

Sienna Island

By Chris Castle

Pete switched off his phone, walked the street up to the café. He looked through the window, saw Eddy working behind the grill and smiled. At least the food would be good tonight. He began to unzip his jacket and stepped inside.

“Peter! How are you? Sit down and I’ll bring you over some coffee, okay?” Pete nodded and smiled.

“How are you Mr. Marsan?” He said, pulling up a chair in the corner. Even though it had been eight years since his dad had died, Pete still couldn’t bring himself to call his friends by their first names.

“It is what it is, Peter. But let me feel better by looking after you, okay?” Pete put his hands up, surrendering. He sat and unfolded his napkin that held the knife and fork and began to wonder who had sat here before him, in the self-same spot. How they had felt, what they were thinking. He closed his eyes for a second, trying to imagine something, an idea, a word, when he heard his name being called out, snapping his eyes open.

“Pete! Over here!” He looked over from his booth. “It’s me, Poppy Hawkins, from school!” Her voice was light and overshadowed by her bangles, jangling against her wrist. He rubbed his eye, pretending there was a problem, hiding his embarrassment and waved back, until she waved him over to her table.

“Are you waiting for someone? A hot date?” she said, her eyes tightening into a smile, as if she was looking into the sun. He shook his head.

“Are you...” he asked, waving to the empty seat.

“Sit, please. Just remember to tell your friend you moved. I wouldn’t like to see him angry.” She said looking past him. “Weird seeing people outside of work, isn’t it?” Poppy continued, her bracelets playing like an instrument now. She was a teacher at the local primary school where Pete worked in the kitchen. He thought they were pretty much the same aged, but she seemed much more in control, even though she was light and optimistic at the same time. She seemed to understand herself, how she talked to people, how she held their eye as she spoke.

“I’ve not seen you in here before,” he said, trying to adjust. He was used to eating alone, not having to impress in the small ways people did in new company.

“I go to a different café each Sunday. I’m trying to get round all of them once, so I know which one’s my favourite. It’s like if you go on holiday; I think I’d much rather stay in a different motel each night than stay in the same place. Then it feels like your holiday starts over and over, you know?” She smiled and

lifted her coffee. She hummed, and leaned forward. "I don't want your friend to get big headed-but he's winning on the coffee front." She winked and leaned back. Her cutlery was still wrapped up.

"Have you just got here?" He said, looking down to the tight napkin.

"Very good detective." She said, raising an eyebrow. He blushed. "You're a café connoisseur I can tell. Can I ask you something Pete?" Her smile fell a little and he nodded, tensed. "Why were you closing your eyes just then?" Pete looked at her; what the hell he was already blushing, so he told her. When he was done, she put her elbows on the table, her hands up in fists, like she was ready to shake them or something.

"I do things like that, too. I imagine what it would be like to have a new name, every time to time. I'm Sienna Island at the moment. I like the way it's written down, the shape of it. I like things like that, like when people write their initials and loop a heart around it in cement. Its stuff like that I can't tell the kids. Adult secrets, between you and me." Pete sat back and smiled. Eddie came over with his coffee.

"The views nicer from here, Peter?" He said looking and winking to Poppy. She winked back, as the old man topped up her coffee.

"With you here, sure. I might just have to make it a regular." She said, lifting her cup, making the old man laugh.

"Now, what do you want to order, Peter? I think I know. You miss, I'm not so sure." He tilted his head, one way then the other.

"I'll tell you what, Pete, you order for me and I'll order for you. How does that sound?" She looked between both of them, sipped her drink. Pete couldn't help it; he nodded. He put on his glasses, picked out something he had tried once. Poppy squinted, looked back up to Pete from the menu from time to time, then picked something out. The older man nodded, snapping the menu's shut and walked away, shaking his head.

"I didn't know you wore glasses, Pete!" Poppy said. She tapped on her neck where her own were hooked on her blouse.

"Just for reading the paper in the corner. Not so much for work," he said smiling.

"Swap then!" She said, already handing over her glasses, black and sleek, into his hand. He handed over his own, disjointed and uneven.

"Won't I wonk yours out?" He said. He meant it as a serious question, even as she started laughing. She put her hand to her mouth.

"Sorry." Was all she could manage. He put his hands up, waving her away. He waited until she'd

calmed down and she was just about ready to put them on. Then he pushed them on, not knowing if this was a joke or not.

