



**Love is a Perfect Place**  
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**by**

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Tom woke up that morning to find the bed he was in was not the one he remembered retiring to the night before. Worse, he realised the person sleeping beside him was not his wife, but a girl barely out of her teens - and she was stirring. Sleepily, she opened one eye and smiled as if she knew him, before realising she didn't.

"Who the hell are you?" she said.

Tom would have reacted quicker except he was sure she'd spoken French, a language he had not learned. Inexplicably though, he'd understood her. "I might ask you the same," he replied.

But she wasn't listening and at once leaped out of bed cringing and clutching at her night-gown. "What have you done to me?"

It was definitely French, he thought. "I haven't touched you," he said. "For pity's sake girl, I have daughters older than you."

And she was puzzled, for likewise, although the sounds of his words were unfamiliar, their meaning seemed perfectly clear inside of her head.

She noticed her hands then, as if for the first time. They were smooth and slender but her expression suggested to Tom they were not quite what she had expected. She turned to the dressing table and peered at her face in the mirror. Finally, her mouth agape, she stroked the smooth contours of her young brow and shook her head in bewilderment.

"But I'm eighty six," she said.

He looked at his own hands then. They were smaller than he remembered and less wrinkled. His arms and chest too seemed different - more muscular, and his undisciplined, middle aged gut was now flat and firm. Then he caught his own reflection in the mirror and was stunned. He'd turned fifty last month but now he appeared to be not a day over twenty five.

"It's not me," he said weakly. But clearly it *was* him - only not on the outside.

He tore from bed and threw open the curtain. Below was a large garden, a stunning jamboree of midsummer colour while beyond the land rose sharply, wild land, green, but with caps of craggy grey rock, where last night had been a familiar urban skyline.

"Where am I? You must know something, girl. What's going on? Where's my wife?"

She began to tremble. "I don't know," she wailed. "I don't know."

He found some clothes in the wardrobe and dressed hurriedly. The clothes were old fashioned and the cloth felt coarse against his skin, but they smelled fresh and were pressed like new. Across the landing, he found two more bedrooms, both unoccupied, and a bathroom. The fittings looked antique, Victorian perhaps, but they sparkled in pristine perfection.

Downstairs, there was a kitchen with the remains of a fire in the grate of a cast iron range. The air felt cold, so he opened the grille and poked at the embers, coaxing some life back into the fire. Then he gazed around, his eyes seeing but still not believing. It all bore that same antique look and also the same strange newness - a stout oak table without so much as a scratch and pans whose bottoms had never felt the heat of the stove.

Eventually the girl ventured downstairs, her eyes wide with fear and astonishment. In the bolder light of the kitchen she looked no more than nineteen, yet she was moving with the slow, shuffling gait of an old lady. She had found a long tweed skirt and a blouse which, like his own clothes were of an old fashioned style, but perfect.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to be rude just now."

"It's all right. It was,... understandable." He offered her his hand. "My name's Tom."

She pressed it gently. "Yvette," she replied.

"And you are French?"

"Yes. And you are English?"

"Yes. I come from Manchester - at least that's where I was last night - and I don't speak French."

"Nor, I English," she replied. "Yet we seem to understand one another."

Tom sank down at the table. "This is impossible, Yvette. There must be an explanation - but I can't imagine what."

"I know."

"Perhaps it's an hallucination."

"If it's an hallucination," she said, "then one of us isn't real, yet you seem real to me." She was embarrassed now. "Tom?"

"Yes?"

"Don't take this the wrong way but I made love with someone last night."

He shrugged. "No, not with me you didn't. You must have been with someone else when you went to bed."

"I'm eighty six, remember? My only companion was a nurse at my bedside."

"Then you're mistaken."

"I admit it's been a while since I made love to anyone, but not so long I don't recognise the evidence of the morning after. How can you be certain it wasn't you?"

"It's simply not possible, that's all."

