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Morocco

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Peters: Morocco

MOROCCO

Dave Peters

In the shop they were offered tea by a mildly obsequious man with a long beard. He unrolled at least a dozen rugs, each very ornate, and told them about the weaving, all by hand, the hours of labor that had gone into the making, the skill and the training. Behind him a woman whispered to her husband that she could see the way the machine had stitched out the pattern, that she could tell. It hardly mattered. There wasn't any room for a rug on the bus.

The tea was strong and sweet, hot enough to be satisfying in the cool, cavernous room. Sam helped Jane up from the floor and they examined some of the rugs on the wall, the designs moving intricately, almost seductively, as if they could speak. Jane stood mesmerized in front of one, finally shaking her head and mentioning "The Yellow Wallpaper," as if watching too long would drive her crazy. How would she pack a rug for the plane home?

The owner of the shop appeared close behind her, his fingers interlocked in front of him, a stance both condescending and invasive. The djellaba he wore was as involved as the rugs, a tattoo he could take on and off.

"This one is special," he said.

He gave a history of the artisan and her family, poverty-stricken and full of integrity, naturally. Everyone here had some hard luck story, each one practiced and believable, but so jumbled together they began to be like the landscape, the long rolling dunes in the distance that Sam and Jane would leave behind when they went home. This was a vacation, not a mission. Jane told herself she would buy something, but not from this man, with the baleful look behind his beard, the hints of brown circling his mouth, cigarette or khat residue. She would buy a few things, small, useful things, and she would pretend to haggle, because the guidebooks told her it was rude

to pay the offered price, but she would not be taking home something as cumbersome as a rug, no matter how beautiful it was, and especially because it would contrast too much with the beggars, muddying the experience and trading decoration for understanding. Sam had convinced her this trip was a learning experience, and she'd come to see that he was right.



The embassy had a facility that looked like it had been prepared for a thousand casualties, as if every American on the continent would be in this precise location at the same time, each of them in need of medical attention. Sam looked down the long corridor of empty beds, wondering what catastrophe had entered these diplomats' minds, and then everything began to warp and expand.

"Sir?"

He turned to see her with the room's tunnel swarming, breathing around her head and shoulders. She was dressed like a soldier, but told him she was a nurse. He would've believed anything, except the truth, and so her uniform was perfect. She was gruff, like a nurse, and took charge like one, but by that time he wasn't paying attention to her. He was looking over her shoulder, and then back over his, to each end of the hall.

"She'll be fine," the nurse said.

She pushed down on his shoulders to put him in one of the beds. He bent at the knees and elbows like a machine.

"The doctors are looking at her."

She stuck him with a needle that kept going in his arm, in, in, in, until he was asleep.



They'd been warned to travel in pairs, at the very least, to stay with the group if at all possible, and for the first few days they'd

done just that. It wasn't quite boring, the regimentation, the routine, but it didn't fit the adventurous idea they'd brought with them. Neither did the police presence. It felt like every time a native person leaned in to offer advice or lower his asking price, someone in the distance unholstered or cocked a gun. This hardly made Jane feel safe, and though she didn't mention it to Sam, she couldn't imagine he disagreed with her. The security teams were a reminder that something was at least a little out of balance, that given the opportunity, something could go wrong. It was a constant lesson to stay within earshot.

Which they had done at the market, the thought of safety not far from their minds when they rounded the corner to look at the spices in careful mounds on a wooden table stacked on sawhorses. Jane stared at the heaps of fine powder, redolent and slightly hieroglyphic, a mixture with an aroma like curry that suddenly made the air feel thick and overbearing. A distraction and a curiosity. Over it all was the ubiquitous canvas tent, the nomad's shelter that seemed to be more present than the mud structures that lined the more prosperous streets. To protect the spices from the desert wind, the table was pulled back a few feet into the tent.

She was wondering what she would do with a canister of cumin when she felt something cut through the aroma, ratchet up the heat.



They were flown by military transport to Ramstein, which Sam remembered as a band. The connection wasn't far from his mind as they rattled and shook over the Mediterranean, their rickety plane shuddering to bring them back to Europe, where they'd started. Jane had been under sedation for days at that point, and he knew that her shaking wasn't solely due to the flight. Sam was ashamed to be pleased that the noise kept them from talking, and transferred his anger to the army, which couldn't or wouldn't arrange for more comfortable transportation.

