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The Other Half of Me

The
OUTLINE
of
LOVE

MORGAN McCARTHY


TINDER
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PART ONE

Persephone and her friends disport themselves in the bowered arches by the lake of Pergus, where the grass bows under their milky feet like the most sumptuous velvet and flowers put out their colours like flags waving for a celebration: lilies, irises, violets. The perfume of the flowers is so pervasive that hounds lose their trail of scent, falter and scatter, leaving the hunters to curse and return home. And so no male voice is heard in the glades, and no rough note disturbs the aural tapestry of rustling leaves and soft soprano song.

Ivy Ford
Persephone and Hades

I am sitting in the garden, without moving – because there is no point in moving – feeling the slow progression of a chill rising up over me; the last light drawing back over my face, the square of lawn between the stone walls filling up with shadow like a cold bath. When the shadow reaches the top of my head, I tell myself, I will get up and go inside. On every side of me, any direction I could look, the crumpled land rolls and folds, holding nothing. I have lived in the Assynt Peninsula my whole life but even I know it's a strange place: even stranger after two thirds of a bottle of wine, consumed alone. At the borders of the horizon the mountains sleep, like titanic dinosaurs that have been dreaming for so long that they have sunk into the land, ossified, and will never heave themselves free. A heavy silence descends from them, lifted only by the wind, which comes to rustle and hiss through the dead heather and the dry grass, then exhausts itself.

Our house is the only human-built structure within this empty land-bowl. There are three other houses within a half-hour's drive, the first belonging to Mrs Farquhar (of whom more later), the second to a misanthropic farmer, and the third to nobody, having been empty for years. It is only really crofters – their predecessors having been exiled here in the days of the Clearances

— who live outside the villages here at this tip of the Highlands.

‘How do they do it?’ I’d once asked my father when we drove past their small farmhouses, overseeing the sheep scattered across the stony clutter of the land, as if distributed by some hurricane from greener pastures. ‘How can they stand it?’

‘The same way that we do, I suppose,’ was his answer, mildly spoken.

‘But I can’t stand it,’ is my reply, never spoken.

We live here, my father and I, because my great-grandfather’s brother was a geologist and was disappointed in love. He was left waiting at an American altar by his flighty bride and so he decided to move somewhere that would ensure that he never met another living woman to trouble him again. The land here, created by glaciers many thousands of years ago, has enough rocky riddles and rewards to keep a geologist occupied for an entire career, which is exactly what happened. After the death of my great-grandfather’s brother, the house he built was passed sideways and downwards through the generations, becoming ever more dilapidated, and would probably have merged back into the landscape if my mother and father hadn’t decided twenty-five years ago to ‘get away from it all’.

The ordinariness of our house — its square white shape, evenly placed windows, pointed roof — and our neat little green garden with its one tree and line of washing is made bizarre by its presence in this landscape. Like a Magritte joke it sits jauntily in the towering tables and shelves of rock and the grim plains, where the only colours are brown, yellow and grey under the wide, grey sky. The tourist guides would have you believe that this part of the earth is dramatic or spectacular, which is wrong, because these

words imply some kind of movement — a show — when all there is is stillness. The tourists call it bleak, which is also wrong. What they are actually trying to express is their own uncomfortable realisation: the bleakness of their own transience that the massed land causes them to notice.

‘And you’re only here for a weekend,’ I say to them.

But now the time for envying the tourist buses is over: now it’s my turn to take the long road east to the airport and from there, to civilisation. This is what the letter I hold tells me, informing me coolly that I will begin my BSc in management at King’s College, London in early October. I have no idea what I will end up managing — or indeed, whether I want to manage anything — but it seemed like a practical sort of choice and I didn’t have any better ideas. When I first opened the letter I put the envelope to my nose. It smelt of dried ink. I was disappointed; I had wanted to sniff some mysterious scent of London: a whiff of perfume, a trace of fog and gunpowder.

I have visited London only once, when I was small and my father and grandparents took me to a show in the West End. All I remember of that day were the lights, the black stone, the piercing sting of my sweets glowing fluorescent and overwhelming. The rough nap of the velvet seat, a curtain drawing momentarily back. I have no idea and my father can’t remember what the show was, but I know there was a princess, the white bell of her skirt moving through the dark set like a delicate man o’ war. When I think of London now I remember the occult delights of that day; the sugar-fuelled unease, the unreality of it. Almost anything could happen to me, in the dream-space of London. And I want this: I want for almost anything to happen.

