

THE CAPTAIN'S  
HOUSE

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## THE CAPTAIN'S HOUSE

It was an old white mansion on a slight rise overlooking Damariscotta harbor, the kind of sea captain's house for which Maine is well known. On a wooden sign overhanging the porch, Elizabeth Benton saw "No Vacancy" in neat black letters.

Nevertheless, she opened the screen door and went in. The hotel desk was in a small sitting room on the right, but as there was no one behind it, Elizabeth looked into what must have been the parlor on the left – a large room with a bay window looking out onto the harbor.

Two portraits over the fireplace drew her attention: one of a young man in a severe black suit and three-cornered hat, a spyglass tucked under his arm; the other of a young woman in a long light-green gown, a dark-green ribbon in her hair.

What struck Elizabeth about the woman was how much the two of them looked alike, almost as though she were a reincarnation of the woman in the painting. The same large, very pale blue eyes in a round face, the same plump cheeks, the same prematurely graying hair, the same ample bosom in a wiry body, the same milky-white skin. It was her portrait about ten years younger, dressed in period costume.

As Elizabeth gazed at the two portraits, she

became aware that someone was standing beside her. She turned to see an old woman studying her with the same absorption with which she had been studying the portraits.

"Yes?" Elizabeth asked, looking straight into the woman's pale blue eyes.

"You wanted a room?" the old woman asked.

"Yes, I do!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "Do you have one? I've been looking for two hours. I have to get to my daughter's camp by noon. But you have a no vacancy sign . . ."

"We have a room that we usually don't rent out on this date. If you'd like to come into the office?"

They stepped across the hallway, and the old woman picked out a set of keys from behind the desk.

"Let me show you the room," she said. "The big key is for the room. The little key is for the front door. We lock the front door after 10:00 PM."

They went up the stairs and stopped at the door of the room above the parlor.

"This was the captain's bedroom," the old woman said as she opened the door.

Elizabeth gasped as she entered the enormous room, with another bay window looking out onto an even more magnificent view of the harbor.

To the left was a large desk, then a sitting area by the window, and on the right a large four-poster bed. Over the fireplace were portraits of an older couple, also a captain and his wife.

"Do you like it?" the old woman asked.

"It's wonderful! But I'm afraid I couldn't

afford – "

"Since we usually wouldn't rent it out at all tonight, I'll give it to you at the usual rate. That's a hundred and fifteen dollars with breakfast. Do you want it?"

"Yes," Elizabeth said. "I'm delighted."

"That's Captain Ebenezer Cosgrove and his wife on the wall," the old woman said, becoming chatty now that the business was concluded. "Ebenezer built the house in 1803 with money from the slave trade. Downstairs are his son Ephraim and daughter-in-law Henrietta. This was their bedroom as well."

She looked at the four-poster bed. "That was their bed," she said.

"Are all the furnishings original?" Elizabeth asked.

"Well, from the 1850's. Captain Cosgrove – that was Ephraim – was the captain of a whaling vessel lost at sea in 1853. The room looks pretty much as it did then."

She cocked her head slightly to the left, like an inquisitive bird. "You don't believe in ghosts, do you?"

"No," Elizabeth said. "Not at all. Are there ghosts in this house?"

"Only in this room. And only on this night of the year. You see, Captain Cosgrove was obsessed with the idea that he might die early and then, as he put it, be forced to share his wife with another man. So he made Henrietta swear that if she outlived him she would never remarry, but remain faithful to him until her death.

"She was from a poor family, and an offer from a wealthy captain was not something she could afford to refuse. So she made the vow, thinking, well, after he died he would never know what she did, anyway.

"As it turned out, she was not married to him long. Four years, but for three of them he was at sea. The year he was home was agony. She hated him. He was arrogant, selfish, jealous, demanding, abusive – oh, how cruel!"

She suddenly stopped, gathering herself back together.

"Anyway, on his second voyage after their marriage, he was lost at sea. Henrietta waited ten years, until she fell in love, truly in love, with Josiah Franklin, a local farmer, and broke her vow to Ephraim Cosgrove. She and Josiah were married on August 12th, 1863, and on their wedding night, in this very room, while they were making love for the first time in this very bed, the ghost of Captain Cosgrove appeared, still dripping salt water from the deep.

"Approaching the bed with savage moans, he made as if to strangle Josiah, who leaped up naked and jumped right through that bay window. He landed on the lawn below and ran bloody and shrieking out along the harbor.

"That was the last Henrietta saw of him. He joined the Union army and was killed at the Battle of the Crater in 1864."

"My goodness!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "You talk as though you were there!"

"It's a well-known story," the old woman said. "At any rate, the ghost then came towards Henrietta, who was standing by the broken window.

"Go ahead and kill me!" she screamed at it. "You've ruined my life anyway! Kill me! But I promise you, my ghost will haunt yours until time gives way to eternity! I swear it!"

"He kept coming, moaning savagely as though incapable of speech. But just then the first ray of sunlight came over the horizon. As you see, the window faces southeast, and since the house overlooks the harbor, it gets the very first light each morning.

"The ghost disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared, and Henrietta fled the house in her nightgown, fled all the way to Ohio, to which some of her family had moved, not to come back to this house except as a corpse after she died in 1907. She's in the burial ground behind the house. You can see the tombstone, Henrietta Franklin."

"Why did she want to be buried here?" Elizabeth asked. It was getting on, and she had to get to Camp Meadowlight by noon, but the story held her.