He'd been asleep for almost a day before he could see her, and still he put it off, walking to the end of the infirmary and stopping at the doorway. Finally he ventured into an alcove where an unmanned nurse's desk sat underneath a presidential portrait. Everything in the embassy was prepared for siege, as if the employees had a plan to fall back when the gates were breached, farther and farther into the building, inside a warren of protective gates and doors. He knocked on the steel barrier on the far side of the alcove and received no response. The sedatives having worn off, he had a strong urge to see Jane, to help her, or confirm her. He began knocking again, this time with the heel of his hand, harder and harder until it was a sound all by itself, neither noise nor music, just something to do.



Two more flights and they were home, at the end of a two-week vacation after only five weeks. Sam was surprised at both the loss of time and the relative quickness of their return, this time on an ordinary jet that flew for twelve hours, giving them ample time to avoid the conversation they still hadn't shared.

Out of the jetway there was no one waiting, just a sea of bobbing heads like a bingo cage and a single line of people eager to board. Then through the corridors, a Hawaiiana art display, all along the terminal, until finally near the baggage claim Jane's mother appeared with a strained smiling face, like a month-old jack-o-lantern. Her worry seemed to have caved her in. She came forward with her arms outstretched like Frankenstein's monster.

"Honey."

Jane backed away involuntarily. Her mother dropped her hands.

"We'll get your bags."



Home. Neither Sam nor Jane parsed the word, but Mrs. Sedgwick didn't give them time. She unpacked for both of them, taking rather ridiculous care of Jane's clothes, as if she were a forensic scientist looking for clues. Sam's clothes she put away with an alacrity bordering on distaste. She seemed to know where everything went, which made Sam wonder how often she'd been here since she'd heard, and since she'd come back to prepare for them.

Jane's mother had arrived at the embassy less than twelve hours after Sam had come out of sedation, and had made herself indispensable, a combination psychiatrist's couch and iron lung, positioned in the matrix of the compound with a familiarity that suggested she'd lived a previous life as a very efficient functionary. She stayed there for a week, useful as a blanket, until Jane asked her to go home and wait.

When someone said a person made a better door than a window, they were always talking about Jane's father. He had a way of filling a doorway completely, usually for effect, but this first time he'd seen his daughter since her exotic vacation, he paused there, just behind her, as if the idea of his entrance were enough, better than his actual arrival. The sun shone over his shoulders, the corona just perfectly situated around his bald head, as if he were made of light. Or darkness. His position there was a perfect eclipse.

"Angel."

Both Jane and her mother turned to face him. Sam felt more than a little extraneous.



The first night away from the military base Sam came from the bathroom in pajama bottoms and a T-shirt, stopping a few feet from the hotel bed to look at Jane across it. Just when he felt it almost unbearable that one of them should speak, Jane undressed completely and stood at the edge of the bed, with just a little hesitation, as if she were wondering about the temperature of a

pool. Then she slid under the covers. Sam was frozen.

"Oh," she said, "just get in the bed."

This was her demeanor with him from that point forward. She would accept no sympathy, no solicitations or help, preferring instead to do the heavy lifting herself. She gave him the impression that he was the fragile one, the injured one, and he had to remind himself what the truth was.



In the grocery store, Mrs. Sedgwick called the checker a nigger. There was some mundane dispute, something about a price or a coupon, and Mrs. Sedgwick said "dumb nigger," crumpled her money, and tossed it in on the conveyor belt. The checker watched the bills slide down and catch in the trap.

It wasn't until Jane's mother was almost finished putting her bags into her car that the manager found her.

"Ma'am?"

Mrs. Sedgwick loaded the last two sacks into the back seat. Then she pushed her cart to the end of the aisle, making sure it rested against the parking abutment without rolling away. She turned back.

"Ma'am."

The man's face was all downward angles, as if the wrinkles somehow linked to the frown. He had a thin moustache, trimmed to half-width between his upper lip and nose. The hair stopped at the east-west barriers of his overlarge cheeks. He gave the impression he'd been lying in a heap among the back stock until a complaint had caused him to be inflated to emerge and deal with the problem.

