



ONE TRUE LOVE
Mary McCluskey

I watch my sister, Chloe, as she moves from the small make-up mirror she has placed on the window ledge to the large mirror in the hall. She runs a comb through her hair again. I wait at the door, bag over my shoulder. I have been ready for long minutes and I can feel the blood pounding through my veins with impatience. But I do not want to hurry her. I know she is nervous. This endless preparation is not due to vanity. She is putting off the moment when we leave to visit the hospital where our mother is dying.

When she reapplies her lipstick, I sigh and then open the front door so that a blast of icy air shoots through the house. I stand on the doorstep, studying the stark branches of the winter trees, charcoal-etched against a leaden sky.

‘That’s a lot of pretty make-up for an old lady who can’t even see,’ I say, finally.

Chloe gives a small, bitter smile.

‘Not that she ever could,’ she says. ‘See me.’

She snaps shut the make-up bag, picks up her purse and walks past me, towards the car. Chloe's hair, blonde when she was a child, is bleached back to its childhood shade by the California sun. She has a husband and three teenage sons still there. We are living temporarily at our parents' house, in the countryside. The old childhood home, full of empty liquor bottles and equally empty memories. She will stay for as long as it takes, Chloe says. We don't know how long it will take. The doctors say it could be weeks. Or days.

We call the woman who gave birth to us The Mother. This seems so harsh to outsiders. Sometimes, I am also surprised at how bitterly we speak, how deep is my sister's anger. Chloe is older by three years and perhaps I never felt quite as vulnerable as she, as eager to grab the attention of parents who cared only for each other. I had my sister's attention after all. I had her to care for me. And she did.

'The Parents,' Chloe said once, 'are like creatures who fight, teeth sunk into each other's necks. And they can't let go or they'll bleed to death.'

For they fought all through our childhood, fights that began with words in the pub and ended with glass breaking, bruises, blood. They fought only each other and they were equally balanced. My mother inflicted as much damage on my father as he did on her. They never hit us; they never noticed us much. We were simply in the way too often, and were ordered upstairs, *out*, up to the loft we shared at the top of the house.

We would crouch together by the loft door in the dark. Waiting like small animals, listening to their voices, hoping that one or the other might laugh, that music might start, or we would hear the sound of footsteps on the stairs as they hurried to bed. Signs that the evening

would not end in shouting and crashing crockery.

I have a clear memory of an incident that defines their relationship: it was the weekend Mother bought us kilts. We were to visit grandparents in Scotland, travel alone on the train. We were excited about this trip. We had seen our grandmother so rarely. Our parents did not like to visit.

Mother was as excited as we were. Now, I understand that an empty house for their games would have been a treat indeed, and she spared no expense on these kilts: red tartan with a proper pin and silk blouses to go with them. The evening before we were due to leave, she dressed us up so that Father might view these clothes, specially purchased to impress his parents. I was six, Chloe eight. We were paraded into the den where he sat sipping at a scotch, a newspaper in his hand,

‘Well, look at these wee girls,’ he said. Then, he opened his arms. This was so unexpected that we hesitated in the doorway. Chloe pulled back but after a moment I ran, climbing onto his knee,

‘Come on, Chloe,’ he said.

So she perched on the other knee, dangling uncomfortably, a tight, awkward smile on her face. I remember the smell of the whisky on his breath, the rough beard brushing against my face. Mother pulled us off so fast.

‘Get out of those clothes now. You’ll dirty them,’ she said. We ran upstairs to change, unsure of what we had done wrong.

Later, I heard a strange, rhythmic thumping and crept downstairs to investigate it. Father sat in the same chair. She was on his lap, astride him, her back to me. It seemed to me such a silly way to sit. Her knees aside his knees, her wide skirt spread. He seemed to

have his hands under her skirt, and she moved up and down, up and down. He was jiggling her hard on his knee. But it was not a game. He was not laughing. His eyes were glazed and distant. His face so stiff, he seemed to be concentrating on something far away, biting at his lip. I paused in the doorway, then stepped back quickly, wanting to hide.

I felt Chloe's hand on my arm and she pulled me back upstairs.

'Shush,' she said. 'It's alright.'

Only then did I realise how frightened I was.

Now, Chloe stands waiting as I open the car door. I can see her taking deep, calming breaths.

'Wait,' I say, remembering the photographs, and run inside to get them.

I want to take a picture of Chloe's three teenage boys to the hospital, as they stand squinting and smiling in the California sun. I have a similar picture of my two daughters, still in our home in Scotland with their father, waiting for news.

Chloe looks at the photographs in my hand and shakes her head.

