

## The Safety of the Sun

By Chris Castle

She rose from the bed, patted down the corners, showered, dressed. The sky outside was already blue, the last wisps of cloud disappearing. She patted talcum powder under her arms, pulled the necklace close to her throat. Walked down the stairs, the sound of her steps echoing in the big empty house. She opened up the front door, propped open the flimsy outer door, felt the full force of the heat and the morning sun swamp her. She looked out past the porch, the grasses, the fence. And there he stood, dressed in a light summer suit, holding the flowers at the same angle, his hair dark and clipped short, same as it was every year.

She walked out amongst the grasses. They swayed at her feet, tickled her calves. He lifted the flowers, almost a wave, jerked his lips, almost a smile. She spoke first, as she always did, almost friends.

“Handsome scarecrow I got me this season.” She hollered. Each year, a different joke. “Gonna have young ladies stamping my fields if I’m not careful.” She walked to the gate quickly.

“Ms. Hendersley.” He said, his voice always faint but always clear, to her at least.

“Mr. Tenderson.” She replied, arching her eyebrow. Maybe she was so loud because he always so quiet. Or maybe he was in control and she was spinning in the opposite fashion. She took the flowers from him.

“Prettiest bunch yet.” She looked over the lilies, the roses. All the colours contrasted just so, just right. She realised, for once, her voice had quietened. “How do you find the combinations?”

You must have a florist who serves god and the devil themselves.” She looked up, her eyes wide and drinking in the heat.

“I buy them myself, put them all together. The...combinations. It’s a hobby.” He looked down at his empty hands as he spoke. She looked at him and shook her head.

“A policeman and a florist. If that’s not the strangest combination yet.” She looked to him. “A hobby I keep ma’am, not share. Best for me in that respect.” She looked for contours on his face, to see any telltale signs of a joke, but they stayed aligned, simple.

“Well, such a renaissance man might as well have a coffee, I should think, to fuel his endeavours. Come on in, the kettle’s blowing your arrival.” She turned, clutching the flowers close to her and made her way through the grasses. She turned and saw him, beige suit against

the backdrop of the forest, delicately clicking the gate shut.

They sat in the living room, the small oak table between them. She laid out cakes, biscuits that she knew he would never touch. She poured the coffee, glad the sun had tilted and gave them a little shade.

“No more thought to selling?” He said, after thanking her for the coffee. He blew on it, sipped it straight after.

“Blowing on your coffee; does that make any difference whatsoever?” She said, trying to tease him into saying something unforced.

“None whatsoever, ma’am. Just a force of habit. Sat in my police car, never any place to put the damn thing, just got brainwashed into it. My brother, he travels, Europe and all, says my worst vice is routine, on account that for me it’s incurable.” He looked up, smiled, returned to his coffee.

“My lord, you have a brother? I feel like I’ve got a ‘lead’ in my case. Next thing I know you’ll be showing me school photos and sports medals.” She joked, but she did feel something from this little moment of information. This strange, earnest man. After Anthony died he appeared every anniversary day, same time as he’d called as a policeman to report the news. Just appeared eight a.m. same day, each year. Five years. Flowers and a suit.

“I’m looking to sell. Stupid of me to live in such a place on my own. Should follow your newly discovered brother’s route and travel. Seems sad to me, 36 years old never having marked her passport. Properties always a constant, so they say.” She drew up her cup, sipped it. That was the first time she’d shared her thoughts, her plans, with anyone. She felt light headed, as if the coffee held some whiskey inside it. She smiled. Now she had said it out loud it didn’t seem so crazy at all.

“That sounds like a fine idea. World’s a big place, do well to see some of it. Wasn’t until I was twenty one until I saw the ocean. Could have come out of comic book the way it looked to me. Remember it clear as yesterday. Beautiful sight.” He looked up, smiled at her smile.

“That must have been, what two years ago?” It was true. From when they had met until now he had not aged a day. It was like he was unaware of himself, forgot to age out of carelessness.

“I’ll be thirty three in the spring, ma’am.” He replied, reddening slightly.

“My god. You’ll be retired by the time you look like you can vote.” She laughed.

“Same as my brother. Though he’ll be a full blown drunk by the time he looks old enough

to buy it in a store, from what he tells me.” A frown passed his face, not aging him in the slightest. Just made him look like he was stumped in a test.

“Well, you are just full of surprises.” She finished her coffee, looked up, saw his coffee cup empty, spinning on his saucer. “About time, maybe?”

“I think so ma’am.” He rose, patted down his trousers, pulled at his jacket. He waved his hand out, offering her the lead out of the door.

