

“The Return of Rufus Stone”

by Kip Jones

This was probably the bravest risk of his entire life, or the most foolish one. This is the way in which Rufus Stone decided to return to his village.

London 2010

‘Tall, dark and handsome’ was everyone’s first description of Rufus Stone. It was the intensity of his electric blue eyes, however, on which most strangers then commented enviously.

Rufus arrived in London at 18—six feet two inches tall with thick, dark blonde curly forelocks cascading on a tanned brow. His youth and good looks could have been his meal ticket. Nonetheless, Rufus concentrated on his love of photography and eventually got a post as assistant to a Notting Hill photographer. He consequently went on to take his own pictures of some of the most famous celebrities of the Sixties. From those connections, he later moved into advertising then television production—first as a cameraman, then an editor and later a director of some important documentaries made for the BBC.

Rufus never had problems attracting women or men equally. His looks, talent and career were the calling cards that engrossed his admirers. He is one of the lucky ones, because as he aged he held on to his good looks too. In fact, some compare him to stars such as Terrence Stamp or Sean Connery. His hair is now silver grey, but he hates the nickname, ‘Silver Fox’, with a passion. He still possesses those chiselled cheekbones, a slim build and his famous blue eyes. At 70, Rufus frequently turns the heads of both sexes.

His English country upbringing produced a quiet boy who turned into a soft-spoken man. In the hustle and bustle of London, this actually became another asset. A man of few words suggested that he meant what he said. This was a welcomed relief from the insincerity familiar amongst some Londoners, particularly amid the glitterati of television and film. When asked by the luvvies of the film industry if he enjoyed evenings at the *Groucho Club*, Rufus replied, ‘Never been’.

Somerset 1958

It is a typical January day—the frost-hardened ground, brown and grey, mimicking the sky above. Rufus and Ellie Stone take the trail to the rail junction through the bushes, littered with the rubbish that is now frozen into the mosaic of the landscape. The junction holds a special meaning for Rufus.

A six-foot post sunk into a gravel mound between the two rail lines at the junction is topped with a small greyish box. This sheet metal container has a small, hinged door on it. Rufus imagines that the box was used for some signal wiring at one time, but now is empty.

Rufus is seventeen, his sister Ellie just ten. She loves walks with her brother because he usually brings his camera and gets excited when he talks about taking pictures. Rufus is her protector—tall, strong and permanently tanned from working their parents' farm.

The rail line splits in two at the junction, one part going to the north through a small village. The other line swings east along the ridge to the nearby market town. (Five years later, the infamous 'Beeching Axe' would close this rail line along with many others, but no one knew that then.)

Ellie and Rufus sometimes spend their Saturdays in the town selling vegetables at their parents' market stall. Ellie likes going to town because she gets to dress up. Rufus hates it and just sees it as more hard graft with no pay.

Rufus' mate, Flip, is olive skinned, dark-haired and shorter than Rufus. He is two years younger and lives along the rail line in the nearby village. The boys met two summers ago when Rufus was walking in the hills collecting berries. They have been best mates ever since.

Flip's real name is Philippe. His younger brother is Antoine. Their mother comes from the nearby town and married a local villager. Being from the town and having 'airs and graces', she insisted on giving her children French-sounding names. Philippe quickly became Flip after a few rounds of bullying at school and Antoine's father almost immediately shortened his younger son's name to Tony.

One afternoon, Flip and Rufus discovered the metal box at the junction about halfway between their houses. The lads agreed to use it as their furtive hiding place. From time to time, Rufus and Flip secretly found treasures, photos and notes in the signal box for each other. Ellie is the only other person who knows about this clandestine niche, or at least Rufus hopes so.

Flip has also become engrossed in photography. The lads have spent many days walking the Somerset landscape together, taking photographs with Rufus' camera and, on hot summer days, swimming in a nearby stream.

Rufus finished school at sixteen and has worked on his family's farm full-time for the past year. He hates it and wants to get away from this harsh country life. Flip is now in his final year at school.

The two lads love to lie in the deep grass on a hillside next to each other and stare at the clouds in the sky, making up animals, characters and adventures for them out of the billowy white shapes. When Rufus happens to brush up against Flip or touch him almost by accident, electricity courses through his whole body. This delights him, but almost immediately causes him shame too.