"But,..."

"If you must know, I'm not able,... I haven't been for years." She was such a pretty girl he thought, at the very peak of her allure and he turned away, ashamed to be discussing such things with her.

She gave him a sympathetic smile which he thought seemed genuine. "I'm sorry," she said. "But Tom, yesterday I could hardly walk. And if my disabilities no longer apply, then why should yours?"

Tom considered the idea for a moment and shuddered. He found the notion disturbing at the deepest level of his psyche and he was about to tell her so when suddenly, they were interrupted by a knock at the door.

Her name, she said, was Nancy and she bade them welcome. She was tall, ebony skinned and possessed of a beauty that was so startling neither of them felt it could possibly be real. There was an unsettling symmetry about her features and also an eerie familiarity in the way she looked at them.

She wore a long frock-coat with a radiant white cravat at her throat which lent her an air of flamboyant elegance, and she spoke a language neither recognised though of course they understood her perfectly, as if her words were being translated inside their heads as she spoke.

Tom felt Yvette's hand curling around his arm in solidarity and he drew an unexpected comfort from it.

"Do you know us?" he asked.

Nancy smiled. "Of course."

"Then who are we?"

"Who would you like to be?"

"The people we were yesterday," Tom said.

Nancy smiled evasively. "May I come in?"

She sat at the table, spreading her coat tails and arranging herself in a queenly fashion. Then she gazed around approvingly. "These imaginings are very fine indeed," she said.

"Imaginings?"

"All of this," she said, "is woven by your imagination, including me. Think of me as a manifestation of your unconscious minds. Thus, I can know only what you know yourselves, though are perhaps unaware of - which may be more than you think."

"Then explain how I can get back to my wife," said Tom.

"You can't," said Nancy. She sighed, then placed a warm hand on top of his. "This will be hard for you to understand, but believe me when I say a part of you woke up this morning beside your wife as normal. How can I put this? Your existence has... bifurcated."

Tom could not help himself. He laughed. "Bifurcated?"

"Yes Tom. You see, in your previous form it was necessary for your mind to make copies of itself. The physics of the vessel that contained you was imperfect, allowing parts of your consciousness to become dysfunctional from time to time. But the copies were always there, ready to take over, ready to guarantee the apparent continuity of your existence through to the end of your vessel's life span. Periodically, the copies are released and fresh ones made."

Tom drew back in growing disbelief. "Released?"

"Consciousness is like energy," she went on. "There are principles of conservation to be obeyed. It cannot be created nor destroyed, but merely changed from one form into another. And if it cannot be destroyed, then it must be released from the host vessel. Do you understand?"

Yvette nodded, seeming less horrified than Tom. "Go on," she said.

"There is a misconception about consciousness," said Nancy. "A belief that a vessel of suitable complexity must exist before consciousness can come into being. But in fact it is the other way around. It is consciousness which forms for itself a vessel and an environment in which to explore and grow. All of what you see and what you are has been spun from the fabric of the universe, to a design from the deeps of your own mind."

Tom remained dazed and unbelieving. "I'm just a copy?"

"More than a copy, Tom. Think of yourself as having moved on. You exist on a higher plane than you did before. These new vessels will not wear out as did your previous ones. Here your consciousness can live to its true potential - such fine vessels, too. You will take great pleasure in one another, I'm sure."

Yvette looked away. "It appears we already have," she said.

Nancy smiled. "Don't be alarmed. You are what each of you has been searching for, all your many lives thus far. Over the coming days, you will realise the truth of this. You will develop feelings for one another - these are natural. Do not be ashamed to express them."

"But I'm married," said Tom. "I have a wife, children,... they need me."

Nancy shook her head. "Remember, you are still with them, Tom. Your previous life goes on unchanged. You are merely unaware of it now. This part of you is free to pursue another course."

"But I don't want to be free," he said. "I want to go home."