'She's not interested in those,' she says.

'They're her grandchildren.'

'She was never interested in her children.'

We begin the drive to the hospital and immediately Chloe begins to talk. It is our story swap; we have always done this. We exchange memories of our parents. I have heard Chloe's story many times before, but I listen anyway.

'Remember when they came to the States,' she begins. 'All that way. And never even saw their grandsons. Well, they saw them for five minutes.'

'They saw Vegas,' I remind her, nudging her on.

‘Christ, yes. And we’d booked everywhere. Paid in advance. The Grand Canyon. San Fran. Everywhere.’

They had visited Los Angeles when Chloe’s boys were quite small. Richard had picked them up at the airport, and Chloe had taken them upstairs to see the sleeping boys.

‘One glance,’ says Chloe. ‘Then, father says — well how about a drink?’

They sat up late, drinking, and slept late the next morning so that the boys had gone to school when they rose, bleary-eyed from bed. Then they took off for the trip that Chloe and Richard had planned for them: Vegas, the Grand Canyon, San Francisco. A coach trip, so they would not have to drive.

They arrived in Vegas, and they stayed there for the duration of their holiday.

‘Can you imagine?’ Chloe asks now, with a small, grim smile. ‘Not even going to the Grand Canyon. When it was all booked and paid for. Not even coming back to see us. Staying in some Vegas hotel for two whole weeks. Jesus.’

‘They loved it, though,’ I say.

‘Yes. Richard says Vegas was made for people like them.’

‘They saw their granddaughters,’ I offer.

This is my story. She has heard it before, but she turns, eyes sparking with interest.

‘Well, Mother saw them. Father never did. She saw them for about two minutes just before they left for school.’

I tell the story again, lightly, in a false, joking voice. The memory is clear, full of a sharp, bright anger.

I remember the girls were so excited, waiting, waiting. The

grandparents they had not seen since they were babies were due to arrive in Scotland in the early evening. At 8pm the phone rang. They were in the local pub. Just half a mile down the street.

‘They couldn’t make the last half mile?’ Andrew, my husband, asked.

‘They want us to join them,’ I whispered, hand over the phone.

He shook his head. ‘The girls,’ he mouthed.

‘Mum, we can’t,’ I said. ‘We don’t leave the girls alone.’

‘For God’s sake,’ her voice thick with alcohol and irritation. ‘How old are they?’

‘Ten and eight.’

‘Jesus Christ. For half an hour? To have a drink with your mum and dad?’

Even then, I felt guilty.

‘No. We’ll see you later.’

They were drunk, laughing, silly, when they arrived at our house. The girls long in bed; Andrew and I dropping with tiredness. They were leaving for the Isle of Skye in the morning.

‘The girls are in school tomorrow,’ I said. ‘Will you see them before you go?’

My mother came down in the morning as the girls, already in school uniform, sat at the kitchen table eating their breakfast. She was wearing a nightgown of lace and nylon, frilled and ribboned. The kind of thing she loved then: a trousseau outfit, a bridal set.

Her hair was mussed; her makeup shadowed her eyes. She was smoking a cigarette.

My daughters studied her with bewilderment. Their other grandmother, Andrew’s mother, was cuddly and round, aproned, a

giver of surprise gifts, a knitter of pullovers and scarves.

‘Pretty girls,’ she said. ‘They look just like you and Chloe.’

Then she swept out.

‘Did they bring us a present?’ Jenny asked.

‘Only their sweet selves,’ my husband replied.

And that was the only time they saw their granddaughters. Though my father, of course, never saw them. He did not get out of bed.

When I finish this story, Chloe gives a long sympathetic sigh.

‘There’s no excusing them,’ she says. ‘Why did we allow them to do that? To us, to our children?’

‘Well, they never actually meant to hurt,’ I say. ‘And look on the good side. They never nagged us.’

‘No,’ said Chloe. ‘That would have been a form of communication.’

While other children complained about parents nagging, complaining, questioning, my sister and I existed in an indifference so absolute we did not understand what ‘normal’ parents were like. It was neglect so profound we were not aware of it until adulthood. We had rules, yes, but they never noticed if we broke them.

Chloe tried to rebel. I remember her standing in the kitchen, a leather skirt so short it barely covered her crotch, black stockings, her hair spiked and dyed purple, white face, black rings around her eyes. A cigarette in a mouth that was a slippery purple pink. Mother, entering the kitchen, glanced at her daughter briefly, picked up Chloe’s cigarettes, took one and lit it. Then she left the room, without a word. Chloe stomped out her cigarette on the kitchen floor and flounced out of the house.

