the bath after she'd turned the tap on in the second bathroom, after the pipes had growled and coughed up viscous yellow liquid and she'd choked on its sulphur stink, after Goran had assured her that the water was just like this in this town, it was perfectly safe to bathe in, and they couldn't move rooms again, and Vasvija had begun to avoid her eyes as they moved around the cramped space between their beds.

– I just don't think it's reasonable to ask us to live like this, she'd tried to say. I mean, it's practically third world, my god! The rest of the town – the rest of the country isn't like this, surely?

Vasvija's face was suddenly turned to hers, the space between them gone in a jump-cut, as though her roommate had moved at superhuman speed. Her words hissed through tiny, pointed cat's teeth.

– Please, can you stop complaining? Please.

Those huge eyes.

Vasvija was from Bosnia. She hadn't volunteered that information herself. Dr Wood had mentioned it to Dr McKenzie while Claire walked beside them to the conference room.

– It's a huge gesture, of course, for them to invite that Bosnian girl here, what's her name, Vasvija Cerić.

– And for her to come, Dr McKenzie had agreed. Extraordinary.

Claire waited, but neither of them turned to her and said – and of course, you're sharing a room with her, aren't you?

Bosnia. She knew something had happened there, but it just meant half-watched news reports from her teenage years, really. Footage of refugee camps, girls with pale eyes in headscarves, a charity album they'd all bought at school because Damon from Blur was on it.

That weird heat still hung in the air, even though the sun had gone down, clothes shucking sweatily to backs. The delegates sat under awnings outside a bar in the square, noisy from the pleasure of being out of the hotel, the pack of young men snapping at each others' heels, joking in the foreign spikes and lilts of their language. Goran was in the centre, crowing like a cockerel as his acolytes applauded and thumped him on the back. The big, frightening Serb, Igor, sat just apart from everyone, staring over, with a bottle of something strong-smelling. There were no other women there, although she'd tried to extend an invitation to Vasvija, when she'd gone to the room to pick up her jacket. It was the first time they'd spoken in two days.

– I do not want to drink in a bar with Serbian men, Vasvija had said, pulling the covers over her head.

Claire was buying her own drinks. Beer, although she didn't usually; it was easier just to go up to the bar, point at the tap and hold a single finger up. It sat heavily in her belly, and she kept turning her head away from the stilted conversation she was involved in to expel the gas behind her hand. She hoped it would just look like she was yawning.

She'd come along to the bar because there had been nothing else to do, because it wasn't the hotel, because she'd loosely thought about flirting with one of the men for a little

pleasure, for that small sexy glow. Perhaps even a kiss to take with her under the blankets when she eventually had to go back to that room. None of them had paid her any attention, though.

– We are mostly engaged in translation, Miho, the clever-faced Croatian, was saying.

When we are not teaching students, or writing our own books, my wife and I are running a publishing company, translating works of American and English literature.

Claire nodded, tried to swallow another burp.

– Your English is excellent, she said.

He looked at her for a second, and there was something familiar about his eyes.

– Yes, he said.

Not *thank you*, she thought, how funny.

One of the Serbs knocked his chair over as the mass of voices got louder, and suddenly, English, rising over the top.

– We should ask the British woman, hey!

The smirking boys pushed in around her table.

– Hey, hey, Claire. In England, when you are telling a man he is a *pussy*, is this a very great insult?

He was quite good-looking, the one who'd asked.

– Wouldn't know, mate, she said, twinkling at him. I'm Scottish, not English.

– There is a difference? he said, returning the twinkle, teasing her.

She went for the laugh, feeling the alcohol move, slack in her.

– Oh yeah! It's probably like telling a Serb he's Croatian.

Around her, eyes widened. Goran stood there looking like he'd forgotten his smile was still on.

– I don't think you mean that, Miho said, quietly.

– This guy! Goran shouted, pushing through shoulders to the table. I love this guy! He seized Miho in a sideways-on hug and kissed his cheek. Miho looked politely at the table. Some of the boys around him made a Wooooahhh noise. Igor stared over at them, pushed his chair very forcefully back and walked off down the street, leaving a sour-sounding whistle in his wake.

– I'm sorry, she said to Miho. I'm sorry. Evidently I said something inappropriate.

– I think perhaps you don't understand very much about the history of these countries, Claire.

Well, she could only be honest.

– No. No, I don't. I mean, I do know that it's a good thing that you're all here. That you came, that my roommate, Vasvija, came from Bosnia –

He smiled a bit there, relaxed again.

– It is an important thing for us to be friends, we of this generation.

– But it's an extraordinary, eh, gesture, isn't it? Your countries were all enemies?

– Is it not just as extraordinary, then, that a Serbian invites British people to his conference?

Claire didn't get it.

– I'm *Scottish* though, she said.