“Yours are strong!” She said. He looked up, nearly seeing her, like someone smudged in photo’s; familiar but just out of reach. He saw her put her hands out in front of herself, wiggled her fingers. Then she reached up, took them off.

“Like a 3-D film, those were. My eyes feel like their spinning, like in the fruit machines, with the lucky sevens.” She looked up, and then reached over. For a second he forgot he was wearing her glasses. He thought she wanted to hold his hand. And then she gently lifted them from his face.

“I think you’ll need these back more than I need yours.” They swapped back. “I used to work in a clothes shop when I was in 6th form. Whenever people left things behind, glasses, scarves, I’d always try them on before I handed them in. Felt like I was someone different for a little while, you know? Like Mr. Benn and his mirror. Oh, here we go.”

Pete followed her look, as Eddie brought over the two plates. He moved from left to right, trying to remember which belonged on which side. He crossed his fingers, said ‘enjoy’, and walked back to his radio stations out back.

“Must be amazing to own a café, mustn’t it?” Poppy said, looking over the place. “All the people you meet, the stories. Like a taxi driver, too.” She followed the sound of the music, moved a little to it. He wondered if she held onto to all that energy all the time, wondered if sometimes, just for a little while, she switched off and cooled.

“Like you, too.” He said, wanting to draw her back from the music. She looked round, tilted her head to the question. “I mean with all those kids flying around. Maybe you’ll be the teacher they talk about.” He looked up, felt safe enough to hold her eye.

“I hadn’t thought about it like that. I guess. Thanks Pete! Course all of mine want to be astronauts and football players, right now. Maybe they could talk about us from the moon or something. That would be a taxi ride and a half, eh?” She lifted an egg in the air. “Closest to the moon I’ll get this year.” She said looking at it.

“Why did you want to be a teacher?” Pete asked. He didn’t want it to sound formal and she smiled when he asked, so he guessed it was okay.

“I guess I left college, tried other things, offices and all that. A couple of my friends were doing it, but they didn’t like it, bitched about it all the time. I came by to meet one of them, Sara her name was, and I just looked through the window. She was trying hard but it didn’t matter; I just looked at all those kids,

bundles of them, all giggling and playing about and I just thought I wanted to be there, inside of all that, you know? Get wrapped up in all that noise. Breathe in the same air as all those kids laughing. Not always like that of course, but sometimes it is. You'd be a good teacher, Pete." She looked up suddenly, catching him off guard.

"I'm not too sure about that. I mean, don't get me wrong, I love kids, but-" he trailed off. He liked the way she didn't judge the job he was doing, make some remark about it. "My sisters not very well, she needs looking after for a while, but after that, when it's all settled, we'll see. But you're lucky, mind. To have a trade you love. That's...rare." He sipped his coffee, suddenly aware of sitting at a table talking to this girl. The daylight was slipping away outside the window, making the town look like something else, something beautiful.

"I see you sometimes, when I'm walking along the corridors, doing all your jobs." He said, quiet and uncertain.

"Oh yeah?" She said, joke accusing. They both smiled, but she stopped, waited for him.

"Yeah. Playing with the kids. I saw you pretending to ride a horse once, galloping around. But other times, after the bell, looking at your blackboard, going through what you'd written, crouching down looking at what the kids had wrote. Doing your paperwork with your glasses on." He looked down from her, tapped the table. "Yeah." He noticed they had both finished their food. He was surprised the time had slipped away so quick and he felt a little sad.

"I know Pete." She said quietly and he looked up at her and for a long moment they stayed like that, looking to each other. A sweet silence amongst the radio and the empty diner. Finally Eddie came out and collected their dishes.

"I'll get this." Pete said, reaching for his wallet. As he pulled out the cash, he saw she'd put her half down already. He laid his down, matched her tip.

"Can I walk you home?" He said, simply. He looked over. She smiled and nodded. He pulled on his coat, helped hers over the shoulder. He walked over to the counter, looking for Eddie.

"Money's on the counter, Eddie!" He called out. "Mr. Marsan, I mean. Goodnight." He waited then walked to the door. Poppy was holding the handle, swinging off of it.

"All set, Pete?" She said, adjusting her bangles to the cut of her coat.

"All set Poppy." He answered and the two walked out of the café, into the early evening and the quiet of the town's empty street.