You have probably surmised by now that Flip and Rufus love each other. At first, Rufus didn't know what these feelings were. Both have always known, however, that being together matters more than anything else in their young lives. They will use any excuse to spend time together, particularly in the summer when school is out of term.

One particularly hot day when they are swimming, Flip doesn't bother to put his T-shirt back on. Rufus conceals the worn, white shirt in his canvas army rucksack. He takes it home and sleeps with it next to his pillow that night.

Rufus can smell Flip on the shirt. At night in his single bed under the farmhouse's eaves, lying next to this piece of worn cotton clothing, Rufus dreams of Flip's unpolluted perfect being. The shininess of his young dark skin, his naturally sun-licked hair, his smile's innocence, his warm arm around Rufus' neck, and laughing—always laughing.

These feelings make Rufus both happy and frightened. Because Rufus is the older of the two, he senses that he is particularly responsible for his growing feelings about Flip. He knows innately that these stirrings could lead to something dangerous or forbidden in his small English country village.

Rufus decides to declare his feelings about Flip to him. Rufus wants to convince Flip that they could quit the village all together when Flip finishes school and find jobs in town, or even move to a city together where Rufus can try his luck at becoming a photographer. Rufus is resolved to tell Flip that he loves him and share his plan with him. So, a few days ago, he wrote a short but passionate note and left it with photos of the two of them frolicking in the woods at the junction box.

Today, Rufus is hoping that Flip's answer will be waiting for him at the junction.

At Sea 2010

It happens at sea. I remember more clearly than, what those flashes of innocent intimacy were like. The lapping waves and the water's surface with its shiny viscosity created by the light prompt me to recall the fluidity of those moments.

Memory is not text, not even remembered action, really. The past is recreated by recollections of an atmosphere, a sound or a temperature. Recalling the arrangement of the furniture often reveals more about a moment than the people sitting on it. Reminiscence is simply dreaming awake.

Images such as dappled sunlight are not a routine physical reality. They are as much a precise instance in the lifecourse as a particular sixteenth birthday. Our first experience of mottled sunlight is a rite of passage, a singularly unique occurrence in our young lives.

So is the nature of key moments in our story of young Rufus and Flip.

Roll the film. Capture them.

Somerset 1958

Close your eyes and recollect this patterned lightness on the patchwork English country landscape and you will see young Flip—dark, tan, laughing—happy to be

with you. There has been no other instance in your life like it. You wish that this moment will go on forever but, even in your youth, you know it will not be so. You have been taught this in songs and they are sad ones.

Your soul has always been an old man's, your cautious, fearful, doubting heart. We are forged as we will be in youth and spend the rest of our lives unravelling that fact. The child somehow knows that as a man you will seek to recreate this moment over and over again and so you prepare yourself for such reminiscence, even in your youth. Play the Adagio from the Mahler 5th. You understand it profoundly.

You and Flip walk over hills towards a wood. This is not a memorised landscape, however. It is a recollection of a three-dimensional physicality consisting of the soil under foot, the sound of the swish of tall grass, and the crunchiness of pebbles mixed with earth. The intensity of the English sky's summer blueness creates a light pressure against your skin. The warm country air is more uncontaminated than any you will ever breathe again. His arm around your neck as you walk is the last uncorrupted act of commitment that you will ever experience. This is the purist state of coupling.

You are in the stream at a point where the water, the great purifier, creates a deep pool. The chilly water laps against his body, and so you do too. The surface of the water makes a fluid partition that allows grazing against his body beneath it seem easier, less obvious, but still dangerous. The pretence plays out above the surface, the risk and the release beneath. If he ever objects ... but he never did. The physicality of your relationship remains in its purist state.

Flip's mother rings your mother. Her shrill screaming coming from the telephone reverberates around the farmhouse kitchen. Your father is uncomfortable situating himself so intimately next to your mother who listens with the receiver away from her ear. She turns her back on you as you stand in the doorway, bracing yourself for what your unfounded guilt convinces you will be the earthquake to come.

