

Maison des Oiseaux

(Excerpt)

She should hear the girl's breathing, shouldn't she? Surely she'd have heard if the girl had left. Or if someone had taken her. Like those men from the boat.

Heart thudding, Della sat up jerkily.

The girl was there, of course, on a cot beside the bed. A Belgian cosmetology student, pretty, but twenty pounds overweight by Della's standards.

There would be another room tomorrow, the night manager had assured them as he lugged their suitcases up the narrow, tiled stairs. But for tonight, or what was left of it, he regretted *énormément* that it would have to be the cot.

Not that Della begrudged the girl shelter, or protection. But she and Peter had work to do.

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Traveling would forge bonds anew, the marriage counselor had said. The timing was perfect: the university where Peter taught was on winter break, and January was a dead month in the real-estate business. Morocco was an excellent choice; neither Della nor Peter had been there—new experiences, together.

The counselor had given them an assignment: they should have sex.

So Della had brought things. After several sessions of surreptitious *Cosmo* reading in 7-Eleven checkout lines (at Whole Foods, a client might see her), she'd settled on some classics: black lace panties and matching push-up bra. *Cosmo* said you couldn't go wrong with black, and Della had figured expensive would be better than cheap. A brand called La Perla; the combo had set her back \$300.

New perfume, also a classic—ambergris base with notes of vanilla. And, so she could face it all, some new antidepressants: Asendin with an Abilify chaser.

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The perfume was still in its box, the bra and panties in layers of tissue paper: the first night was officially a bust. No leisurely exploratory walk (the ferry was two hours late leaving Málaga and lost another ninety minutes along the way). No intimate dinner on the patio (the restaurant closed at ten). They hadn't even seen the patio because the lights were already out, everyone asleep, even the night manager. And they hadn't arrived alone.

It had never occurred to Della to plan sex. Theirs had always just happened. And it had been good. Hadn't it? Okay, there'd been a few years of hardly ever, when Muriel was small. She'd been a high-maintenance baby and then a curious toddler brimming over with questions, trenchantly resistant to sleep, even when she was so tired she could barely keep her head up.

But things had gotten back to normal once Muriel had started school. Even keel, fine (even keel *was* fine, of course it was). And they'd stayed that way.

Until one year, two months and four days ago, when Muriel, during the first semester of her freshman year of college, had gone missing. At the self-same school where Peter taught in the department of coastal preservation. In the same mid-sized mid-coast town where Della sold upmarket homes, where she'd lived all her life. Where things like that didn't happen.

Della had gotten the call in the kitchen, clicking out of a deal she'd been closing on her work line (fabulous property, lake-front with private dock, every other real-estate agent in town was about to hate her). She'd sunk into a chair at the old Mission-style table, certain the detective ("Pat," but she'd been just "the detective" then) must have dialed the wrong number.

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For the first six months, as the manic shots of adrenaline ebbed, the rushes of horror and hope leaving behind a daily grind of bleak, disconsolate confusion, each had been too shell-shocked to seek the other's body for anything more than a shoulder to lean on, a hand to clasp.

But by spring, Peter had begun to reach for her again.

And Della had begun to drink, hard. More and more at dinner, and then more afterward, so she could stomach doing something that now made her wonder, every second she felt Peter inside her, whether someone had forced her daughter's legs apart and held a hand over her mouth to stifle her screams.

Or maybe was still doing so. Though it was unlikely, the detectives had told her, and the missing-daughter community on the internet (which was a lot bigger than you might think)

agreed. But of course there were the outlier cases of girls held captive in sheds and basements or derelict houses for years or even decades.