There is a picture on the sideboard that Chloe and I discussed once, when we were teenagers and wise about everything in the world, including psychology.

‘You ever seen a photo like this of a family?’ she asked. ‘The parents wrapped round each other. The kids separate like that.’

We stand in front of our parents. Two little girls in short, tight, wool coats. Chloe has hold of my hand and scowls at the camera with no effort at a smile. I have an awkward smirk on my face. A neighbour must have taken the picture. It is in our back garden.

Our parents, behind us, have arms around each other. She has one arm wrapped across his front, tucked into his jacket. Neither of them touches either of us. Not a hand on a shoulder. There is no encircling arm.

When my father died of cirrhosis six months ago, every friend and neighbour at the funeral whispered to us of their love.

‘Never saw them apart,’ said Vera, the barmaid at the Black Horse. ‘So devoted they were.’

‘Remember them dancing?’ her husband said, and a group of people around us sighed in agreement.

‘They could dance like nobody on earth. They danced like angels,’ said Vera.

They danced always. Late at night, they would dance to the stereo at home, whirling around, bending, dipping, his mouth sometimes hard against her neck. The dancing often ended in tears, fights, blood.

‘She’ll be lost without him,’ the neighbours said.

And she was. She stopped taking care of herself. She stopped eating and sleeping. She did not visit the pub, nor see friends. She sat alone by the fire, a bottle of scotch at her elbow, willing her body to

die.

Six months later she has almost achieved it. The doctors say she suffers from malnutrition, but they know, as we do, that she has simply lost the desire to live.

When we enter the hospital, my sister stumbles on the step and I catch her arm. She is pale.

‘It would be just like her to die before I get there,’ she says.

It has occurred to me, too. I have kept a vigil at her bedside for a week now, and this is the first time — to pick up my sister from the airport to bring her here — I have spent a whole night away.

‘She looked fine when I left,’ I say.

In fact, when we enter to room I see that mother actually looks a little better. Her eyes are open, and they move quickly from me to Chloe.

‘Well, look who’s here,’ she says.

‘Hello, Mother,’ Chloe says, moving forward, placing her hand over mother’s hand on the bed. It does not move in response and she leaves her own on top of it for a moment, then moves away, finds a chair. I sit on the bed.

‘How are you, Mum?’ I ask.

She ignores the question.

‘Tell them to stop this,’ she says, indicating the drip that feeds her glucose and salines. She is still refusing to eat. Her heart is failing, her body shutting down.

‘They won’t, not until you start to eat,’ I say.

She closes her eyes.

I place the photographs on the bedside table. Chloe raises her eyebrow.

‘Your grandchildren, mum,’ I say.

Her eyes open for a few seconds, flicker to the photos, close again. She says nothing for a while, then.

‘Three of them, then, you’ve got?’ she asks Chloe.

Chloe glances at me, frowns a little.

‘Kids, yes.’

‘Boys. Jack wanted boys.’

I hear my sister’s expelled breath. I do not look at her face.

‘And what did you want?’

‘Oh. I didn’t care,’ she says. ‘I just wanted Jack.’

I look at Chloe then.

‘We know that,’ I say.

‘I just want to see him again,’ she whispers. ‘My Jack.’

She leans back, closes her eyes. It appears that she is sleeping. Chloe moves away, looks out of the window.

‘Jack, your own true love,’ she murmurs.

We sit through long seconds as the machines click and whir. She seems to be asleep.

‘I’ll get us some coffee,’ I whisper.

‘I’ll come with you. I need some air,’ says Chloe.

‘Shouldn’t one of us stay?’ I ask. ‘Just in case...’

‘Go with your sister,’ the voice from the bed is loud, clear.

‘Are you sure?’

She doesn’t open her eyes, but gives a slight nod.

We hear the alert as we return from the café, carrying paper cups of coffee, and curling sandwiches that are plastic wrapped. Medics rush into the room we had left only ten minutes before.

‘Oh, Christ,’ Chloe says.

'*How could she?*' I say to Chloe, as fear rushes up into my throat.
We move fast along the corridor.

We reach the door. A doctor and two nurses are around the bed.
The oldest nurse looks up and gives a small shake of her head.

We step back as another doctor pushes past us.

Her last words, then: *Go with your sister*. Words I had heard all
of my life.

'She waited for you,' I say.

'You think?' Chloe asks, in a small, unsure voice.

I glance at her. Her face is damp with tears, it mirrors my own.

'Positive,' I say, and take her hand.

I imagine him waiting for her. He stands beyond the white light,
ready to dance, a scotch at his elbow.

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