She looked at him, her eyelids drooping in sympathy. "These feelings will pass," she said.

"But there has to be some way back," he said and he looked to Yvette for support but she glanced away, unable to meet his gaze.

Nancy shook her head slowly. "You must understand, Tom, there is no need to return, because you are already there." She rose to leave. "You need time to adjust to all this strangeness. I shall come again. For now, remember, you will find everything you require here. You need only think of it, and it shall be,..."

When she had gone, Tom ventured alone into the garden. The colours were bright and the air felt clean upon his tongue, but there was a profound stillness over the land, so that he could hear only the sound of his own breath and the anxious pounding of his heart. Finally, in a daze, he crouched and ran the soil through his fingers. It was good soil, a fine sandy loam and it gave life to the healthiest of blooms. Perfect! Everything was so,... perfect!

After a while, the front door opened and Yvette appeared. She was not aware of him, still crouching among the tall flowers. She moved cautiously at first, unused to such freedom of movement. Gradually though, she gained confidence and eventually he saw her throw up her arms, her face lit with delight, and then she skipped the length of the garden, her

skirt dancing, her hair wild and loose. He knew then she had been won over by the prospect of life anew, that he was alone in his horror.

She stopped when she saw him, then knelt and placed a hand on his arm. "Tom?"

He gave her a smile but she could see he was deeply afraid and lonely so she laid her head upon his shoulder and wrapped him in the comfort an embrace. Gradually then, through the numbness of his stunned senses, he became aware of her warmth and her closeness.

"Let me comfort you," she said.

It might have been the sweetest solace, except he belonged to someone else and for him Yvette's mere proximity carried with it the hint of a betrayal.

He untangled himself at once. "No," he said. "We should see what else there is. We'll need food. There's a path of sorts beyond the gate. Perhaps we could wander down the valley a little,... there might be others."

Yvette stood back, surprised and not a little disappointed. "All right," she said and for a moment the fear in her returned. She had not thought there might be others. Indeed, she hoped there were not.

She hoped with all her heart that she and Tom were alone - just the two of them, in this perfect place.

They set out along the unmade track beyond the gate. It was a beautiful valley with high peaks on either side, and a stream lending an oddly subdued voice to the serenity of the ever changing vista before them. It was as if the beauty were unable to express itself from beneath the weight of an inexplicable sadness.

They walked into the afternoon before Yvette drew a halt, her hand checking his arm. "There's nothing, Tom. We can see for miles and there's nothing. We are alone. Truly we are."

He squinted at the sun. It was slipping lower, the shadows lengthening, hinting at the evening to come. There would be darkness to follow and the thought filled him with a renewed terror.

"You're right. We'd better turn back," he said. "Are you hungry yet?"

She shook her head.

"Me neither." Nor was he thirsty, even though he had walked for hours beneath the hot sun. He crossed to the stream and found a rocky

pool, deep and clear, into which a white ribbon of water tumbled. He scooped some water up and drank. It astonished him. It tasted like he imagined the most perfect water should taste, but it was a sensation spoiled by the mere fact that he wasn't at all thirsty.

"Perhaps we don't need food,... or water," he said. "Only when it pleases us."

He looked around then at the land and he felt a chill. What manner of place was this? And what manner of being had he become?

On the way back, Yvette took his hand and they held on to one another like frightened children, until the cottage came once more into view. It comforted them to see it, their spirits lifting at the warm colours of its quarried stone and at the welcoming perfumes of its garden. There, they sat on a bench by an emerald lawn, resting and sipping tea, while the sun sank lower and the shadows reached clear across the valley.

Eventually, Yvette turned to him. "Tom," she said. "Aren't you even a little excited? Aren't you pleased with that handsome body?"

He looked at her, not knowing what to say. Earlier, he had washed in the privacy of the bathroom and out of curiosity, had undressed before the long mirror to examine the perfection of his new form. It had been difficult not to be impressed. But then before his eyes, as his mind had filled with the memory of the warm press of Yvette's hand, the creature at his loins, so long dormant, had begun to waken.