The smile again, under the faint black fuzz of what might be a moustache.

– Scottish pilots can still fly bomber planes, he said.

– I'd better go, she'd said at the floor, had practically run down the hot, dark street with her cheeks flushed. Goran had called her name anxiously, had hurried down the street after her. She'd been touched.

– Really. I'm just tired. I know where I'm going. Have a good night.

She walked for a while, quickly, conscious of the sweat pricking her, of the air tightening in around her.

It's not my fault, she should have said. I didn't know. That's why I'm here, to learn, she could go back and say to the table, cut over their drunken shouts.

She didn't, though.

The building in front of her had been painted pink once, probably about ten, fifteen years ago, but it badly needed a new coat. An old, bald politician stared crisply, sternly from a poster pasted on the wall, a red anarchist A carved into his forehead.

In fact, the poster seemed to be the only thing holding the wall up. It wasn't just the paint: the bricks and stones of these buildings seemed to be peeling away under the air, flaking off, drifting down into piles of masonry dust in the gutters.

Around her, the town waited, silent, pending something.

It was coming; she could smell it.

Claire began to run in what she thought was the right direction. The streets were empty, all the shop signs in the Cyrillic alphabet, that strange code she couldn't hope to crack, only the odd word breaking through. AUTO. SALON. TEENAGER DISCO!

Somewhere behind her, a low growl echoed off the pavement. Her muscles prepared for flight.

A flash of light, and the hard shock of something on her skin. Rain. Lightning. A storm.

The hotel foyer was completely abandoned – no-one at the desk, two lights out and a third flickering ominously. The space felt charged, primed, full of electricity, and Claire thought of the static-crackling curtains in her room. Her finger had been hovering automatically at the elevator call button, but she ran for the staircase. Rain-noise battered the building, its tempo changing as she reached the first floor. It sounded wetter, nearer, as though it was coming from inside the hotel – from inside the conference room. Claire pushed open its heavy door and saw, through the gloom, water leaking, cascading down through the fittings of the chandelier. And all the lights were flickering. Flash. This whole building could turn lightning conductor, she thought, every plug socket loose and ripe for potential treachery. Charred flesh sticking to the melted nylon fur of the blankets.

In the hallway by the dining room she could see motion, hear moaning. She approached almost without wanting to. Igor, the big Serbian, stretched out in one of the leather-covered massage chairs left for guest use, mechanical hands groping his writhing muscles. His eyes were closed, his mouth almost obscenely open.

– Igor. Igor. Dr Maljivic! You should get out of the chair. I don't think the hotel's safe. The electricity –

As the lightning flashed again, his eyes snapped open. He tried to stand and move towards her, groaning, but his arms and legs were clamped by the machine, and she took her opportunity to run, taking the stairs two, three at a time, until she reached her floor, where all the lights were already out. She struggled with the key in the lock of her room for agonising seconds before she broke in, could slam it behind her.

The television was on, and the room lit strangely – she felt the static more than ever before, and it took her a while to realise that it was coming from the window, that the curtains were open. And there was that noise, the raw whimpering of her nightmares. It was coming from the chair in the window.

– Vasvija?

Nothing, just the noise.

– Vasvija. I think we ought to switch the television off. There's a leak in the building. The storm.

Vasvija whipped round in the chair, as the lightning flashed again, illuminating her face, her eyes red.

Oh god, thought Claire. This is it. This is it. That thing was Vasvija. It had always been Vasvija –

– You're back, her roommate said, her voice thick, blank, full of snot. How did you enjoy the bar?

She blew her nose.

Vasvija was crying. She was sitting in the chair, watching the storm, crying, curled up and tiny. Claire's heartbeat began to slow, a little.

– Ehm. Are you okay? Is it the thunder?

– Fuck the thunder, Vasvija said quietly.

– Sorry?

– Fuck the thunder. My. My friend – my lover. She no longer wants to be together with me. She tells me this by SMS message, this evening. The whole time I am in Serbia she does not want to answer my calls, and then only she sends this fucking SMS message! This is all I am getting! We are together three years and this is all I am getting!

She looked into Claire's face, then, and she laughed, a simple, bitter, human laugh, a laugh that said *shit happens*.

– Claire, you are looking as terrible as me. What has happened to you tonight?

Claire thought about home, about watching telly on the sofa with Jamie, about eating pizza. Her easy, easy life, doing well at school, slipping straight from undergraduate to postgraduate at the same university, saving up for the wedding, not suffering. Not at all.

– I. I just don't like thunderstorms, she said, finally.

Vasvija did that laugh again, but it wasn't unkind.

– But you are from Scotland, she said. You have a lot of storms, no?

Claire exhaled, staggered to the bed, sat down.

– Not like this, she said. Nothing like this.

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