

Detour

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1st edition 2016

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Peter Clayburn from the Proofreading Company for providing invaluable feedback and comments on this story.

CHAPTERS

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King's Cross was busier than usual for a Saturday morning. The lines at Pret A Manger flowed into the main hall, and the ticket collection machines were indiscernible behind the horde of travellers searching their pockets for the note with their booking reference. It didn't suit Crispin. His headache had worsened on the Tube, and he regretted accepting his colleagues' invitation to spend Friday evening at the pub. It was only meant to have been a few drinks. His colleagues had reassured him that they would go home early too. But one pint had followed another, and by midnight they had been doing shots. He had stumbled home at two in the morning and woken up at seven. Sitting on a train to Morpeth for three hours to attend the wedding of a cousin he hardly knew ranked just above suicide on his wish list. But promises had been made, and bailing out on account of a hangover would lower his ranking in the family alarmingly.

He couldn't decide whether to cue for a double espresso at Starbucks or try his luck with a healthier smoothie from Leon. He chose the coffee; the safe choice to kick-start his hung-over body.

He looked good despite his sufferings: He was smartly dressed in black trousers, a tight white shirt, and a light gray blazer. All his clothes were by designer labels, and he had ironed the shirt days in advance. He was slim thanks to a religious devotion to running, and had been trying recently to bulk up by going to the gym, so far without success. He hadn't shaved, but the resulting stubble made his round face look more mature. He assumed that women liked this rougher look.

He necked the espresso and felt the invigorating effect of the caffeine as he jogged to the platform. He boarded one of the carriages just before the train started to pull away. He hadn't reserved a seat, though, and discovered to his despair that it was nearly full. The thought of standing up for three hours made him feel sick. He spotted a seat and homed in on it, but a fat, middle-aged woman beat him to it by almost throwing her laptop down on the seat to signal that it was occupied. She smiled victoriously as she sat down.

He scanned the rest of the carriage, but it was a lost cause. He let out a resigned sigh, and accepted that sitting on the floor next to the toilets was his best chance of a "seat." He had his hand on the button that opened the door to the no man's land between the two carriages when a female voice pulled him back from the brink.

"Are you looking for a seat?"

He turned around and saw three women occupying a table, with a free spot in the corner. The one closest to him was tapping invitingly on the seat. He accepted and squeezed past the three pairs of legs, then threw himself into the seat with a sigh of relief.

"Thanks; I appreciate it."

He dozed off to the train's rocking movement, and didn't wake up until the first stop at Peterborough. He adjusted his position in the seat and yawned. The girl next to him acknowledged his return to the world of the conscious.

"You're up. Rough night?"

He had brushed his teeth twice that morning and put on extra deodorant, but it wasn't enough to hide the smell of alcohol.

"Yes, it was; too rough! Thanks for the seat, by the way."

The girl sitting diagonally across from him smiled and joined the conversation.

"No worries; you looked lost."

"I was. I was already dreading having to stand all the way to Morpeth. Anyway, I'm Crispin."

"I'm Marie," she answered and pointed to the girl next to him. "This is Fay. And this is Siena." She looked at the girl who was sitting to her left and directly opposite Crispin; she had so far been quiet.

Marie was laying out some sandwiches on the table as she spoke, and the trolley stopped by their table just as she had arranged the final paper plate. The timing was perfect.

"We'll have four cans of Heineken, please," she requested.

Four? Crispin thought to himself. He tried to halt the transaction and turn the sandwiches down, but Marie had anticipated his stuttering attempt to object.

"You need to get back on the horse."

She opened the cans with four quick snaps and slid one to Crispin along with a plate. He was genuinely afraid that he wouldn't be able to keep it down, but to his surprise, the alcohol made him feel better. The sandwiches were tasty too. They got three perfectly formed triangles each: cucumber and cream cheese, French ham with mustard, and mature cheddar with chutney.

He felt obliged to compliment his hosts.

"These are great sandwiches; home-made?"

Marie smiled at the compliment, satisfied, and looked almost as if she had expected the question.

"They are indeed. I made the bread, the cucumbers are from my parents' greenhouse, and Fay made the chutney."

She nodded at Fay, who smiled and looked at Crispin.

“So, what’s your story?” she asked.

