

The World Outside

By Chris Castle

She stood by the window and looked over the broken windows, the overturned, burnt out bins. There was a shop she went to everyday that was unrecognizable now; the building scarred, the contents emptied. There were not even stray dogs wandering the roads; they had emptied the street of the unwanted animals.

“It’ll start up again tonight, maybe earlier,” she said, staring at a dried smear of blood on the concrete. It looked for all the world like graffiti, a failed signature.

“Maybe they’ll move on,” the boy said. He came up behind her and put his hand on her belly. “They can’t reach us up here,” he said after a long while.

“Why would they want us?” she said. “They’re protesting against the rich, aren’t they?” she leant back into the nape of his neck, still unable to take her eyes off of the wreckage below.

“They’re protesting against the government more than anything,” he said. Even though the words were directed at her, she knew he too was looking out to the street.

“Some of them are fighting just to see things get broken,” she said slipping his hand over this. “They’re not outraged, they’re just angry.” She felt his body stiffen. He thought differently to her about what was happening now, but neither would change.

She felt the long breath he took on her neck and closed her eyes, waiting to see what happened next.

“It doesn’t matter, what happens down there,” he said finally. “There’s only the three of us here.”

“That’s right,” she said, squeezing his hand tighter. It was true as well. Sometimes now, she felt like they were the last people left on earth and that didn’t scare her, not really. No, instead she found it reassuring, close to the things she dreamed about at night.

“Look at the way the cars are so dirty from the rain,” she said. The cars that had gone untouched by the rioters were caked in a thick, heavy dust.

“They say it’s dirt from Africa,” the boy said. “It stays inside the rain and blows in somehow.”

“It looks so...stale,” the girl said quietly. A wasteland. That was what it looked like, she suddenly thought; like a place the world had forgotten about. Or chose not to notice.

“Come away from the window now,” he said, gently pulling her. She let herself be rocked, then teased him by pulling forward. They went on rocking, until he laughed, and she followed. The two of them

turned away from it all and went inside.

There were still the remnants of the night before; the candles, the opened books. The electricity was supposed to come back on at some point in the day. She had enjoyed the freedom of the last day, seeing him helplessly push the computer to one side, the absence of the television, all the small commotion that technology brings. Even that morning their room was still in a half light, as if it was a permanent dusk.

The sounds of the birds that had settled on their roof hummed quietly. She smiled, listening to their cooing; somehow, it made her feel safe. She put her fingers up to the wall; a dozen pictures of chandeliers. Photos, sketches, catalogue pages. It was their dream, their silly dream; to one day own a chandelier. It was so silly and impossible it was perfect; as every dream should be.

“When will they be dry?” he asked looking down to the table full of drying leaves. They would wrap mince inside them and it would be their weekend meal.

“Soon,” she said, smiling at him. “The moisture needs to be gone completely.” She smiled at him and watched him turn red.

“What?” he said quietly, half laughing, half frowning. She leant down, padding the leaves with her fingers, turning some of them over on the table. The cloths were white and made it look as if the leaves had slipped onto a bed of snow

“My father used to ask the same question to my mother. Every half day, every evening.” She removed a couple of the dry ones and put them in a small pile. “He wasn’t impatient, just like you’re not impatient. Just curious. ‘Curious to how the world worked,’ my mother said.” She kept running her fingers over the ripples and curves, feeling some damp, others bristling and dry.

“It’s true...I do like to understand how things works. The mechanics of things. The same as you’re only interested in the magic of things.” He took her by the hand and drew her away from the small table. He held her close and they swayed in each other’s arms to imaginary music.

“What would they think,” the boy asked, closing his eyes and letting himself slip onto her hair, her cheek. “About all of this?”

“They wouldn’t want to talk about the mechanics,” she said, pressing the small bump of her stomach onto him. “They’d only want to think about the magic.”

“I wish I could have known them for longer,” he whispered. They began to move their feet gently, the floorboards creaking.

“They knew you well enough,” the girl said. “They watched you taking flowers from the old house.”

They knew you had bought flowers for me but you threw them away and took those ones, because they were the finest. My father always liked that you stole flowers for me.”

“I’m sorry...I’m sorry they aren’t here for you,” the boy said. He pulled away from her, looked into her eyes. There were tears in them now, but the rest of her face was not upset, or wounded. She looked as beautiful as he could ever remember her.

“Tell me something,” he said, wiping away each tear carefully, one by one. “A secret, a beautiful secret.”

She drew in close to him and he felt her breath on his neck. They still moved without music, the room losing its light, so they danced in dusk light. When she drew out of his chest, the tears had stopped, but they had left something on her, so her skin gleamed in the darkness.

“They came to watch me in the Independence parade. Every year they watched me and clapped along with the crowd. They were so proud of all of us, the costumes we wore, the way we held ourselves. It’s not like now, where they dress themselves because they have to.” She stopped for a moment and gave a short laugh.

“Listen to me, a disapproving woman. I sound like an old maid.” She put her palms to his chest and patted his chest. “Twenty five going on a hundred!”

“Shush!” he said, drawing her hands up in his. They were gathered over his heart and they both listened for a moment as it beat. “Please...”

“We danced in the square each year. Dressed in red and white, holding the batons and wearing those itchy hats! But the last year, I remember my parents were both at the front of the crowd and I managed to be so close to them. It felt as if I was dancing for them and only them.” She drew his hands over onto her heart, so he could feel it racing.

“The square was so broken up, there was cracked pavement and rubble and I was always so afraid of catching my shoe and falling. But when I saw them so close, and I saw their faces, I just remember being so...free. And the sun was strong and it was as if I was dancing under a spotlight, God’s spotlight and my parents were there to help me understand all the things that were happening.” She looked up to him and he brought his hand up to her face, placed his palm to her cheek.

“I remember thinking, ‘we’ll always have this, this moment, forever.’ No matter what happens, anywhere, ever, we’ll always have this moment. And...and we did. We have. I’ll never lose that, that memory and I know they kept it close, too.”

“That’s good. It’s good that you can keep hold of that,” he said. “Like the memories we’ve built. Like this.” He looked around to the small room, the photos on the walls, their lives together. She drew her hand over his.

“And all the ones to come,” she said, smiling, the bump between them nudging against his belt buckle. “That’s what we have to shield ourselves against all the mechanics,” she said.

“All this magic,” he said. She nodded. Then her face slipped to his shoulder and the two of them kept dancing in the half-light, gently moving against the spent candles, the leaves and the world outside.

© 2011 Chris Castle