

THE TWA CHRISSES

(a love letter to Lewis Grassie Gibbon's 'Sunset Song')

by Morna Young

For aa the quines wi twa Chrisses in their saul.

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A one act story

1.

“So that was Chris and her reading and schooling, two Chrisses there were that fought for her heart and tormented her. You hated the land and the coarse speak of the folk and learning was brave and fine one day; and the next you'd waken with the peewits crying across the hills, deep and deep, crying in the heart of you and the smell of the earth in your face, almost you'd cry for that, the beauty of it and the sweetness of the Scottish land and skies.”

It staired wi a buik. It staired fan the teacher said the wirds, those unknowinst beluvit wirds. And it staired fan I repeatit thaim tae ma granny -

Sunset Song

- an granny's een lichtit up, bricht and quick, but sare aa'na.

Aye, quine, I ken it richt eneuch, she said. It wis yer mam's favourite.

Sae granny gaed an got the copy, mam's saicret copy fae ben the hoose, aa tea-blaudit an scrunt, an I haudit in ma haun, like it wis the maist precious thing in the warld. I hinna got much o ma mam, ye see. A puckle photies and a wee bit jewellery... but *this... this* wis aa bled throu an bound wi sweat fae her fingers.

I breithit in the stourie scent, the sweet musk o a story, passit haun tae haun, an layered wi life.

I should mebbe hae geen that tae ye a whiley ago, said ma granny, but I liked tae hae it close. I dinna need tae tell ye tae luik efter it.

An granny didna need tae tell me, for I kent that this wis the treisur I didna even ken I wis luikin for. And fan she said:

Ye'll be seein she's cawd Chris. Yon quine in the story.

I kent it wis meant tae be. I kent that this wis pairt o ma story aa'na.

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2.

There's nae mony a quine cawd Chris, but it's a name I likit fine.

'What's in a name?' Juliet said, in anither buik the schuil pit afore us. And I'd said tae the teacher -

'A name is nothing. And a name is everything. Cos, aye, a rose would maybe smell as sweet if we called it a - clart... but it doesn't sit as bonnie on your tongue, does it?'

And ma teacher hid smiled at yon, and I thocht it wis a smicker, but, nah, she said:

And what's a "clart", Chris?

Muck... or mud, I said.

Well then, that I understand.

And then it wis ma chance tae smile, affa erch an shy mebbe, but a smile nanetheless.

Thank you, I said, wi ma English vyce, the ain I savit for teachers.

Thank you, Chris, she replied.

Aye. Chris I wis. Niver Christine. And I ay likit that aa'na. Liked bein a quine wi a name that could be baithe or aither. And I ay thocht that if I scried a buik, thit fowk micht think it cam fae a cheil's pen and mebbe they'd tak it mare sairiously, syne aa the schuil buiks we were geed were by William or Lewis or Alasdair.

I could be on that list, I thocht tae masel. They'd never ken. And if iver they learnt the trowth o it, then mare fool thaim for nae pittin eneuch quines on the list in the furst place. Cos it disna tak a pintle tae haad a pen.

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3.

Baithe and naither.

Naethin and aathin.

It seemit ma hale wurld wis cleavit.

Chris the quine wi a loonie's name.

Chris the ain wi the twa vyces, the 'thank you' for ma teachers and the 'aye, ta' for ma granny.

Chris the ain wi the buiks and the learnin, and Chris with the saund atween her taes.

Chris o the hairt and Chris o the heid.

* * *

4.

Whiles she, Chris Guthrie, wis o the land, I am o the sea.

I am the bairn brocht up in the watter wi salt in her blud and erms makkit tae slice throu the rairie waves. They say a fisher quine needs a strang back and braid shooders, and baith o them I hae. I'd be fine built tae cairy boxes o fish, or staun at the guttin for hoors.

But noo the fowk are in offices an shops an ahin screens. They're typin an swipin, an niver a day daes their hauns feel the clart o muck or a hivy day weel spent.

But ma da still grinds and grits at the sea, a fisher wi his weel-wirked erms, dipped in guts and scales. He's built different tae the loons ye see wi their trackies and gym-kits, aa liftin irons for nae reason but tae bonnie thaimselves. They run oan the spot, an sweit tae swagger.

I wunner if there's nae sic thing as an honest day's wirk noo. Or if we're aa jeest happy tae pretend that keyboards an screens are actually tools o the trade.

That's fit the schuil seem tae think as they steer us aa tae computers and code.

And fan I talk tae ma teacher, ma English teacher, the ane I likit best, she says:

You don't need to choose a career in IT, Chris. Don't you think English is your calling?

* * *

5.

Aabody leaves this place in the end. Aabody ma age.

They leave wi a gleam in their een and a skifflet stap. Aye, back some o them come eventually... wi their degree papers or pairtner or bairn... they've gone oot in the wurld, bravin their wye, and then they're back – deen.

That's thaim... ready tae settle doon in the place they ay cried hame. Hame, aye, they caa it that still but they're nae sae shuir noo. They're torn wi far they've been and far they've come fae. Sae back they arrive... auler, wiser... duller.