He settled on the short version. He was 34 years old and single and had just moved back to the U.K. after spending three years in Ghana working for the U.N. as an engineer on water-well projects. He had liked the job, but he had never set out to save the world, and was looking forward to something different... more business-oriented. He lived in a shared house in Archway, but didn’t particularly like the people he shared with. They were noisy and stayed up late but, worst of all, they were less tidy than he was. It was incredibly annoying being the tidiest person when sharing a house with others. You inevitably end up cleaning the place more than everyone else if your tolerance of mess is lower than that of your roommates.

Fay interrupted.

“Can’t you just move out?”

“I can,” he confirmed, “but I might not stay in London for that much longer.”

He explained that he had been offered a job by the engineering firm Rotork, which had its headquarters in Bath. He was seriously considering taking it. However, the idea of moving to a small town in Somerset didn’t sit well with him. He had always imagined himself as a Londoner and a cosmopolitan, especially when he had returned from his adventures in Africa. He wasn’t sure that he was ready to give up on that idea yet. It was a good offer, though. The job involved the right mix of technical challenges and fieldwork. The salary was even higher than for any of the positions he had been looking at in London. To boot, the cost of living would be much lower. He was going to Bath the following week for his first interview.

Marie and Fay smiled as he finished his mini biography. Marie summarized, “I’m sure you’ll figure out what to do.”

He nodded, and thought about asking his companions what they did, but he didn’t get the chance. Siena was looking intensely at him. Her head was bobbing faintly from side to side as if she were trying to read his mind. She kept this up for what seemed an eternity before finally speaking.

“What about your family?”

He was surprised by the question, but obediently responded.

“Well, I have two older sisters who both live abroad. One lives with her husband and two kids in Vancouver, and the other is single in Singapore. They are both home for the wedding.”

He continued, “My parents used to live in London, but they recently sold their house in Clapham and bought another on the coast near Brighton.”

He pulled his shoulders back and looked up to suggest that the account of his background was over. But Siena wasn’t satisfied.

“What do your sisters do?” she asked.

He stuttered into the answer.

“Well... my sister in Canada’s a marine biologist. She’s doing a PhD on the movement of large whale populations. Her husband owns a car dealership, I think, or at least he works for one.”

Fay’s eyes opened wide.

“Oh, that sounds so interesting,” she enthused.

She poked Crispin in the rib with her elbow and smiled. He thought she fancied him, but she wasn’t particularly pretty. She had crooked teeth and an asymmetrical face with the eyes tugged too far back in their sockets. She was overweight and her body had an unfortunate pear shape, but her demeanor and laughter were pleasant.

Siena had been sitting motionless and kept her eyes fixed on Crispin as he spoke. She wouldn’t be satisfied until he had finished.

He continued, “My other sister’s a banker in Singapore. I visited her last year, but I don’t remember seeing her much. She works an 80-hour week. I loved the city, though,” he added, trying not to sound too negative. It was true; he had had a great time exploring Singapore on his own.

Siena leaned back with the faintest of smiles. She seemed content with the level of information, at least for now. It also gave Crispin his first chance to have a proper look at her. Fiery was the best word to describe Siena. She was ginger, with boyishly short hair. She was pretty, with round cheeks, and her skin was almost transparently white and covered with hundreds of tiny freckles that moved like live polka dots as her face changed expression. She was slim, and she moved her hands with grace, a bit like a conductor in the midst of a symphony. But her eyes were the focal point. They were piercingly green, and almost hypnotic to look into. Crispin was fascinated by her. She seemed confrontational. She wanted to extract information from him, but seemed uninterested in him as a person. She even appeared disengaged from her two friends. She had a hue of indifference about her; it was like a thick armor, and Crispin was desperately curious to see what was underneath.

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The pause in the conversation gave him the chance to extract some information of his own.

“So what do you girls do?”

Marie and Fay looked at each other as if they were trying to determine which of them was going to answer the question. Siena seemed uninterested, looking out the window at

the British countryside whizzing past.

Marie started speaking.

“We know each other from school. We all attended the same university, too; like peas in a pod, we are.”

She laughed, and Fay took over.

“We even have the same job. We’re estate agents. I work for Knight Frank in Wapping, and Maria works at their offices in Chelsea. And Siena...”

She looked across the table to get Siena’s attention, but she kept staring indifferently out the window.

Fay continued, “Siena used to work with me in the Wapping office, but now she’s leaving us. Actually, that’s why we’re on this train.”

“Oh, how so?” Crispin asked.

Marie and Fay answered the question simultaneously.