"One of our employees brought something to my attention."

Mrs. Sedgwick could see the faces lining up in the store window.

"What is it?"

Her own terseness surprised her.

"My courtesy clerk said that you insulted her."

"What did I say?"

"She said you insulted her. That you used . . . an epithet."

"Which was?"

Neither of them was going to repeat it.

"Ma'am, I think it would be best if you didn't shop here any more."

Mrs. Sedgwick turned and got in the car. As she drove away, she saw the people in the store celebrating.



"They weren't even black, Mom."

Jane leaned into the washer and pulled out the sheets. This part she didn't think she'd ever have to describe. In fact, she hadn't described anything, up to that point. She'd discussed how she felt, and what she was going to do, or how she was coping, in a detail that seemed to erase the facts, or push them aside, but she hadn't talked about what had happened at all.

"They were African, Mom." She put the sheets in the dryer and switched it on. "I was in Africa. But they weren't black. And how could you call someone that, anyway?"

Her mother stood there with an expression less chastened than defiant. She was hardly there to take a lesson.

One of them was the color of cumin. Two of them were the color of nutmeg. One was coriander, and the other was cinnamon. All of them were represented by the piles of powder in the tent, as if they'd sprung from the spices, or vice-versa. In the space of time it took for everything to happen, which was quite a while, there were surprisingly few details. The ones she remembered, though, were sharp, exact, and indelible. Most of these were facts that her mother would not be able to hear, that Jane would not be able to hear if she were in her mother's place.

"I asked you a question," Jane said.



The raised voices were something new. Previously everything in the house had been in a protective layer of silence, like insulation. Sam was grateful for the catastrophe, whatever it was. It was time for a child down a well or a broken leg, a manageable disaster. An argument was just what he needed, if only to get them all talking.

Blocking the doorway was Jane's father, his arms tensed and pressed out just a little from his body, the light coming around him. He moved aside and let Sam squeeze into the room.

Why was Sam afraid of her, glaring at her mother, why was he frightened of the woman who used to hold on to him in shady neighborhoods, on their way to urban restaurants? What had he become? He could probably carry her in one arm, and she scared him.

"Please," he said, raising his voice over the rattle of the dryer. "Stop."

"Shut up. This has nothing to do with you."

"It does. I was there."

"You watched."

They looked at Sam, all of them except Jane, who turned her attention back to her mother.

"I won't have you behaving like this."



When Sam went back with the soldiers, they discovered that no one had witnessed anything, not so much as a suspicious character or a pickpocket. The tent itself was still there, one of many, though it had been emptied of its contents and looked deserted for good. A rope come loose from its stake snapped in the wind like a whip. Sam jumped. The soldiers shook their heads.

"Why did you go in there alone?"

"We didn't go in alone," Sam said. "We went together."

He remembered walking past the woman who'd criticized the rug, how she'd talked about the caftan she wanted to buy, and had complained about the quality of the material. Sam had taken Jane's hand and gone in another direction.

Jane hadn't been asked to join them. The soldiers hadn't mentioned it, and Sam thought she wouldn't be up to returning, wouldn't want to come back and find the men there, grinning or fearful or indifferent. He'd convinced her to make the trip for her courage, which seemed lacking in the States, as a way to show her the world, even in the controlled environment of a tour, so that she wouldn't be so afraid to try new things in the future.

"What did your guide tell you?"

There were circles of residue where the mounds of spices had been.

"Didn't your guide tell you to stay with the group?"

Inside the tent the men had put a knife to his throat. Simple. He hadn't ever thought something like that would happen to him, or he'd thought it would, watch and wallet, over in a minute. On a bicycle trip through South America he'd been beaten severely, but he was traveling alone, he was young, and he'd recovered quickly. In Thailand he'd had everything stolen from his hotel room, even his passport. He'd gotten caught in a brawl in Dallas, once. Those other experiences were stories, and he'd laughed in telling them.

"Because you always stay with the group. The guides are there for your protection. You were told that."

Well, he wasn't told that, at least not explicitly. The lead soldier had a European accent, almost, as if he'd learned his English by way of France. In the U.S. his language skills would be very marketable. His expression confirmed that nothing would be done about all this. Sam stared at the moving canvas, coming forward and back as if the tent were alive.