Tom had always been faithful to his wife, but secretly he'd been distracted from afar by pretty girls throughout his married years. And since, for him, girls were at their most physically captivating in their teens and early twenties, it was a distraction that had seemed to grow more tiresome and more ridiculous, the older he had become. So he had not mourned the passing of his virility. Why should he? It had been a torment to him. But now, what possible point could there be in such an astonishing renewal?

It seemed almost cruel!

He shivered at the memory as he faced Yvette. "It's just that this is a very young body," he said. "There are processes going on in it that I'm not used to. In fact I wonder how I ever coped with such intensity, when I was younger."

Yvette hugged herself. "I know, isn't it wonderful?"

As the evening grew late, Tom became increasingly nervous about lingering outdoors. "Would it please you to eat?" he asked, and Yvette, just as nervous, replied that it would.

Once inside, she searched the larder.

"That's odd," she said. "I looked in here this morning for marmalade."

"I don't think there is any," he replied.

She emerged holding a jar of freshly made preserve. "Well there is now, and there's more bread."

"We must have overlooked it," he said, but then he remembered Nancy's words about finding everything they needed here, that they had only to think of something, or desire it, to make it happen. He'd not supposed she'd meant it literally. But if they could truly spin a physical reality by merely thinking then what else could be made to happen?

Gradually, throughout their meal, he noticed the way Yvette was sitting, ... the curve of her hips, the press of her bosom against her blouse, and suddenly, as in days of old, he felt himself momentarily given over to the pleasure of a most delicious distraction. He caught himself then and snatched his eyes away.

"Tom?"

"It's nothing," he said. But it *was* something, only he dared not say, for now it seemed his fancies could no longer be considered harmless. If it were true, even thinking about her could make it happen. Then, as if intent on making things even more difficult, Yvette came to him and placed a hand upon his shoulder. He felt it, soft and warm.

"Tom," she said. "Will you lie with me tonight?"

He recoiled. "I can't," he said, disturbed as much by her request as by his own pleasure at the idea of it. "Please, you've got to understand, Yvette - inside my head, I'm still the man I was yesterday. In thirty years of marriage, I've never been with another woman."

She looked at him as if she had been shot through, but she understood and respected him for it. "It's just that I'm afraid," she said. "I only want to have you near me in the darkness. I don't want to sleep alone."

Yes, she was afraid, he thought - afraid if she slept alone, she risked somehow breaking the mysterious spell of this place and waking tomorrow to find it had all been dream. Tom knew this because he felt it too, only he was afraid of the opposite, that by lying with her might somehow perpetuate the nightmare.

Darkness came slowly to the old house and Yvette withdrew silently upstairs to undress. Tom followed shortly, his way lighted by the amber glow from an oil lamp. He took one of the spare bedrooms, and lay down fully clothed upon the bed. Then he turned out the lamp and was plunged instantly into total blackness.

He slept, eventually, the blind hours of his confinement being disturbed only by fleeting ghosts from his former life. He was woken by the dawn and as he opened his eyes, he felt a glimmer of optimism, but then he realised the room was the same and he was alone. With a heavy heart, he slipped out onto the landing and peered into Yvette's room. She was stirring. She opened her eyes and he saw in them a flicker of doubt before she realised she was still there, still young,... and then she smiled.

Solemnly, he prepared breakfast, though he understood by now, it was more for the ceremony of it than for necessary sustenance. Yvette joined him in silence, too sensitive to his feelings to want to appear joyful.

As they ate, they agreed to test their new found powers by focusing their minds upon some item they each desired. For him, he thought of fruit while Yvette considered a pair of earrings she'd always liked. Then they set out from the cottage once more in order to explore their strange new home.