When I hear the first murmurings of my father's car, I drink the rest of the wine in my glass, push the cork back into the bottle, then put it in a bush. I don't rush. It takes a minimum of two and three-quarter minutes for a car to gently bump down the single track road leading up to the house, so that I could have the glass rinsed and back in the cupboard were my father suspicious enough to think of sniffing it. But, of course, he isn't. My father's worries are timid ones; they huddle in his own head, reluctant to impose themselves on others. If he found me drinking he would just be deeply and quietly sad, because he thinks drinking could be a cause of cancer. He also worries about me smoking, driving too fast, eating pink chicken, and going out without an umbrella. He knows the various ways someone might die young like a waiter knows the menu, so I try not to remind him of any of them.

Evan Triebold's fine-tuned sense of death developed in 1991, the year his wife, his father and his mother died one after the other. My mother, Sylvia, died of cancer. Then his father died in a car accident. Three months later his mother Laure was diagnosed with a brain tumour, the idea of which prompted her to kill herself. She left a note for Evan: 'I'm impatient. I'm not going to wait. Sorry.'

I don't think my father kept the note: it was horrifying to him that, after what death had done to his family, his mother would rush towards it so carelessly. I never asked about it, though secretly I would have liked to have seen the note. Never having met Laure I can romanticise her decision: the courage of it, the panache.

My father's car finally crackles to a halt on the rough drive and sighs itself quiet. Then Evan himself appears around the corner of the house, politely announcing his arrival with a small cough.

'Hello, Perse.' Wherever he turns up, whoever he greets, he always

does it shyly. Then, once he is welcomed, some ease settles back over him, as if he has pulled a blanket over his shoulders. He sits down a little awkwardly on the bench next to me and plucks leaves from the creeper on the wall. My father has pebbly colour eyes, tucked under a soft fold of skin at the corners, grey eyebrows, and a lot of heavy grey hair. His face is sparse, slightly uncertain, easily understood.

'Hi, Dad.' (In his birth country of Switzerland my father would not be called Dad. He would be Papa, or maybe Vater. But Sylvia would have said Dad, and I say it too, so she is still part of our conversations.) 'Did you have fun in Inverness?'

'The pictures are selling well, apparently. They don't want the gold or silver frames though – they keep getting requests for the driftwood, the, ah, knots and natural look, I suppose. I wonder if they imagine a little old man collecting wood by the sea. It seems ironic that I have to import the wood, doesn't it?' As he talks he pulls the leaves absently to pieces. Green confetti sputters from his fingers.

My father takes photographs at places like Achiltibuie and Morar; initially it was a hobby, but now they are framed and sold to tourists. The product is, of course, tacky, but in his studio the prints hang ready to be framed all over one wall, and they are beautiful. Hundreds of sunsets, hundreds of glittering grey loch edges, sea-rims, arcs of sky.

'I got the details of my university place today,' I tell him. 'I'm living in a house rather than halls, apparently. But I don't mind where I am. So long as it's London.'

My father says, 'Oh, that's splendid, Perse,' and pats my hand, not quite meeting my eye.

'I'll be careful,' I tell him. 'I'll stay away from drugs and street gangs.'

'I know you're a sensible girl,' he says. 'I'm very proud of you.'

'You won't be lonely, will you?' I ask.

'Oh, no, no. I'll have Mrs Farquhar, and Mr Anderson, and the Cullens, and the McCleods.'

'But you hardly see any of them. You've only met Mr Anderson once. And you never go to the McCleods' dinner parties.'

'Oh, they're not really for me. I'd feel out of place.' He looks at me, blinks, and adds, 'But I'm sure I'd make the effort to go to more of these things after you've left. I'll be sociable. You mustn't worry about me.'

'It's hard not to. Just . . . make sure you see people. Do something.'

He nods, and I sigh, then we sit for a while longer in silence, both hoping that Sylvia will say something. But as usual, she keeps quiet, and eventually my father gives me an apologetic smile, and goes inside.

My father has maintained every possible memento of my mother in the house – her clothes, books, half-hearted attempts at decorating – as if she might, any day, walk in and say something like, 'Have you seen my reading glasses?' to which he could say, 'In the drawer, where they've always been.' If the house is her shrine, my father's stories, told over and over, have become scripture. How she loved reading, painting pictures she always threw away, experimenting with food that was always inedible, writing to her parents back in England. How in a small village of Dorset, where her family was from, she had opened a health food shop, but nobody quite understood ginkgo biloba and aloe vera back then and so she closed the shop and went travelling in Europe, where she met my father in a Swiss boulangerie.