“She’s opening a café in York. We’re going to help her pick out a property.”

Crispin could not conceal an expression of surprise. From real estate agent in London to a coffee shop owner in York was a big leap. He was intrigued now. Who was this mysterious woman? What was her story? She was sitting there, unmoved by her friends’ invitation to join the conversation, peering across the landscape flashing by.

Fay poked him, and whispered, “Siena sometimes shuts the world out; she’s not trying to be rude.”

Crispin nodded. Fay smiled, pulled out an iPad and put on a pair of headphones. She invited him to join her.

“Do you want to watch a movie with me?”

He responded politely, “No, I’d better rest, before the wedding.”

She looked disappointed. “OK. Let me know if you change your mind.”

He looked over at Marie, who was reading a magazine. Siena was keeping her eyes fixed on the landscape gliding by outside the window. He slid down the seat and fell asleep.

A tap on his left shoulder woke him. He raised his head quickly and made the muffled sound you make when your brain snaps back after being half asleep. Fay’s head bumped his left shoulder and he thought that was what had awoken him. She was sound asleep,

and he sat up slowly in order not to disturb her. Marie was also sleeping, but not Siena. She was staring intensely at him.

“You were dreaming. Something about your dog,” she informed.

“I don’t have a dog,” Crispin replied.

“Well, you did in your dream,” she insisted.

Her eyes were narrowing as if to signal that she didn’t want him to argue about it. She continued, “Are you married, or do you have a girlfriend?”

Hadn’t he already clarified his status here? He thought to himself, but as Siena wouldn’t take no for an answer, he obliged. The story of his experience with the opposite sex was quickly told. While in Africa, he had been going out for a while with a Dutch doctor from Médecins Sans Frontières, but it hadn’t lasted. She had wanted kids, and they had drifted apart when he had preferred to wait. She had left for a new job in Sudan, and Crispin had returned to London.

“Will you see her again?” Siena asked.

“I doubt it,” he replied. “Don’t get me wrong: She was lovely. But her dream of raising a child while running a medical clinic in some deprived African village wasn’t really mine.”

“But do you want children?” Siena asked.

“Yeah, I do... eventually,” Crispin replied.

Siena opened a bottle of water and took a sip, keeping her eyes fixed on Crispin.

“You’ll do,” she said.

“What?” he replied.

Siena ignored him and continued.

“I need a husband and someone to help me with the café. I think you’ll do fine.”

Crispin’s eyes widened and he looked at both Marie and Fay for assistance, but to no avail: They were still sleeping.

“I don’t understand; we’ve just met. And you want to *marry* me?!”

She nodded as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“I can’t take care of the café on my own, and I’d also like to have children at some point. I need someone to help, and you seem like a decent chap.”

This was crazy. He didn’t know what to say. Surely, she had to be joking. It had been two hours since they had met.

“I don’t know; can I think about it?”

He smiled, as if to imply that he didn't think she was serious.

Her prompt reply and her expression were clear signals that she meant every word.

"No. You have to come with me in 20 minutes when the train stops at York," she insisted.

Could she actually be serious?

He leaned forward and locked eyes with her. They stared each other down, like two dueling gunmen in a western.

Crispin didn't stand a chance. He was the first to lower his gaze.

"Are you serious?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Siena fired back.

"Oh, I don't know. Because we just met?!"

"I don't think that matters at all," she said.

Crispin tried to come up with a facial expression to match his sense of bewilderment, but he failed, and the growing realization that her proposition was real didn't make it easier.

Siena didn't change her expression. She tilted her head, like a painter surveying her finished work with satisfaction, and repeated:

"Yes... you'll do."

The train guard was announcing York as their next stop, and Crispin didn't know what to do. He was mysteriously drawn to Siena, but her offer was mad. They would realize that it was a bad idea by the afternoon, if not much sooner. Marie and Fay were slowly coming to, and the passengers alighting at York were collecting their things and filling the aisle.

For a brief moment, his mind suppressed the offer on the table from Siena. He was about to say thanks to the three girls and tell them how much he had enjoyed himself the last few hours. But Siena reminded him of his predicament, and took matters out of his hands: She was packing her bag when she said to the two other girls, "By the way, Crispin is coming with us. He has agreed to help me with the coffee shop."

"Has he, now?!" retorted Fay, looking skeptically at Crispin.