This time, they walked along the track in the opposite direction, traveling again until the afternoon. The track ran on, twisting its way into a range of high mountains. They followed doggedly but the mountains seemed to draw back from them as they advanced. It was Tom who called a halt this time. " I swear they seemed nearer hours ago than they do now," he said.

"Perhaps they were."

"But we made this place," he said. "Surely, we can control it! We can make towns and cities filled with people and we can blast away that terrible silence with music if we want to."

"Perhaps the cottage is all we have," she said. "Perhaps our control ends at the gate." She looked around and shook her head. "But there *is* something, don't you feel it? A sort of expectation."

"All I feel is the silence," he replied. "It's unnatural, like the silence of a void, like a vacuum." Yet as he gazed around at the silent peaks, a part of

him believed Yvette was right. The world seemed not quite dead, but more frozen,... suspended,... as if waiting for something.

Gently, Yvette took his hand. "Come," she said. "We'll go back."

And when they returned, it was to find a bowl of fruit upon the table and in a trinket box in the bedroom, to her delight, Yvette discovered her earrings.

She came to him later, in the garden. She had found a very fine dress, one whose design she had quietly been musing upon throughout their walk, and her new earrings sparkled in the softening light. He had made a salad of the fruit and they shared it, lounging on a rug spread upon the lawn.

He found it puzzling that here the silence seemed not so oppressive. He could hear the gentle movement of air, stirring the tall stems of the flowers and he was able to gaze out upon the land beyond without feeling afraid. Yvette was right, he thought. Their powers ended at the gate. But that made them little more than prisoners. What kind of higher existence was that?

"The grass has been cut," observed Yvette. "It smells lovely."

He nodded, ever more aware of her allure as she sat beside him. She lay back and sighed. "And the towels in the bathroom are fresh. Oh, Tom, it's like being on holiday,... staying in the very best hotel."

"But it gives us nothing to think about," he said.

She laughed. "You'd rather mow the lawn and wash towels?"

"It's what we do," he said. "It's how we live - details, we take care of details."

"But, Tom,... now surely everything is arranged so we can devote our time to thinking of one thing."

"And that is?"

"Each other, of course." She reached across and pressed his hand against the cool grass. "Already, I feel such a tenderness for you."

It was not possible to hide the effect of her touch and she smiled at his response. "There," she said. "I told you. You have been made like new."

And in that moment he hated his fine new flesh for its weakness.

"I belong with my wife," he said.

"But part of you is still with your wife. It would not be a betrayal of her, if you were to give this part to me."

He looked away, frightened even to think of it, in case it should come true.

"Tom," she went on, "what other reason is there for existing if it isn't to nurture what we can in each other. What else is there to think of now?"

"We must think of a way back," he said.

She looked away. "No, Tom. I was old and frail - I was sick,... Why should I want to go back?"

"Because none of this is real."

"Is imagination not real?" she said. "Is it not the most intimate form of reality any of us can achieve? It feels real to me - and it could be perfect,... if only you would think of me a little."

That night, she left her door ajar. He saw the soft slice of amber from her lamp when he retired and it seemed to call, stirring in him a deep carnal ache. It was a bitter twist, he thought, to have rediscovered such desire and yet be for ever separated from the woman he loved.

But he knew his wife would have been unable to cope with this renewed virility. Their amiable, but sexless marriage had been a thing they'd grown into, like their middle age. And he realised with shame the desire he felt now was not for his wife. The chemistry within him was unsophisticated. Not for it the dimpled buttocks of maturity. No, it sought only the unblemished perfection of youth, and who else could have embodied all of that more than the lithe and lovely Yvette?

How long would it be, he wondered? A month? Two months? A year? Inevitably it would happen. He would be won over by her love scented breezes, and everything he had ever known in his former life he would forget as surely as if he had been drugged.