The drive to the cemetery was scenic. If it were any other destination it would be beautiful. The long roads snaked and smoothed, constantly shadowed by the oaks stacked above them. Sun shone out of thin shafts of lights across the tarmac like fallen bolts of lightning. The houses slowly fell away until there was the occasional garage, a pylon, the totem pole built in the 60’s, whose headdresses changed with each graffiti can. She only noticed these little things this one time of the year, when he drove and she had the chance to look out the window. Fifty other weeks of the year it was simply the tarmac, the other cars, the tyre tracks left by hungry young drivers in battered up junks.

The drive was always in silence. She enjoyed taking in the scenery, the silence of the road and the gentle noises of the forest. No need for a radio with him by her side, the movement of his hands on the wheel, the clicking on and off of the indicators. It all replaced the inane chatter of the shows she was forced to put up with the other times. Occasionally he coughed, drew from his water, and that was enough.

They drew into the cemetery, the gates still caked in moss, the first two letters of the title chipped away and obscured. The keeper mowed the lawn to their left, a few people scattered at the countless graves. Most were old, a few mothers and daughters, fathers and sons. One whole family gathered at a stone. The kids distracted by the pull of their kite, the parents drawing closer, their knuckles and shoulders brushing the way true couples show intimacy. They pulled into one of the spaces, cut the engine, and waited.

They walked towards the stone. For a moment she shook with shame, thinking she wished the walk was farther, more complicated, so they could have kept walking. She shook her head, tried to empty it of her thoughts, crouched at the tombstone.

Anthony Stokes Hendersley  
Beloved son  
Eleven years of age

The tip of the stone had begun to chip away. She ran her finger over the indent of each letter, picking out dirt, scraping at moss. After she was done she closed her eyes, running her fingers over each letter. She concentrated completely, with him standing behind her, blocking out the sun, the breezes, so it was just her and her son. She patted the stone when she was done, rose to collect the flowers.

She lay them down, stood a foot away. The flowers added to the stone, made it human.

“Be getting ready to decide what he wanted to do with his life about now. Or thought what he wanted at least. Sixteen.”

“Rock band when I was sixteen. Then a comic book artist, then a traveller.” He crouched, patted down the grass, picked away a little of the dirt.

“That sounds about right. Right sort of adventure. Probably drunk a few times now, too.” She remembered herself, weaving down roads at 15, beer can and candy floss, getting ready to be sick in the drains. Next day, confined to her room, grit on the kerb, the candy stick still by the grates.

“Gets to 16 before he starts, he’s doing well.”

They stood in silence for a while, just the sounds of the grounds gathering behind them. A few birds gathering, then falling away. Nowhere was the sound of men or women, all silent now in this, their grieving.

“I drive past, do a circuit, once a week, once at weekends, just to make sure there’s no teenage vandalism. Truth is I think they take it out on the totem pole more often than not. Poor guy’s had a different hairstyle every month of the year.”

“He’d probably be doing that, too...” she said, starting to think about it. She imagined him then, climbing the statue, spray can dangling in his rucksack. She smiled despite herself, the idea of it. “I could see him doing that. The drink, the girls, I can only see him at eleven still, so none of that. But something that reckless, that immature...I can see.”

“Maybe that’s good. Maybe use that, if you see sports, or theatre or something. Even horseplay.” He kept his eyes on her, making sure he was getting through to her. She nodded.

“Horseplay?” She said, smiling. “You know, this is the only week other people look at me. You know why? Cause I’m wearing white. Every other week, black suit. People here, walking in, think it’s inappropriate. If I’m with you here, it’s a celebration of his life, not a time to mourn.

And...I like them to wonder. Is that selfish? I don’t know.” She looked over to him, but his

eyes were straight.

“Just makes you human like the rest of us. Nothing wrong in wanting to belong, I don’t think.”

They walked to the gate; he raised a hand to the grounds man.

“You ever come here without me?” She asked suddenly, leaving off his name, so that it sounded vaguely like an accusation. “I mean, you seem to remember the path here better than me.” She felt her cheeks blush, started to feel the breeze.

“I remember routes. Part of my job. Half of my enquiries are road routes. Routine disease again.” He smiled, putting her at ease. “Wouldn’t make for as many good cop shows, I think.”

“Do you watch them? The shows. Do you mark them out of ten, or tut at how they shape up? It must be strange seeing your career acted out on TV.” They zig-zagged, left, left, right.

“Sometimes. I don’t think the ratings would hit the roof so much if it was based on grown men and women guessing along to the radio quizzes, stuck in their cars. Girls aren’t as pretty, either.”

