

October Sun

by Chris Castle

Magda walked back from her cigarette break and returned to the foyer. She looked at her watch. One hour left. She went behind the reception desk, checked the computer. Everything seemed to be in order. She saw herself in the computer screen and shook herself, trying to not look as sad as she felt.

“Hey Maggie!” She jumped, looking up. She started to smile, even though she was shaken.

“You made me jump! What are you doing here, Maisy?” Maisy was her fellow receptionist; her number one girl; she helped Magda with her English, took her out some Saturdays when they were both free.

“Well I was just coming in to collect my timesheet for next week, but seeing how you’re here and finish in an hour, I guess I could go for a drink and a bite to eat.” She swung behind the desk, smacked Magda on the behind as she went out to the back desk.

“I don’t think so, Maisy, not today...” she followed her to the back, to the quiet.

“Well in that case, we definitely will. My Maggie needs cheering up, I think; wine, my treat...meet me in the Hub in an hour. Okay?” she pulled down the sheet, looked up and smiled. “Fuck! On the weekends again.”

“Such language...okay, crazy-Maisy. I will meet you in one hour.” Someone walked towards the desk and she turned to see a couple walk towards the desk. Maisy brushed past her and headed out, waving to her over the shoulders of the man and woman as they came closer.

“There she is!” Magda looked over; saw her friend sitting in the corner of the bar, a bottle and two glasses before her. She smiled and walked over. She liked this place; it was quiet and had spaces between the tables to talk.

“You’ve been here for long?” she sat down. She always seemed to arrive in bars later than her friend, with bottles already opened. She said thank you as her glass was filled.

“Now why the long face, buster? I’ve seen how sad you’ve been looking these last few days. Are you okay? No one giving you a hard time at the hotel?” They raised their glasses.

“No nothing like that...” She sipped her drink; it was cool and tasted fine. She enjoyed and was scared by the way people drank in England; it was as if they needed it as much as a

meal or a cup of coffee and a cigarette. She remembered how she felt sometimes after nights out with the hotel people; bad. Very bad.

“You need a man in your life, Maggie. A pretty girl like you could have any man she wants. You should be picking not waiting.” She lofted her glass as Magda shook her head.

“No, no man for me right now. Life is simple, life is good.” She sipped her drink again.

“Maybe you need a little confusion in your life, Mag. I know at least a few who’d be try...” a group of men walked by their table and looked over briefly. Maisy smiled even as Magda looked to the other side.

“You know the first time my parents went out for a meal together, a man, a total stranger, paid for their meal.” She sat back, shrugged. Magda leant forward.

“Really? This cannot be true...” she was weary; Maisy had tricked her before. “You are playing games with me, yes?”

“I swear! My dad went up to settle the bill and the cashier said it was all squared up. My dad explained there must have been a mistake, but the man kept shaking his head. Said that there was a man, dining on his own, looked up from time to time, saw how happy they were and paid their debt. Mum said from then on it was written in the stars they were meant to be together, if even strangers could see it.” The sun turned round and poured through the window, making them move out of its glare.

“That is so beautiful, Maisy. So romantic. A story they told at the wedding, I think.” Magda moved so the sun rested on her arm, warming her skin.

“It was pretty when she told me. Dad never got tired of saying it. But I always felt a bit sorry for the man who was sitting on his own, you know? Watching other people be in love. I always felt for him, just a little.”

“It is two ways of seeing the same story, yes? My grandfather, he was a florist, yes? He spent all his time on these wonderful bouquets; every one complimented him on how beautiful each one looked. And then he showed me, how he had to use metal, coiled it round the throats of the stems to keep them upright for many days, you see. Underneath all that beauty, all this ugly metal. Like you lovers and your lonely man.”

“And talking of lonely...” she poured another two glasses, so that the bottle was empty. Magda shook her head at how quick they were drinking, while Maisy pretended to be shocked.

“It is not loneliness...at least not for a man like you say. Today...today is a very sad and...terrible thing that happened in my home. One year ago. Anniversary?”

“Yes anniversary. Jesus, Magda if it’s your family, I’m-” She shook her head as Maisy’s forehead creased.

“My family are fine. My school. My home town school, a year ago a boy walked into the school and shot seven people with a weapon. A rifle. Seven boys and girls as they sat studying. Then he killed himself too, before the police reached him.” She sat back, felt the words move out of her and into her friend’s ear. Watched as she turned pale, put her fingers to her lips as if she held an imaginary cigarette.

“God. Magda, that’s terrible. Did you know any of them?” her words were small now and the two of them leant close in, as if sharing a secret. Which they were, Magda thought. A sad and terrible secret.

“No. they were four, maybe four years younger than me. But I know two of the families. They were killed where I took my exams. Such a stupid sad thing to happen to those poor people. Before they started their lives, even. So sad.”