Sam couldn't sleep, because when he closed his eyes, he saw himself watching. Jane had apologized, at some length, moving on to the origin of the trouble, and describing her mother's actions as unforgivable. Then she'd considered the matter settled and had gotten into bed.

He realized it might have been easier if he'd gotten killed. If he'd gotten killed it wouldn't have been so much a compounded injury as a diversion from what had happened to her. Dead, he would be a useful distraction. Alive, he had nothing to offer. Jane seemed to know that, to hold onto it and use it. Even so, if she knew what he was thinking she would call him melodramatic.

She slept coiled in sheets the color of rope. Sam realized for the first time that he loved her with a wildness that he hadn't ever acknowledged. It had taken all of this for him to see it, a feral kind of desire that had become manifest after their trip. There in the bed he wanted to devour her. He imagined waking her up and seeing her eyes glow in the dark.

Like most untutored students of a foreign language, they'd known the cursewords well, though sometimes they shouted things at Sam that didn't apply. And like movie characters they knew all the conjugations of violence. The knife jerked against his throat with each threat. If he closed his eyes he could see the men taking turns. He could see himself watching them, could see Jane's legs in the air like something butchered.



"These men," Jane's father said to Sam, "they think women are this way, and then they act it out on them."

It was the first time they'd been alone. A few times they'd found themselves in the same room together, but they didn't even notice each other, cocking their ears to listen for Jane's voice and keeping decidedly apart. They kept at a discreet but measurable

distance until Jane finally agreed to go shopping with her mother, just to be away from their continued surveillance.

"This is a rite of passage for them. They do it in their own communities."

Jane's father had become an immediate authority on all things African, from the chief exports of Namibia to the sack of Carthage. He could talk at any length about genocide or the diamond trade. He'd tried an encyclopedic approach to his problem, as if knowing everything could bring relief to the one thing with which he couldn't cope. And so with Mrs. Sedgwick planning every moment to keep her daughter from thinking at all, Mr. Sedgwick took up the slack and concentrated on the facts, piling them up to smother the truth.

"I don't understand how they can blame us for immorality and then do those kinds of things. What are they angry at? What's their point?"

He pored over articles on the Internet, in popular magazines and books. These explanations were written for people who didn't know anything, as primers or polemics, and Jane's father utilized them for his own purposes, to confirm his desires, like pornography. Finding evidence of depravity seemed to comfort and support him. Mrs. Sedgwick was so omnipresent in her daughter's life that this was probably the first time anyone had a chance to hear the explanations Mr. Sedgwick had formed.

But he was getting nowhere. Sam listened to it all out of politeness, primarily, but also to have something else to think about, and to believe that Jane's father didn't blame him. Sam wanted to be forgiven in a way that didn't seem possible, but he kept paying attention in case Mr. Sedgwick stumbled on something, leaving open the possibility that there was an incantation to save him, a loophole that didn't turn into a noose. It was easy to seem like he was intent because Jane's father was talking quickly, and wanted the confirmation that Sam's silence gave.

"How can they pray so often and do those things?"

"Do you mean they wouldn't have the time?"

Jane stood in the doorway with two shopping bags hanging like weights from her hands. She dropped them with a thud and turned the corner into the laundry room. Her father was startled.

"No, honey. I'm just trying to understand."

"Why?"

She reappeared in the doorway with an armful of tightly wrapped bedding, the bulk of it twisted small enough to resemble a loaf of bread.

"I need to make sense of things, Jane."

"That doesn't work. Sense isn't part of it."

"Then what do I do?"

"You can do anything you want."

With that, she was gone.



Sam stopped in the bedroom doorway as Jane stood under the windowsill to finish slipping on the fitted sheet, tucking the last corner of the mattress under the fabric. He watched as she bent over and stretched out her arms to push the wrinkles away. He watched as she went to the foot of the bed and shook out the top sheet, letting it fall in soft folds like hillocks. Then again, with a snap and a ripple like a flag in the wind, Jane foregrounded and solitary as the sheet went up, then silhouetted against the incoming light as the sheet came back down, her image faint in the glass across from her. Sam tried to catch her reflected eye, but the sheet interfered as it came up again, whoosh and snap, rising between her and the window. Sam closed his eyes and listened.