"You remember. She had vowed to haunt Captain Cosgrove's ghost. And so she has, as the two remain locked in hatred for eternity. But you said you didn't believe in ghosts. Do you believe in an afterlife?"

Again, the quick little incline of the head.

"No," Elizabeth said decisively. "I believe dead is dead."

"But there are disturbances in the aether. That's what a ghost is – a disturbance. All a ghost longs for is serenity – to be dead like other people – 'dead is dead,' as you say. But the poor thing can't until this disturbance – of love, of hate – well, the two amount to one passion, after all – is resolved.

"That's why ghosts haunt certain places at certain times, places where something was left unfinished, seeking revenge, mostly, hoping that the passion in some way might dissipate like fog beneath the sun, and the ghost might know some peace."

"You obviously believe in ghosts," Elizabeth said.

"That I do. That's why we never let this room on August 12th. I'm only showing it to you because you seem so anxious for it. You're sure you want it?"

"Yes, yes. I'm not afraid of ghosts."

The old woman shrugged. "You can pay and fill out the forms when you leave," she said.

Elizabeth walked with her down the stairs and then hurried out to her car. She'd bring her overnight bag up to the room later. Now she had to get to Camp Meadowlight before her nine-year-old daughter Virginia freaked out because no one showed up on visiting day.

It was like Todd to count on her being the good guy. He called her late the night before to inform her that he wouldn't be visiting Virginia even though it was his turn.

"Sorry," he told her. "Something just came up that I have to take care of. You can see her, can't you?"

Of course she could. She could get up at 6:00 AM and drive the three hours up from Boston and find a place to stay over on a Saturday night in prime time. She never had anything to do that was more important than Virginia, while for him things kept coming up that he had to take care of.

And he knew that she would never make Virginia suffer – never leave something undone or criticize him for not doing it. So he got away with his self-centered, selfish behavior, just did what he wanted and let others pick up the pieces, as he had in their marriage, as he did now in the wreckage of their marriage.

After ten years of loving him – God knew why – she was suddenly told that he was leaving her, that he hadn't loved her for years, that – oh, by the way – there was nothing in their joint bank account, nothing in their joint portfolio, and the house had been sold.

How could she have been so stupid as to love him all those years? It was breathtaking, that stupidity! The ugliest, most selfish and self-centered bastard on the planet, and she had loved him!

She knew the tape was playing again, the tape that was consuming her life, but she couldn't stop it, and it went on screaming and screaming as she drove white-knuckled up towards Camp Meadowlight.

*How could you do this to me? How could you do this to anyone? How could you pretend to love someone for years while you planned to leave them, and lie, lie, lie every day, every minute of your life? Didn't you care at all what you were doing to me? To Virginia? Don't you have any*

*soul, the slightest bit of honor or integrity, the –*

Screaming, screaming, screaming at him, her hands white on the wheel, unaware of the road, of where she was going, of anything but the hatred that gripped her like a god and would not let her go.

Virginia was, of course, distraught that her father – again – didn't come to see her, but Elizabeth made excuses, and though they both felt thoroughly abandoned, the mother and daughter had a good enough afternoon together.

To make up for coming a little late, Elizabeth took Virginia out to dinner when visiting was over, and by the time she dropped her off and got back to the Captain's House, it was after 10:00 PM.

The front door was locked, but the small key on the same ring as her room key opened it, and Elizabeth eased quietly into the house, her overnight bag slung over her shoulder, and locked the door behind her.

Even in the dim light of the lamp still burning on the desk, Elizabeth could sense the magnificence of the place – the grace of the tall bay window, the elegance of the furnishings, the intricacy of the plaster work, the fineness of the wood.

She made her way up the stairs and across the barely lighted hall, fumbled at the door with the unfamiliar key, and entered the room.

There was no light on, and the open bay window framed like a painting the moonlit harbor. Unwilling to give up that view, Elizabeth lay her overnight bag on the bed. By moonlight she found a

nightgown, closed the bag, and put it on the floor.

She took off her clothes, put on the nightgown, and crept into the plump, cozy four-poster bed. The one in which Ephraim and Henrietta shared their hatred, and Josiah and Henrietta shared their brief love. The one which Ephraim's ghost visited, and in a savage rage attempted to kill the newly wedded couple for the crime of replacing him. The one which, if the old woman were to be believed, Ephraim's ghost would haunt this very night, hoping to take Henrietta with him into the underworld, and at last be at peace.

Except that Henrietta was already in the underworld, supposedly buried behind this house for the express purpose of haunting him.

There was a self-created hell, she thought. The two of them each year re-enacting their hatred, never letting go of it, in a ritual that would go on until the end of time.

Poor things! They must both have had more than enough of it!

Elizabeth laughed at herself. What was she thinking about? She didn't believe in ghosts.

She must have fallen asleep because the next thing she knew she was awakened by the sense that someone was standing over her. She opened her eyes and since the moon had set could see almost nothing. The bay window showed only a few scattered lights around the harbor. But someone, or some thing, was definitely there.

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw a black mass hovering near the night table. Her heart

froze, and for a moment she hoped she was dreaming.

The mass moved, straightened up, and came to the edge of the bed. She cringed beneath the sheet, unable from fright to move, and the figure began to moan, a moan of pain and devastation that Elizabeth could barely imagine, and to sway above her.

She felt a drop of water on her forehead, then another on her throat. The moaning became louder and more unbearable, and then Elizabeth felt cold fingers clutch her throat, the bloated, drowned face of Captain Ephraim Cosgrove descended towards her, and with a scream that she couldn't scream Elizabeth finally realized who the old woman was, and why she had rented her that room on August 12th.