

L.A. MACRAE

And Now the
Light is Everywhere



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Netta

Our names are pressed in the black-bound Bible like dried flowers. On opening, the filmy page whispers beneath the light and the air.

In the front of the book concerned with the preservation of the soul, here is proof of each fleshly, if fleeting, existence. Most of us are here, set down in the hands of our fathers. We are woven in stems of ink. We are unfurled offshoots from the familial branches of begetting and becoming: sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, husbands, wives. Incomings, outgoings. Legitimacy, apparent or otherwise, is the sap which binds us all together, the short-lived and the long-lasting jostling for space.

It is true that history does not relate every relation, but I, Netta, am here:

Janet MacArthur, born 1st January 1920.

As it was for my twin sisters Fern and Bella, and for Angus John, the long-awaited son, my first squalling sight of the world was the upstairs bedroom of our family home of Crois na Coille, a room so low my father could stand up straight only in its centre. Back when there were four of us, Crois na Coille was our broad kingdom: the squat cottage with its whitewashed walls and its meagre rectangle of ground before it, huddled in the lee of the yellow hill.

As children we were taught not to write in books unless

they were school jotters. My siblings and I would situate ourselves upon the insides of the front covers, beneath our names:

*Carrabhal School,
Carrabhal,
Argyllshire,
Scotland,
The Earth,
The Milky Way,
Etcetera.*

Only lazy scholars use *etcetera*, Miss Grimond would tut. Undeterred, we carried on regardless, just as I insisted on writing with my left hand despite muttered prophecies of deviance and delinquency. We did not think much of Miss Grimond, with her widow's peak, her red running nose and her strange aversion to violence.

When Fern and Bella last opened the Bible, it was to record the death of Angus John, our little brother. There was some mild bickering over whether it was respectful to use biro, and then there was the question of me: of whether to fill the blank space next to my date of birth. A question mark was suggested by Fern but swiftly rejected by Bella. For of all the querulously quick and the definitely dead in this family, I am one whose whereabouts is unknown.

In this uncertain state, I join a motley selection of familial waifs and strays. In the space of a few lifetimes we fade from missing-person mysteries into tales that trail into the unknown. Those who once searched for us pass on. And so some of our endings are lost forever, our beginnings our only legacy: an inked name in an opened book.

Monday 16 March 1998

Fern

Fern MacArthur stoops to strike a match on the back step. She touches the flame to the cigarette held between her creased lips and the tip burns red with her indrawn breath. She shakes the match out and tilts her chin back, sighing smoke. She stares up at the yellow hill.

They had all grown up in its shadow: she and Bella, Netta, Angus John. Fern thinks of the path that winds over the hill, of the caves that hold centuries of stories in their dark mouths. Her brother had known the hill path well. He'd trudged it, knee-deep in winter drifts, stotted bleary-eyed among the whin and gorse during spring lambing, and swaggered over it in late summer to the harvest dance at Altnaglas.

Angus John will always be a boy to Fern, supple-limbed and striding, setting the field-covering pace of his youth. And Netta will always be twenty-six, dark hair on the collar of her pale mackintosh and the scent of Shalimar, the last day Fern saw her.

Latha na beinne: the day of the mountain. One of their father's expressions. Fern had always taken it to mean death, but now she isn't so sure. She'd been reminded of it in the final weeks of her brother's life, as his mind travelled to the places his legs could no longer take him. It is two weeks since Angus John went from being, in Bella's words, 'poorly' to 'very poorly'. He asked for their mother. Bella and Fern kept watch as their brother's life slipped through the cracks in his breath.

Fern sat closest to the door, her twin sister at the head of the bed, her broad, work-swollen fingers encircling Angus John's wrist. The bedside table was piled with large-print Westerns. *Solitude's Lawman* was uppermost, bent sickle-seamed on the top of the stack.

In the final hours Angus John's breathing was ragged, irregular, and when it stopped for some time Bella would look up, whereupon another breath would rasp forth, a low growling rattle. Fern found herself wishing for his final illness to be over almost as strongly as she wished it had never begun. She had to excuse herself three times to stand in the kitchen and wait, her fingers pressing her face.

When it was over, Bella placed her brother's arm back by his side and rose to turn the dark-spotted mirror to the wall. Fern leaned forward to touch Angus John's cheek. His skin was warm and his eyes were closed. Bella hauled the sash window open, and the wind slammed the door shut on the other side of the room.

Bronchial pneumonia, the doctor wrote on the death certificate. Bella took him downstairs at the end of his visit, but Fern remained where she was. She picked up *Solitude's Lawman* from the pile of books and opened it where her brother had left off.

'Those will have to go back to the library van,' Bella said on returning upstairs. She had stood on the threshold of the room, looking in. Their brother had never been late with a library book in his life, and Bella evidently saw no reason to sully his record in death.

That day, the hill had glowed in the gold of deep winter sun. But today the land is pale and betrays nothing. It is an in-between time, spring still hibernating beneath layers of ancient rock. The gorse will come soon.

We only get a certain number of springs, Fern thinks, and this one will be my seventy-fifth, if I'm saved.

Fern doesn't really believe in predestination, not the way her father had, anyway. Without it, he would say, who would be saved? She can still hear his voice to this day, asking his children solemnly, one after the other: *Are you saved? And are you?*

The radio in the kitchen plays out the closing jingle of the weather report. Fern hears a car drawing up, the crunch of footsteps that sets the dogs barking, then a rapping at the front door. She stubs out her cigarette, tucking it behind her ear, and backs into the house, closing the door behind her. She hisses to the dogs to be still. Good news seldom enters in through the front door. Those on social visits know to come around the back.