“Did they say why? Why the man did it?” She watched as Maisy leant back; the colour began to move back inside her, making her angry.

“They have theories, but it is all gossip...rumours? No one really knows. I think in one way that is good to not know. What drives someone to do that would make you mad, I think. My grandfather say it is all the dark in our country; Twilight countries. That it could be something to do with all the darkness.” She sat back, shrugged her shoulders.

“I guess there’s no real answer when you’re faced with something like that.” Maisy leant back too, so there was the space of the shaft of sunlight between them.

“There is a saying in the schools and the bars that we talk in two languages and remain silent in both. So many detached souls, you see? Lost from people wrapped in computers until they don’t know who they are anymore. So...tragic for all.”

“I mean suicide is one thing...but to take all those other people with you...through with you.” Maisy’s voice was level but her lips trembled, her eyes shook. “My aunt committed suicide. She’d been depressed all her life. Was just born sad, was how my mum put it. But there were times when she’d visit, take me and my brother out in our garden on our bikes and she was like a firework, you know? All sparks and laughter. Falling in the hydrangea bush, throwing flower petals and buds at me and my bro. you’d think she was the happiest woman in the world. Lived with two faces was how she said it. One with a grin and another with tears running.” Her hand lay loose on the table and Magda linked her fingers through hers. She looked up and the two of them smiled to each other, their faces lit by the heat and strength of the sun.

“Like the two of us, now yes?” Magda said, seeing the thin line of a tear running from her friends face, feeling a mirror tear on her own cheek.

“Like the two of us, yes.” She said, letting go of her glass to wipe away first her own tear and then reaching over to wipe away Magda’s.

“But goodness! What a thing to talk about on such a nice day with my friends. Not a subject to talk about when the bottle is empty, no?”

“Magda. Thank you for sharing with me. People at our place, they think I’m just there to...I don’t know, pull funny faces and flirt with all the boys. You...listen to what I say. I don’t know. You’re probably the first person who’s believed in me enough to tell me their secret. And that includes loser boyfriends. Sometimes sharing is halving, right?” Magda squeezed her hand tighter. “And here I was trying to make you feel better...”

“Of course I feel better for talking out loud rather than hauling it all in, my number one reception girl. I will go to the bar and buy another bottle of wine for us, yes?” their hands broke away. Maisy reached for her glass, while Magda tapped the empty bottle on the lip.

“Yes! Let’s go outside and have a cigarette. I can’t get used to smoking outside now, can you?” Maisy pulled out her cigarettes, rolled the packet over her knuckles.

“It is fair, I suppose. Though I don’t know if I will say this in your winter.” She reached for her purse, stood.

“I think you may have a few new words for the rule by then.”

“Your swear words, no doubt.” A man bumped into her, smirked as he went past. “You want I should spend time with one of those?” She arched her eyebrow.

“Maybe not one who feels women up because he’s got a WEINER!” Magda put her hands up to her face, feeling herself go red. She tried to shush her, but Maisy was both smiling to her and staring over to if the man dared to look back. He did not.

“You...you are the firework, I think. Sparks and rockets.” She shook her head as Maisy walked round to her side, linked her arm through hers.

“Weiner bodyguard. Well, I like the idea of being a firework; all those lights and colours. You’d be a Catherine wheel, I think. The one everyone admires and secretly wants to be.” She squeezed her arm. Magda felt herself blush again, for the right reasons. And together they marched up to the bar.

“I could fall in love with a man who engraved our initials into concrete.” They looked around, trying to find a nice place to stand in the sun.

“A tree, I think. Craved into an oak or an ash tree. Not so much cement. So it could

grow and others could add to it. How about by the steps?" they weaved over to the corner, where it was still and quiet.

"A silver birch then, if it's going to be a tree. They were always my favourites on school days out. They used to... shimmer. Like today. Can't believe this sun after so much stinking weather." They reached the corner, nodded to each other.

"October sun. There is nothing finer, no?" They stood outside on the brick patio, the sun turning to face them fully now. She placed the bottle down on the brick, watched Maisy put the glasses either side.

"I think you're right there. To October sun on our skins." She pulled out two cigarettes, lit them both and then handed one to Magda.

"October sun. Do you want to go and eat someplace after this?" she poured the two glasses, all the way to the brim almost. She smiled and felt her friend smile beside her.

"It's either that or fall on my ass. Where do you want to go?" They took their glasses, laid their cigarettes in the ashtray by the bottle.

"Anywhere you like, crazy Maisy. While the sun is out we've got all the time in the world." they brushed their glasses together and squinted towards each other in the sun.

"Amen to that."

"Amen." And they turned to look out to the blue sky, the people slowly tumbling out of the offices, the cars and the bikes. And they lifted their glasses and drank, the glasses full with wine and the lip with a sliver of the blue sky.

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