For a moment, Crispin felt as though time were standing still. The whole thing made no sense whatsoever. From a rational point of view, he had to stay on the train. Anything else would be madness. He wasn't normally a spontaneous person; getting off with the girls at York would be very uncommon ground for him. But a sense of adventure was taking over his senses and clouding his judgment.

Did he have anything to lose? After all, they would probably agree that the whole thing

was a joke by the end of the day. He might even make the wedding, and could offer the excuse that the train had been delayed.

He stumbled into his reply.

“Err, yes, that’s right. I’m looking forward to it. It’ll be an adventure.”

“What about the wedding?” Marie asked.

Crispin answered, “I don’t know the couple that well anyway.”

He felt bad as he uttered the words. It was true that the groom was a cousin he rarely spoke to, but the rest of his family wouldn’t take it kindly if he was late, let alone if he didn’t make it all.

He put on his jacket and took his suitcase from the rack. They moved into the aisle and lined up together with the other passengers who were getting off. A mother and her son were standing in front of Crispin. The boy was carrying a small bowl.

He looked at Crispin and invited him to ask about his artifact.

“That’s a nice bowl you have there,” Crispin said.

“It’s *crystal*,” the boy replied, emphasizing that it was made of a more impressive material than mere glass.

Crispin continued, “I see. It’s very nice. Where did you get it?”

The boy instantly looked troubled, as if he wanted to answer but couldn’t find the right words. His mother intervened.

“You found it at the flea market, didn’t you?” she prompted, inviting her son to participate further in the conversation, but he simply nodded and left her to explain. “We found it at a flea market selling items from an old pub. It’d recently shut because the owner had died. There were hundreds of small crystal vases and bowls.”

Crispin smiled. “I see. That sounds nice.”

The mother replied, “It was. The owners must have really been into crystal, because they had a lot of it.”

The train stopped and the doors opened. Crispin followed the girls onto the platform. For a second he considered getting back on, but the timetable didn’t afford space for second thoughts, and the train pulled away almost immediately after they had set foot on the platform. There was no turning back now. Crispin had no idea where they were going.

Siena eventually took charge of the situation. “This way,” she called, and signaled for them to follow her.

He nodded and glanced one final time at the train as it pulled away. He would be late for

the wedding, but at least he would have a great story to tell. He looked up and saw Siena signaling for him to go with them. He nodded and walked into the unknown.

December was one of the busiest months in the café. Crispin was confident that the two feet of snow that had settled overnight wouldn't deter visitors. It might even encourage people to visit the old city, which looked postcard-picturesque when covered in white.

He had been up early and made sure the café was open at 7 a.m. He always got up earlier than Siena, but she made up for it in the evenings, when the café turned into a bar; she almost always closed up. He had turned on the outdoor heaters, cleaned the snow off the tables, and put storm candles on them. They were flickering invitingly in the dark. He had also lit candles in the window and put on some jazz while he prepped the espresso machine. The café was a beacon of warmth and comfort on the cold and crisp Yorkshire morning.

It was not a large place, but could accommodate fifty guests at a push when all the tables were occupied. It never felt overcrowded, though. It was something about the room; it always felt spacious even when the café was busy. Crispin thought it was the high ceilings, but in truth he couldn't quite tell why. Siena had taken the lead on the major interior design decisions. Crispin often thought that she had been decorating the café in her head since she had been a little girl.

The house had originally been a blacksmith's workshop, and had large oak beams running across the ceiling. The old furnace had been turned into a big fireplace, which was more than enough to heat the café in the winter. They had painted the walls a very light blue, but kept the floors, which were made of the same dark and twisted wood boards that had been laid when it had been built over a hundred years ago. They appeared indestructible, and Crispin was certain that they would remain as foundations for whoever came after him and his family's little business.

Siena had meticulously chosen the tables and chairs from nearby second-hand markets and stores. No two were the same, but they all seemed to fit together like a perfect symphony. The books, however, had been Crispin's idea. The old, bulky shelves that the blacksmiths had used to store their tools couldn't be moved, and had to be used for something. They had chosen to stock them with both new and old books, fiction and non-fiction, and it added an air of tranquility and serenity to the room. Who didn't like books, after all?

The irreparable squeak of the front door alerted him to the first customer of the day. It was the keeper of the Minster grounds. He was often the first customer.

"The usual?" Crispin asked.

The man nodded. A cappuccino with one espresso shot, lots of sugar, and plenty of chocolate powder on the top. He rarely spoke, and normally edged toward the far end of the café to look at the local artwork exhibition while his drink was being prepared.