Even our neighbours pay service to the cult of my mother. They

tell me how romantic she and Evan were, that every week they had dinner by the light of a candle in a jar. They say she was easily distracted, that she was kind. They try not to talk about how she died, of the illness that took little bits of her, her hair, then her flesh, like a kidnapper, until finally becoming greedy and wanting everything.

After her death, our own lives stopped moving. It is as if there are still three of us, my father still bewildered after all these years of my mother being dead, still only partially recovered. My mother's name always in his mouth: *Sylvia*, a ferny, wraith name, soft and hushed. His own name, *Evan*, an assonant echo, forever reverential.

The next day I go to Ullapool. I intend to tell my father (who is also out and about today) that I'm posting letters, but really I need to visit the bottle bank and then the supermarket, my bush stock having run dry. In accordance with my father's curative preservation of all things Sylvia, her old red hatchback has been kept running and has now passed into my hands to travel where I like, so long as it isn't far and I slow down at bends.

The car hiccups and rocks down the uneven track from our house before I slide out on to the main road and turn south. Today the sun is out again: a dreamlike hazy disc, like a light behind opaque white glass, marooned in the featureless span of the sky. I squint at it suspiciously: up here there is no trust of the sun. Its appearance is greeted with a raised eyebrow or a bitter laugh. *Don't think we don't know what you're up to.* Here one minute, gone the next, and then days of black rain. We're wise to the routine.

The road ducks and dives through the land, slipping under the noses of the rock-trolls of the hills, cresting briefly, dipping again,

like the path of one of the little brown birds that swoop over the heather. It passes the barren lakes, the stripped slopes, the occasional clutch of pines, huddled together as if knowing they are exposed, the silver birches lichenized like alien trees, the needly scruffs of gorse. In the distance Stac Pollaidh lies, its distinctive mammoth humps moving slowly from one car window to another. Ullapool appears only after the person driving there has become dizzy with following the road, concentrating on every turn, and slumped into a tired hatred of the hills. Then, like a mirage, a house's garden will appear, fresh and unexpected green. Then the sheep proliferate, followed by more houses, then hotels and, finally, everything is green, the flat steely loch opens wide and turns blue, and the village appears, neat and white on the waterfront. Everything in Ullapool is small, square and white, down to the suburban road where I park: an arrangement of white houses at right angles, white fences and cherry blossom like a slow 1960s American dream, the mountains hovering in the distance above them.

A face withdraws behind a curtain when I get out of the car; a window across the road closes. I imagine children being rushed inside, their tricycles left overturned and spinning in the suddenly empty street. There is a low level of suspicion of me in Ullapool, I know: I am tolerated here, but not really liked. My name, my face, my voice all mark me out as something different and unfamiliar. I can sympathise. I'm not quite familiar with myself yet either.

Apparently, before my mother died, I used to attend parties and playgroups with the other children of Ullapool, but after my father started to worry about the sharp edges of other people's hearths and the bacteria that might be harboured in their mayonnaise, these social visits tailed off. Maybe the invitations themselves waned: perhaps I

had become an awkward presence at Pass the Parcel: a half-orphaned, disconsolate four year old. After nursery school I was home schooled with the help of our neighbour Mrs Farquhar, if neighbour is the right word for someone living on the other side of the mountain.

I sidle around the aisles of the supermarket, alert for my father, whose tired blue estate I have spotted in the car park. I pick up a few bottles and go to the furthest checkout, so wary of being seen that I don't notice Kirsty McRae – chin in her palms and eyes widened with hostility – until it is too late to turn back.

I put the bottles down in front of her with a 'Hello' of apology. 'Right,' says Kirsty in response. 'Having a party?' She taps a bottle with one hot-pink nail.

I look at her warily. The most contact I have had with Kirsty McRae is hearing her mutter, 'Would you look at that whore?' as I passed by her in the street, but, like everyone else, I know who she is – a gap-toothed femme fatale in fake gold jewellery and dirty-edged white trousers, who has given blow jobs to most of the local teens. I had always imagined that she would be the first to leave the town for the bright lights of the porn industry, but she lingers on, queen of her small sexual pond.

'Just restocking,' I murmur.

'Re-stock-ing,' repeats Kirsty, as if amused by the word. As I walk away I can feel her mouth something behind me, but it doesn't matter, because I'm out in the strange flat sunlight, empty bottles gone, new bottles snugly hidden in my carrier bag, and it's only a few weeks before I'm gone for good.