He fought it. He had made his choice long ago and thoughts of anyone else, he told himself, were wrong. There had to be a way back! Then he began to wonder if perhaps like everything about this mysterious place, the answer could be found inside his own mind. Gradually then, throughout the long, slow hours he sank deep inside of himself, until at last, before the pale transparency of dawn,... it came to him.

In the morning, he turned to the bedside cabinet and slid open the drawer to find the revolver lying exactly as he had imagined it. Slowly, he drew it out. It was so simple. He would take himself off, somewhere far from the cottage where Yvette would never find what remained of him and there he would shut down this nightmare of semi-reality. Only then,

he thought, would he become aware of his old self once more. Only *then* would he regain his freedom.

"But are you sure that's what you want?" came a voice.

It was Nancy. She was sitting in the rocker, watching him.

"How long have you been there?" he asked.

"I'm always here," she said. "I'm a manifestation of your unconscious mind, remember?"

"Are you?"

"You doubt it?"

"Would my unconscious lie to me?"

"I would never lie," she said.

"You told me there was no way back,... but there is. Am I right?"

Nancy looked away and Tom knew from the sudden sadness in her eyes that it was true. "Then *you* did lie. But why?"

"I am the marriage of your unconscious with Yvette's," she said. "You share me. So, I know only what is true for the both of you. Yvette has no desire to return, so there can be no way back for you either. I did not lie."

"But by that reasoning, if I want to go back, then Yvette has no choice but to return as well."

"No, Tom."

"Why?"

"Because you do not want to go back either."

"But,... I want it with all my heart."

"Not with your heart, Tom,... with your conscience. There is a difference."

He felt himself filling then with an unexpected bitterness. "No," he said.

"Tom. This is right for you. It's what you have always dreamed of."

"I don't believe you."

"Sometimes we deceive ourselves."

"No. I know what I have to do." He held the revolver close and clicked the chambers round. To his surprise, it contained two bullets. "Two? Why two? Why not six? Why not just the one?"

"Did you think of leaving Yvette here, alone? It's not enough to take your own life. You must take hers as well. That's why you need two bullets in the gun."

He hesitated. "But I can't make her go back. She's nothing to return to. And she needn't be lonely here. She can spin lovers for herself."

"Lovers perhaps,... but not love. And without love, eternity would be an unimaginable torment. Surely you can see that."

"I see it. But what about me? How am I supposed to feel? My eternity will be a torment of unfulfilled desire."

"It need not be unfulfilled."

"It can never happen."

Nancy shook her head in pity. "Tom," she said. "You know you do not love your wife."

At that he leaped up and screamed at her. "NO!"

But she'd already gone, melted into the deep shadow and at once he sank upon the bed and wept because he had known all along it was true.

He came upon Yvette in the garden. She turned at his footfall and he was at once aroused by the seductive fluidity of her movements. Suddenly, he felt a swelling in his chest, an unbearable pressure, squeezing his heart into stillness so that he thought he would die. Stricken, he fell to his knees.

She cried out and ran to him. "Tom!"

"It's all right," he said. "I'm all right."

She knelt beside him cradling him in her arms. "But Tom, what is it?"

He looked into her eyes. "Nancy was right. I've spent my whole life waiting, searching for everything that you are,... .

"I know."

"But we were a nation, a language,... a generation apart. What chance did we have?"

"Tom,... "

He bent his head into her hands and cried out. "I should have waited for you. Yvette."

"No,... you were right to settle for what you could have. We choose our mates at random,... and there doesn't have to be love for us to be happy. We would never have met, and even if we had, we would not

have recognised our destiny in one another - only now,... only now as pure spirits given form. Do you understand?"

Suddenly they felt the air move. They felt the stillness throb with a new silence, a living silence made up of immeasurably tiny sounds,... the beating of wings and the stirring of grasses as the land breathed and the clean air stroked the mountains. Tom looked out at this new world beyond the gate. It seemed to beckon and he understood at last that in the simple realisation of their love, this truly had become,....

... ..a perfect place.

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