It maks me wunner fit happens oot there; the place thit's nae *here*.

Cos ma buiks tell me thit there's a wurld o dreams tae be haen – but the faces o the returnit tell an affa different tale.

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6.

I try tae pictur ma life awa fae here. I close ma een an I see masel staundin oan the steps o a great university, a place wi a librar bigger than ma hale wee hame toon.

I see masel, a face in the croud, wi ma stack o buiks and ma chat o *politics* an *philosophy* and *classics*. And I'll spik awa tae these unfamiliar fowk fae here and there, wi their city lives and their fancifu wyes. And I'll nod an giggle, maskit an affrontit aboot ma aul simple mainer. *Yes, I'll say. I understand, I'll say. That's so funny! I'll say.*

I can see ma lecturer screw her nib fan I hoist ma haun and askit *this* or *thon*, forgettin far I am, catcht wi a gust o farrach.

Could you speak properly? they'll say.

And ma English vyce will tak the leid and ma tongue o fine, gustie wirds will be pit awa in a wee box, niver tae be appened again. And fan I ging hame tae see ma da or ma granny, and

appen ma erms for a wairm and weel-needit bosie, they'll furrow their broos and luik at me lik I'm stranger wi a borrit face. Wi their vyces law, they'll harkit aboot their lass wi the boul in her mou... and they'll spik different tae this lass wi her fantoush claes an highfalutin notions, baised by fit she's become. They winna caa her *quine* nae mare. Mebbe nae even *Chris*. Christine, they'll say.

And this woman, for she's nae a quine, will walk briskly doon tae the beach but she'll nae tak aff her sheen tae feel the grun aneath her fit. Back she'll staun, too feart o the greendies and the gows.

Then she'll return tae this new hame, aye, for that she caas it noo, even though she kens she disna really belang and niver will. And some chum, Poppy or Millie or Tilly, will say '*how was your visit?*'

And '*fine*' is aa she'll say.

Fine.

Because it's nae her hame nae mare.

* * *

7.

Then I pictur the ither life. The ane far I bide, here, wi ma fowk and ma beach. And I think o *her*, Chris Guthrie, wi her peewits crying and the smell o earth in her nib.

And I think... she learntit tae gee it up. She pit awa her buiks and dug intae the laund and, aye, it wis a sair life for a quine back in the time o war but it's nae lik that noo. The men here will bide and though the fishers will keep gan oot, maste o them will still mak it hame.

And mebbe ane day, this second Chris, she'll luik at ane o the loons she's kent since she wis wee... Billy or Jimmy or David... and she'll think... Aye. There's comfort in you. There's an ease in kennin those same een yer hale life. And mebbe they'll hae a bairn or twa like aa the quines ay get pusht tae dee. Or mebbe she'll say nah and get hersel a wee hoose fu o catties and buiks sae the bairns hae a witch tae fleg thaim feart.

Whedder there's a Billy boy or a Bessie cat, ilka day she'll daunder tae the beach, barefit and braw blythe and she'll weigle her taes as she walks tae her aul freen, the bracky-bree, wi its saut-brack and crackin tide.

And there she'll hover and there she'll haver, gan intae a dwaum, as the fell-thocht o anither life ebbs and flows wi the tide.

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8.

The twa Chrisses, wi twa paths: forrit and ayont.

And wi ma mither's buik in haun, I hear the caa o the sea and there I'm drawn. And I sit and I read the same wirds and the same sense, ower and ower, and I let masel cry for an answer.

Fit wid ye dee, Chris o back then? Fit wid ye tell this quine o the noo?

And fan she disna respond, tae ma mither I turnit and say:

Fit wid ye dee, mither? Fit wid ye tell this quine o the noo?

And I let maself see those twa lives I hivna lived and I think o ma spairk and heirt, here and noo. And I kennit... I dinna wint tae be ane o those that gings awa and comes back without their gleet.

Can this nae be eneuch?

And as the sky turns daurk and duskish and the fairy wind whips tae a sweel, I hear a ferlie hark... it could be the breeze or the tide, it micht the caa o she, Chris, or that o ma mither. It could be suith or it could be a bocken. It could be naethin or aathin.

But this much is clear. It says:

Ye can be baith.

* * *

9.

I run tae ma granny's, swith, an I thraw ma erms roon her.

Granny. Dee ye think mam wid be prood if I wint tae university?

And ma granny says: *Yer mam wid be prood fitever ye dee, quine.*

And later, fan I askit the same quaisten tae ma da, and git the same reply aince mare, I ken the chyce is mine.

Then ma da, ay cannie and quate, says:

There's a big world oot there, oor Chris. Dinna be feart tae mak yer ain path. And whither ye ging or whither ye bide disna maiter. For ye'll ay hae a hame here.

And I think, even jeest for a wee-bit time, mebbe it's true.

Mebbe I can be the twa Chrisses.

Or mebbe I'm hale jeest the wye I am, wi hairt in the sea and ma heid in a buik.

Nae baithe or naither.

Jeest –

Me.

WORDS 1985