As I pass a pub on the way back to the car I hear someone shout: 'Persephone!'

Here is the reason for Kirsty's dislike, and several other girl-feuds

besides. The eligible males of Ullapool are sitting outside with pints of beer, sunglassed and boisterous, calling me over. Robert Lennox doesn't appear to be with them, but I don't want to cross the road. A superstitious shiver moves over me: the idea that if I step over the pub's threshold my hair will stiffen, my lashes lengthen, my skirt shrink, and I will become Kirsty McRae, sitting at the pub for ever, while the changeling Kirsty goes to London in my place.

'Got to run,' I call, making an exaggerated sad face, waving, but moving quickly. Their voices follow clearly in the thin, pure air off the Loch.

'Come back tonight!'

'Fuck that, just come over to mine!' Laughter follows this last. An old woman walking a terrier looks at me disapprovingly, as if the noise is somehow my fault.

I wait to cross the road behind an idling tourist bus, one of the many that stop here to spill out their contents: Canadian and American tourists, thinning out over the village with maps and binoculars, taking the ferry across Loch Broom, eating seafood, demanding photographs of anything in a kilt. Now that it is late afternoon the tourists are being recalled from wherever they were spending their money, reeled invisibly back to the bus. What is unusual is that my father in his battered hat is amongst them, walking next to a woman: a camera-wielding, peanut-coloured American woman.

Taken aback, I stop at the side of the road to watch them, expecting my apparent father to reveal himself as another man, a mild grey doppelganger listening to his companion. But it is my father, with his own distinctive gestures – even now moving his head in the way he does when he is interested, tilting his ear towards

her, as if aligning the ear and her mouth more closely will allow him to better understand her meaning. He listens seriously for a little longer. Then he straightens, and laughs.

Realising that I am one head-turn away from being seen, I move further behind the bus, then I cross the road quickly, and walk back to the car, without looking back to find out if they have seen me.



Once I get home I lie on my bed with a magazine, wondering at my behaviour. Scuttling around town like a skittish animal, spooked by the town bike, the local boys, the tourists. It is as if that, now I know I am leaving, I can't bear to touch anything with more than the lightest of brushes, as if making contact with the Assynt will trap me somehow, fix me in place. Not that this explains, of course, why I avoided my father, who appears to be faithfully and promptly obeying my instruction to see people, to *do something*.

I listen out for his car, the sound of the door opening and closing, its faint, familiar whine, and get up from the bed to go downstairs. But the next sound isn't something I expect: another car door, opening and closing, followed by the sound of two voices – one Evan's, one American, and female. I sit back down, blankly, and stay where I am without moving. Exit routes unroll in my head. Out of the window and down the tree? Out of the door, into the bathroom and out of the window?

I am still sitting on the bed when my father comes to tap on the door, before putting his head around it.

'Hello, Perse. Have you just woken up? I was calling you.'

'Really? I didn't hear you. Sorry.'

'We've got a guest for dinner,' he says festively, 'Sadie Weisner – she's holidaying here. She was going to the Summer Isles but missed her ferry so I invited her here instead. I thought I could cook venison. Come down and meet her.'

I wonder whether the headache spreading like an ink stain, blooming darkly in my temple, justifies my staying in my room while we have a guest, but give up and follow him like a sulking cat down to the kitchen.

'Hi,' says Sadie brightly, putting out her hand. The brief impression I had of her earlier was of a tall woman with a lot of matte blond hair, much younger than my father. Now I realise that she is closer to his age, with deep-colour skin and the healthy, compact look of a woman over forty who exercises and makes sure she eats plenty of fruit. 'I'm Sadie. Great to meet you.'

'Persephone,' I say. 'How do you do.'

'Oh, just great! I love it here. What a pretty name you have.'

'Sadie and I have just been for a walk around Ullapool,' Evan says.

'This area is just breathtaking!' says Sadie. She enthuses about the mountains ('So desolate and proud!'), the loch ('Haunting!') and the locals ('So welcoming!') while my father hovers proudly at her side, irradiating her oblivious left ear with his smile, as if he has personally offered up the Assynt to her, laying it down at her feet like a cape for her to tread upon.

The light slides down over the humpbacked horizon as my father cooks and I make small talk with Sadie, who, it turns out, is staying at the local bed and breakfast rather than leaving town tonight. She is travelling with a group of other Americans, something she has been doing for most of the past year. She shows us photos of herself looking cheerful in front of Shakespeare's house, Aztec

temples, the leaning tower of Pisa, and so on, grinning her way through the pick of the world's sights.