They made their way through the rest of the cemetery in a loop rather than return to the car. They made their way past the war memorial, immaculate white crosses, each one glowing in the sun. They walked alongside the lake, two kids fooling around in a kayak. She tightened her eye, tried to see her son in the water, rolling in the ripples of water, but it wouldn’t come yet.

She threw a few twigs in the water, hurried back up to keep pace with the policeman, who she knew had slowed down as much as he could already.

They pulled into the driveway. The sun had pulled over now, lighting the grass over the house.

It made the grass shimmer, but also made it look old, tired.

“Would you like to come in for a coffee, lunch, dare I say, a glass of wine?” She arched her eyebrow, tried to make a joke of it, hiding everything else.

“Well, I’m driving...” he began to say, before she drew up a hand.

“One glass is under the limit, officer. We’ve met five times in five years. I see my dentist more often. Now my gyna-”

“Okay, there. I’d love to, thank you.” She opened her door, didn’t wait for him. “What do you say when you ask for the same day off every year? Does anyone notice?”

“I tell them it’s my sister’s birthday.” He said, looking at the door, his hand risen to shield

from the sun. "Um...that is to say, I do have a sister, but I don't talk about her. It's just...easier." He made his way round to be by the side of her.

"When is your sister's birthday?" She said.

"April fools day." He said, drawing down his hand, offering her the lead in the driveway.

They decided to sit in the chairs out the back, overlooking the garden. She opened a bottle of white wine, brought out some cold cuts. They finally sat together, looked out to the flowers.

"Cheers." He said, lifting the glass.

"Cheers." She sipped her wine, feeling the sting. "So how's your family? They all growing up the way you hoped?" She had sat at his police desk, seen photos of a wife, two daughters. He'd caught her looking, said their names. She asked their ages, guessed at school years. All the while numb in shock, waiting to explode, destruct. But that came after, in the night.

"They're doing okay. We broke up...so I don't know where that's going to lead." His voice grew even quieter and this time she did have to lean in to hear what he said.

"I'm sorry to hear that. So sorry. I didn't realise..."she looked at him, then noticed the pale skin where the band should have been. "Your ring...so stupid of me."

"That's why I'm the police officer." He smiled sadly. "Damn thing. Never thought to take it off, even after, then I visit, take round the presents, set up the x-mas tree. Just me, Mel, the kids and the estate agent, one big happy family. I put up the tree, the tinsel, all of it. I get back to the place I'm staying at and my hands are itching like crazy. I wash them until there raw, red raw, and somewhere along the line it slips off in the suds...so I guess I've taken to not wearing it anymore." He fell back, for once looking tired. "Sorry. I..." she sushed him down.

"Don't be stupid. I guess... I guess things don't always work out simple as that." She sipped the wine, the sting cooling, the drink losing its chill. "I don't think Mike left because of Anthony. I think it just gave him a way out." It was true and now she had said it. She sat back, light headed. The sun moved across where they sat like a wave and she closed her eyes to it then, sunk inside of it. For a second she imagined living this way, always inside then sun, her eyes closed and forever in the light. When she opened them, she turned away from the burst of light, looked over to him. He was watching her.

"You looked peaceful. Never seen you look that way before." He squinted away, reached for the sunglasses that sat in his pocket.

"That's what a big glass of wine before noon will do to you." She smiled, then stopped

suddenly.

“You try it. Close your eyes, sit back in the sun beams.” He began to apologise but she stopped him. “Ryan...” she said and he did. He tilted back and awkwardly positioned himself in the beams of light. Then slowly he began to slip down, to relax and she looked on him and didn’t recognise who she saw. A stranger. A stranger at peace. He rose up wearily, pulled his neck, rolled it to trap everything back in place.

“That felt nice...good.” He said, opening his eyes. “No more wine for me I think.” He looked up, began to grip the sides of his chair. She opened her mouth to say something, then stopped herself. Today had...been enough. Maybe. She rose with him.

They walked through the house, listened to his thanks. They reached the door, but she walked out with him, out into the yard, the grasses. She stopped short of the car by two or three feet.

“Well...” he said, running his sunglasses around his fingers.

“You can visit, Ryan. No exact time, no precise date. Just to walk to my gate, one day, one morning. Either that...or I’ll see you next year.” She looked at him. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Laura.” He said, nodded. Then he climbed into his car, slowly reversed, gravel kicking up. He lifted his hand to her and then he pulled away further, squared up, then drove away.

She watched the car disappear then turned back to her house. The sun shifted again, so that her house was now in darkness at the front but surrounded by an explosion of sunlight at the other side. She walked away slowly, around the darkness of the house. She removed her shoes, put her feet amongst the grasses and slowly walked, eyes closed, into the heat and the safety of the sun.

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