Flip's mother says that she found the dirty letter that you wrote to her son. She screams down the phone line that you are a filthy unclean pervert and she is coming to your parents' farm with a kitchen knife to sort out the whole family. Then she is going to make certain that the entire village knows about their evil son and your

wicked intentions. She is going to report you to the police for the criminal that you are.

Your mother is crying. Your father slams the kitchen door and storms outside. You can hear him near the barn shouting and swearing. The tall case clock in the hall ticks away its heavy unrelenting passage of time. It seems more strident than ever tonight—even louder than your father’s shouting or your mother’s crying. Somehow it’s ticking soothes you.

You know that tonight is the end of innocent intimacy. It is probably the beginning of something else, but you are unsure of what that is.

The next morning, very early, your father tells you that you will need to leave the village. He will drive you to the railway station in the nearby town, past the junction where you and Flip met up so many times. He tells you to go pack your things. He will give you the train fare to get to London, but then you are on your own.

He then mutters bitterly, ‘That’s where your kind go, don’t they?’

The surface is broken. Rufus never sees Flip again.

London 2010

Rufus prepares the motor for the long drive. It reminds him of those Saturday journeys to the market as a child when they neatly packed his father’s motor with wooden boxes of vegetables. There were so many boxes that there was hardly room in the back seat of his parent’s saloon for Rufus and his sister Ellie. Today, Rufus is stuffing the back seat of his prized 1965 racing green Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud III with cameras, equipment and boxes of photographs. After years of searching auctions, Rufus located the very same motor used in Antonioni’s classic 1966 film *Blow-Up*. His proudest possession.

“Packing a few bits and bobs that wouldn’t matter to naught but me for the long trip back to my small village in Somerset. I am returning to my birthplace after 50 years of London life and its adventures. The removal van went down to Somerset day ahead of me with my furniture, clothing and the rest of my bric-a-brac.

“London is now just routine to me, nothing to get excited about these days. After years of fighting the Tube, the crime and grime, the congestion charge and getting around London, I am ready to leave it all behind. The rushing, pushing and shoving—‘Sorry, sorry, sorry!’—that hollow apology ringing out from every pub, shop and road crossing—I’ve had enough. I think I am now ready to finally try to a quiet life in the countryside.

“When my parents sold their Somerset farm quite a few years back now, they bought a small cottage in the nearby village to live out their retirement. My father died not long after. My mother recently passed away, but not before she had one last go at me over the telephone about what a disappointment I had been to her and my father. How their life in the village was made a misery after that ‘fuss’ around the ‘filthy’ business that I stirred up just before I left for good. She said that she has never absolved me for that. I suppose I was still 18 years old in her mind, even though I was by then near 70. Perhaps if she had forgiven me all those years ago, she would have died more peacefully and I might not be making this journey now.

“The money that remained from the sale of the farm went to my sister who emigrated to Australia. She married out there and has three children. My parent’s small worker’s cottage was deeded to me along with my grandfather’s tall case clock that I am particularly fond of. That generosity took me by surprise, actually. I don’t think it had anything to do with their forgiveness though, more to do with family duty and doing what was expected of them—doing the ‘right thing’.

“Fed up with London, I decided to finally retire to Somerset and their cottage. Most of my friends say that I am mad and will regret it. Still, they promise to come down for long weekends if I will entertain them properly. Most are involved in television production or the theatre. They would create quite a stir invading conservative Somerset! At least I think they would, since I haven’t lived in the village for nearly half a century”.

On the Road 2010

As Rufus prepares to head out of Islington and make his way to the A-4, he wonders if he *can* go back. Can we ever go back and expect things to turn out differently?

“Of course, I am not the same person today. I have a lifetime of experiences, working as a photographer and making films for television, and the relationships that I have had certainly changed me. I am no longer that young lad who was cast out by the villagers because of their ignorance, shunned by my own family, and coerced into self-exile by my own doubts all those years back, that’s for sure!”

Rufus turns on the Rolls’ Sat-Nav, happy to rely on a posh but strict recorded woman’s voice giving directions. He named her “Sadie” after his deceased mother. Such nomenclature is a kind of cheekiness that would provide Freud with a field day in this case. For Rufus, the decision to leave is finally no longer in his hands; a programmed voice takes over. “Sadie” knows what’s best for him, what to do and where his next move should be.