Sadie had one previous husband who died a few years ago of prostate cancer: a loss which, she tells us, propelled her to start going round the world in order 'to really experience everything, and really live'. As she talks I have the rising, uncomfortable feeling that my father and I are about to be the new characters in *Second Chances*, the TV movie of Sadie's life.

When we sit at the table, my father brings out three wine glasses and a bottle of Beaujolais, which he puts down without comment but with the same air of 'special occasion' that has hung over him all night. Then he decides to put on music and realises his only CD – Ravel – won't do, so I am sent upstairs to find something more cheerful in my own collection. When I come back down they are sitting closely together, laughing over something they try unsuccessfully to explain.

'I'm really sorry, but I think I'm going to get an early night,' I say, cutting them off. 'I ate lunch late, and I've got a horrible headache.'

Though the headache is genuine, their concern makes me feel guilty and I go upstairs feeling both wrong and wronged, dropping down onto my bed with the weight of it. The headache keeps me awake for a long time, lying listening to the muted sounds of laughter below me, looking up at the window in which the mountain tips have become colder, grander, glinting like frost under the last of the light.

The next morning, I get up too late to work out whether Sadie's presence in the house is because she stayed over last night, or whether she has only just arrived. She and my father are sitting with coffees

making plans for a drive to Dunnet Head, which I excuse myself from, saying I've already arranged to see Mrs Farquhar.

'That's such a pity,' Sadie exclaims.

'I know,' I say. 'But it was really lovely to meet you – I hope you enjoy the rest of your time in the Highlands.'

'Oh, I'll be here for a little while longer, so we can hang out again,' Sadie says. 'I can't wait!'

'Great!' I say, picking up my car keys. 'Glad to hear it!'

I drive towards Mrs Farquhar's house with no idea of what to do, as I'm almost certain that she's visiting her sister in Edinburgh. As I suspected, the tall, lonely grey-blocked house is clearly unoccupied, so I get out of the car and sit on a rock with a cigarette: another of my secret cancer-pleasures. As a concession to my father I restrict myself to only one a week, but this strikes me as a two-cigarette week.

Mrs Farquhar's house overlooks the dam, beyond which a wide, still body of water stretches into the far slopes and ends in a drifting desert haze of yellow and blue. The sky is rainless for once; an odd blue, like the blue of a Dali painting. Over the water the wind calls up a low, tuneless singing noise, like a giant blowing across the mouth of a bottle. Mrs Farquhar's house actually used to be a hotel, but it wasn't a success: the eerie whistling noise bothered the guests. Now she occupies one corner of it like a caretaker, living on her pension and money from tutoring.

I blow a long speculative stream of smoke into the warm sky, wishing I'd thought to pick up a couple of magazines. Last night Sadie said the Assynt Peninsula would suit those with an artistic or philosophical temperament ('You could just sit all day and be inspired!') but as neither an artist nor a philosopher I am sadly marooned in the hills, the great bowl of near-bare rock, graduating

yellow and grey up to the sky. I don't see how anyone could be inspired here. Without a breeze the intense quietness is reflected by the blank hills and sky: pressed, layered into a silence so thick and impenetrable that it is like liquid glass. Surely it would seep into a creative thinker and stop them like an old watch; the unanswerable coma of silence.

Time here is a strange thing: I feel the land could either be very far in the past or far in the future, with nothing much changing between either time, leaving it hovering uncertainly between the two like a dream landscape. The land gives the appearance of not noticing the brief pressure of motion on its surface, the lives of people and animals vanishing in a micro-blink, too quick to register. But the things that stop and come to rest – signposts, houses, bridges, bones – become part of the land itself, they collapse and petrify, giving up their allegiance to civilisation, their function and familiarity. The flats and hills are scattered with ruins: the half-tumbled castles, the wall-traces, roofless crofting cottages, the chambered cairns – alongside those of a more recent vintage: the rusting bathtub in the field, the stranger's car broken down thirty years ago by the side of a road. The human relics have both an equality in their abandonment, and an equality with the structures that have not yet been abandoned, so that a ruined crofting cottage will sit alongside a new house as if in recognition that in very little time the occupants of the new house will be dead, its roof will have fallen in, and it will have rejoined the sleeping mountains.

Life in a place like this is a strange and small thing. Take our neighbours – the abrupt and timid Mrs Farquhar, the short-spoken farmers and gamekeepers: they all have something subdued about them, as if they understand that their presence here is as transitory as the bumble