Sometimes he would pick a random book and read the first page—always only the first page.

“There you are!” Crispin exclaimed, and handed the man his drink. He nodded a silent “thank you.” He had picked a classic today: Melville’s *Moby Dick*. “*Call me Ishmael,*” Crispin recollected, as he observed the man read. It was probably one of the most famous openings in literature; a good choice, he thought, especially if you were reading only one page.

It had been ten years since he had got off the train with Siena. He often wondered where he would have ended up if he had stayed in his seat. He didn’t believe in fate, which meant that he had to put their encounter down to chance. The power of coincidence was not to be trifled with.

Even a decade on, Siena was a mystery to him. Objectively, she was completely unsuited to a relationship. She was introverted, reserved, and desperately difficult to get to know properly. Even Crispin, now her husband of seven years, was confident that he had only scratched the surface. She was caring, though; a good mother and fiercely loyal. He loved her, though he wasn’t always certain that it was reciprocated, at least not in the way that most people understood the concept. He wasn’t sure that Siena could love a partner in that way. Their intimate relationship hadn’t changed since the day they had met: They had sex once or twice a month, but it was almost as if the rigmarole annoyed her. It annoyed her that she had a sexual need at all. On the rare occasions that he managed to go on long enough for her to have an orgasm, it was as if she were embarrassed to express that kind of vulnerability. Crispin cherished those moments, though.

The other mystery was what exactly had happened on that train. Why had she chosen him? Why hadn’t he left? After all, the whole idea was insane. They had never really talked about it, but he had asked her once. In what for her was an unprecedented show of affection, she had caressed his cheek, tilted her head slightly, and whispered, “I could see that you were a good man, and I have been proven right.”

It was difficult to argue with *that*, even if it was an argument clouded in the same kind of mystery that surrounded the day they had first met.

His hair was graying, and two deep wrinkles were forming on his forehead. Siena, however, was virtually unchanged. Tiny lines around her eyes when she smiled were the only evidence that ten years had passed. She was like the elves from *The Lord of the Rings*: gracious, mysterious, and unmoved by time.

She had strange habits that would have strained other relationships to breaking point. Every year, she would pack a bag and go hiking on her own. She would take a plane to France or Switzerland and head for the Alps. Usually this would happen in June or July. She never revealed precisely where she was going, and would normally be gone a week. Crispin had been nervous the first time she had gone away, and conjured up all kinds of horrible fantasies. Now, however, it was part of their routine. She would go away and he would take Lima on vacation, where they would later be joined by Siena.

Only the first two years with their daughter had interrupted the habit, but a week after Lima's third birthday, she had left again. Crispin had thought it unreasonable, but the argument had been brief and the result inevitable. She was going. He felt bad about Lima; how would he explain it to her? But it turned out that he hadn't had to. She hadn't asked for her mother once while she had been away, as if she had known all along why she'd had to leave. She'd accepted it.

Lima was the spitting image of her mother in both looks and behavior. The former was a blessing, but Crispin wasn't certain about the latter. He worried that she would struggle with the other kids in school, but he settled on the simple conclusion he'd drawn from ten years of marriage with Siena: If she was going to be like her mother, it was futile to try to change her.

Crispin knew very little about Siena's family, partly because she didn't have much of one. She had been a lonely child, and had lived most of her life in Zurich, where her dad had worked as an executive for the big commodities trading firm Rio Tinto. He had died when she had been a teenager, and she had eventually moved back to England to study. She had never lived there again, but her mother had stayed. Siena would visit her once a year, usually in spring. Recently, she had taken Lima, but never Crispin. As with her other habits, he knew that there was no point in asking. He had seen his mother-in-law once, at their wedding, and spoken to her for no more than 10 minutes.

The door squeaked again. Crispin looked up as Siena walked in. She had been walking Lima to school.

"Hi, darling," he greeted her.

"Hi there," she replied.

She didn't like him calling her "darling," but he did it sometimes anyway to tease her. She started adjusting the candles and napkins on the tables. She always did that, even though he had already laid them out. She joined Crispin behind the counter and helped him arrange the cakes and sandwiches that were going on display.

The first tourists were already gathering in the big space in the front of the Minster, but it wouldn't open until nine. Two children were building a snowman with their father. They waved at the couple behind the counter, but only Siena reacted. She smiled, inviting them to come in. Soon the door squeaked again.