As he careens off early morning Upper Street—it’s café workers cleaning up the pavement real estate occupied by drunken revellers the night before—he turns on BBC Radio 3. The Adagio from Ravel’s Piano Concerto in G is playing. Rufus makes a mental note to himself that this piece of music would provide a perfect soundtrack for the more rural segments of today’s journey. His mind is never far from the editing room. Rufus sinks into the Rolls-Royce’s leather upholstery and deeper into his thoughts. His driving becomes routine.

Who is it that impatiently awaits the conclusion to our story of Rufus Stone? Is it us, eagerly willing a happy ending? Is it young innocent Rufus who wants to finally go back and change the outcome of his tale of first love? Does he believe that by making this return in time and place that he can reignite the love, passion and intimacy of his youth? Or is it wiser and older Rufus who has realised that what matters most to him is to come to terms with the past at the end of his days? Can he even, perhaps, finally find a way to forgive in this tiny pastoral corner of the land? Can we ever go home? Or is it our memories, with all of their twists, turns and imaginings that propel us into a deep abyss created by our re-imagined pasts?

Rufus reconsiders the countryside of his youth as he drives.

It is a memory of a five-year old boy sitting on his grandfather’s lap. Granddad’s hand, rough and worn from working the land, his thumbnail somehow permanently split, reaches into the pocket of his tattered woollen trousers and magically produces a

cellophane-wrapped peppermint sweet for the boy. The tall case clock ticks in the background, the same clock that ended up in his parent's farmhouse hallway. The sound of this clock has always provided Rufus with comfort in times of crisis. It is recollections of his grandfather that most warmly represent the countryside to Rufus.

Rufus recalls pushing his sister's pram up dirt paths on the hillside, away from the family farm and the village—as far away as he could get the two of them. He remembers the feeling of searching for his own private landscape where his thoughts could finally be free and be his own.

Later, he remembers walks along the railway tracks with his sister. It's the majesty of the sky and the smell of wild grasses mixed with the scent of oil on the railway sleepers, more than a revisualisation of their footsteps, which provoke his recall. It is the sounds of the train approaching, spewing and hissing steam—these sounds as much an invasion of their privacy as they portend the thrill of travel to unknown, yet-to-be-seen places.

He remembers getting to know the workers on that independent rail line and one of them taking him into the signal box that day. This is when he learned about the physical stirrings that his body provoked in others and acts that are prohibited between a boy and a man. Pleasure, guilt and the forbidden become central to his sense of self from that day forward.

But then there is Flip. Beautiful Flip. Years of searching have never produced such innocent attractiveness again. If Rufus could only experience it again, to be in his presence, to walk with him arm in arm!

Rufus makes stops at several lay-bys and overlooks along his route to take in scenic views. At each of these breaks in the journey, he gets out a camera and takes some photos of the bucolic English countryside with its well-represented patchwork of hedgerows and fields. Particularly noteworthy for Rufus are the points along the narrower roads where they suddenly turn and reveal sweeping vistas. He laughs to himself when he sees cows in a field lying down and remembers that this means that it is going to rain. Once a country boy... Except for the improved condition of the roads, nothing much has changed.

His journey makes it way, first, through the less familiar Thomas Hardy country of Dorset and then on to Henry Fielding's Somerset. It is as though he is seeing his birthplace for the first time. After almost 50 years, he may as well be.

Indeed, Rufus envisions one last attempt at resolving his youthful crisis somehow. He knows that he still must seek acceptance in order to love openly and freely amongst his peers in rural England. The law may have changed in his lifetime, but acceptance is still not a legacy for him and his kind and particularly not for his generation in the countryside. This is the kind of tolerance that is fundamentally socially constructed by one's peers. Life has taught him this hard truth. In his imaginings, Rufus hopes, at least in his case, to make this finally possible.

This is the way our story now twists and turns. Consulting his memories, our Rufus drives confidently onward, willing to gamble on his imagined past. This is probably the bravest risk of his entire life, or the most foolish one.

This is the way in which he decided to return to his village.

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