

Seven years into her ill-fitted marriage to Federal Agent Dru O'Neil, Elise had enough of bomb squads, gun raids, and surveillance missions. The once prominent investment broker secretly sets out to reclaim her own self-worth.

THE AGENT'S WIFE

By Carol Morley

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CAROL MORLEY

THE
AGENT'S
WIFE

A NOVEL

Crime was a constant which too often invaded the threshold of her home.

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Beyond Public Image

DIMINISHED

Dru would never understand her need for therapy. As far as he knew, his wife was taking a sculpturing class at Georgetown University on Tuesday afternoons. It wasn't as if he would be curious, not enough to ask to see her art projects. These days, his mind was self-contained in the going and coming of snipers, arsonists, and terrorists. As long as there were clean socks and underwear in the bottom draw, he was content.

Doctor Katz greeted Élise O'Neil with his hand extended and directed her into his office. She sat on the plush leather sofa feeling like Alice in Wonderland in the strangeness of her surroundings. "There's no reason to be nervous," he said, placing a glass of water and a box of tissue next to her. He watched as she tucked her long, dark hair neatly behind each ear as if to better organize her thoughts. He couldn't help but

notice his new patient appeared less photo-shopped than the host of glammed-up women he counseled each day. Instead of fake eyelashes, plumped-up lips, and salon manufactured tans, she let her natural, girlish good-looks speak for themselves. How refreshing! It was a message he attempted to preach at home to his two teenage daughters. *But then I digress*, he thought.

“Shall we begin?” he ventured, getting down to the business at hand.

It was like watching her life flash across the big screen as Élise began to explain how, in seven years of marriage, her life had gone from negotiating million-dollar investment deals to squabbling with the butcher over the price of pork chops.

“So, you feel diminished?” he summarized.

“Yes, diminished. It’s as though I’m living someone else’s life. Certainly not mine. This is not the life I imagined. It’s like I have everything, but I have nothing.”

The doctor recognized her in the face of a hundred other women who sat in the same seat, divulging the identical story of an unrewarding marriage in which they were lost. It seemed the higher they registered on the economic chain, the more desolate their situation. With perfectly manicured nails and sculpted bodies, they slumped in despair, sniffing into fistfuls of tissue, while choking on their own words. Unlike the others, however, he couldn’t help but notice, Élise O’Neil had yet to shed a single tear.

Doctor Katz, a tall dark-haired man, was beautifully accessorized from his custom-tailored tie to his alligator

leather shoes. His long fingers looked as though they had never known a callous. He scribbled a single word on his tablet now and again without looking down or losing eye contact. "So, you say your husband has no idea you're here?" he asked without judgment. "Why is that?"

Élise confessed, since the birth of her third son, there were a number of things she was keeping from her husband. "First and foremost, I'm planning to leave him," she stated, as though it were hardly worth mentioning.

"That is a major decision!" he replied, his previously expressionless face displaying concern. "When did these thoughts of leaving your marriage begin?"

"Oh, Doctor Katz," she sighed. "When have I not thought about leaving? It's the *how* and *when* that fills my every waking hour. This past year, I've had plenty of empty hours to carefully think it through."

"I see," he said, with a furrowed brow. "Earlier, you referred to your recent pregnancy as your pregnancy from hell," he probed with an empathetic tone.

"Yes," she uttered softly, head down, as if she thought an apology necessary.

"Pregnancy for many women can be a difficult time," Dr. Katz added gently, mindful of the havoc hormones often play in a woman's body and mind. Even so, his sixth sense told him, in this instance, he was dealing with more than a common case of postpartum blues.

Élise wasn't in the habit of sharing details of her dismal married life. It wouldn't be easy, but nevertheless, she would

have to put her trust in someone. Dr. Katz was, perhaps, her only hope.

“This might take longer than you care to hear,” she smiled, turning to the notebook she had brought along.

“Take your time,” he said, returning the smile. “That’s what I’m here for.”