She hears Bella moving around upstairs. Her sister has set to rearranging every single item in the house, it seems. Today it is the turn of the linen press: each item being re-ironed and refolded and returned to its place. Fern adjusts the combs in her hair, preparing to answer the door. Her sister calls downstairs that it's the postman. Fern makes her way down the corridor, weaving through the fronds of the dogs' tails. She opens the door.

'You're not the usual one,' she says to him.

The usual one would disappear if he turned sideways; this man's square frame is a bristly silhouette in sudden sunlight. Fern has to squint at him in the glare and sidestep into his shadow. He is carrying a parcel a little larger than a shoe box.

'I'm just covering. I do the other side, normally.' The postman taps the box with a thick finger. 'MacArthur?'

'It is.' Fern settles her glasses on her nose and looks down. Handwritten, the label, badly smudged, with no post code. A red and blue sticker bearing the words *Air Canada*. Her heart strikes a blow.

'Been round the houses a bit.' The postman sets his burden down gently on the step. He walks back to his van and drives away with a crunch of gears.

Fern stands for a few seconds, staring down at the parcel, at the Canadian postmark from a month ago. She hears the prattle of jackdaws in the rowan tree by the gate, the end of a tune from the radio she can't quite grasp. She stoops and lifts the package, and goes inside.

Bella sits down in the opposite chair. She says nothing. Fern nudges knives and spoons aside with the bottom of the box, placing it in the middle of the table. She turns it to show her sister the label and Bella stops, a spoon dangling from her fingers. They look at each other. Jinky, the orphan jackdaw tamed by their brother, hops from slat to slat on the pulley above their heads. Fern knows Bella's face better than she knows her own, but after all these years living together she finds her sister's expression hard to decipher. She almost looks fearful.

'We'll open it, will we?' Fern says, her voice high and bright, as if humouring a recalcitrant child. She springs into action, delving in a kitchen drawer to unearth 'the scissor', black-handled tailoring shears that belonged to their mother. She makes to hand them to Bella, but Bella shakes her head impatiently, as Fern had known she would – *never pass a blade*, their mother would say, *it'll sever the friendship*. So Fern wields the squeaking shears, sawing through the bindings of tape and cardboard to reveal another box inside. She slits the Sellotape seam of the second box to expose another: sturdy, with a lid which Fern removes.

Inside is a small envelope sitting on top of a folded piece of white cloth. She picks them both out, weighing the softness of the material in her hands. A silk scarf. She looks from the scarf to her sister, expecting to meet her eye, but Bella has turned away to take up a serving spoon and a rag.

Fern sighs, and turns her attention to the envelope. It is heavy, too heavy to contain only paper. She slides her finger under the flap and looks inside before gently shaking out the

contents. A small wad of photographs falls and spills out on the table top.

‘Bel,’ she says, ‘would you put down that spoon for a minute?’

The first images are black and white. A bridal party, a formal studio portrait, everyone stiffly arranged on high-backed chairs. Fern stirs the pile with a finger, turning one of the photographs the right way up. Across the table, Bella leans forward. She says nothing.

The picture under Fern’s finger shows a young woman with dark hair holding two kittens. It looks windy. Fern strains to see the landscape behind her but it is a wash of grey. Not how she imagined Canada, but she has always found it hard to reimagine black and white photographs in their true colours. She turns it over again in case anything has been written on the back, but there is nothing. When she raises her eyes she sees Bella is looking too, now, and so she moves around the table to stand beside her, gently prodding another picture under her sister’s nose. A group in a boat, fishing rods slung over the sides like spider legs. A black dog a blur in the stern. They peer at this one for some time.

‘Perhaps,’ Bella says at length, in a small voice. ‘Perhaps it is her.’ She puts down the spoon and wipes her hand down the side of her housecoat.

‘There’s a note,’ Fern says.

With both hands, Bella pushes herself slowly away from the table, her chair squawking backwards on the tiled floor. She turns herself side-on to the table, burying her hands in her lap and leaning over them. Beside her, Bree, the oldest collie, gets to her feet and shakes herself loudly.

Fern watches the dog moving arthritically across the kitchen to slump down in front of the Rayburn with a wheezing sigh. ‘Och, Bella,’ she says. ‘Do you not want to look at this?’

Bella does not move.

It is just a scrap of lined paper; Fern can see that before she unfolds it. She smooths it beneath her fingers.

Dearest Angus John,

I thought you might like to see these. I'd always hoped to return, and tell you about my 'new' life, as it was then. But it would seem that time is against me, and this may be the only way I can.

– As we used to say –

Once more across the water, MacArthur!



The clock on the dresser ticks. Fern realises she still has the scarf tucked in the crook of her arm. She holds it to her face. Powdery and exotic-smelling. The white of her sister Netta's neck in the rain and her cold fingers in Fern's hand as they said their goodbyes. The scent from the little amber bottle, the label gold and blue.

The rest of the melody comes to Fern unbidden. The years unroll as easily as a spool of thread, tangling as they loosen. It is the song they used to crank from the gramophone in the best room, and the words, too:

Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar

Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell?

She turns back to the table. 'And where are you now?' she murmurs, scarcely audible even to herself. She looks to the kitchen window as if her long-lost sister Netta might be walking up the path.

Beyond the house, the yellow hill shivers in its thin winter coat. Every mountain has its day.