With a deep breath, she settled into the oversized sofa, and in a confident voice began to tell her story, listening, as though she too were hearing it for the first time.

PRINCE HAL

Oliver and Will were asleep, soundly burrowed beneath pillowed feather comforters. Élise smiled in the darkened silence to the quiet sounds of their trusting breath. It was the purring of puppies when they snore; sounds that restored one's sense of purpose and of self.

Slipping from the boys' room, she trudged down the hallway before tumbling into her side of the empty, king size bed. Shivering at the chill of the sheets through the layers of bedclothes, she flipped on the preset radio resting on the nightstand. The late-night drone of *Coast to Coast* helped ease the eerie darkness of the room. Ironically, the silky voice of the radio talk show host comforted her with his real and imagined myths of ghostly demons and pending national disasters. Visions of space alien abductions permeated her mind as she drifted into an unsound sleep.

Suddenly, Élise sprang upright in bed at the piercing sound of a barking dog, made all the more alarming since the O'Neils did not own a dog! "What the...?" Jumping to her feet while still half asleep, she waddled down the unlit hallway, clinging to the wall, and clutching her pillow to her chest.

"Quiet, Hal!" a man's gruff voice rang out in a hushed holler. "Get over here, boy," said the voice at the foot of the stairs as the front door hurled itself shut behind him. The lights turned on in the downstairs study as three burly men deposited heavy wooden crates onto the thickly carpeted floor.

Dru met her at the foot of the stairs. "Sorry, hon. We have the bomb dog with us and he gets mouthy in the aftermath of a gun raid," he said apologetically, brushing a kiss on her cheek, and rushing off to join the others.

It was 4:20 a.m.

"You scared me to death," Élise said, left standing alone on the staircase, her heart pounding like a jack hammer.

Two of the agents were unloading boxes in Dru's study. The third was in the corner, emptying a manila folder stuffed with mug shots. The now silent barking dog moved cautiously as Élise entered the doorway, a restless growl throttling in his throat. His bottom teeth were aligned and Élise could see saliva seeping from both sides of his mouth. She cowered past him, avoiding eye contact. The certified explosives detection canine brushed her leg with his practiced nose before settling down.

“Get over here, Hal!” said Agent Paul Martin, quick to recognize unadulterated fear on the face of his terrified hostess.

“Thanks, Paul,” she said gratefully, inching her way to the corner desk.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he said, gallantly kissing her hand, and guiding her to the over-stuffed leather chair. Seated amid the assembly of broad-shouldered men, her swollen, pregnant body felt grossly conspicuous though no one except Paul and the bomb dog paid her any notice.

The two younger men and her husband focused exclusively on dismantling the contents of the cartons. One by one, the rifles were laid side by side on the tarp surface. “Holy Jesus, if we didn’t hit the mother lode,” said Dru, holding a sawed off shot gun into the light like a kid on Christmas morning who had just unwrapped his first BB gun. With rubber gloves, the trio examined each piece of the cargo with the satisfaction of felons fingering embezzled currency. Élise felt more like the devoted wife of a mobster after a heist than an innocent spouse awakened from a dead sleep by the fervor of an ATF firearms bust.

“Now that’s one scary dude,” Paul said, surveying a photo of a man with gaping hollows where teeth ought to be.

Élise leaned over, gazing at the image of the young man whose life was reduced to a series of numbers running along the border of the print. 4593. She read the numbers, staring at the photo as one stares at a fatal wreckage. This whole business frightened her but she was indirectly a part of it whether she liked it or not. Crime was a constant, which too

often invaded the threshold of her home. She wondered how its ugliness would eventually affect her children as they became more and more aware. Oliver carried a mock badge in his rear pocket, pining for the day when he would become an agent. As if by osmosis, he had already adopted his father's strange way of probing every situation with painstaking scrutiny, to the point of alarming his preschool teachers.

Paul winced, tossing the photo back to the top of the pile. Élise couldn't help but stare into the blackness of the suspect's eyes in search of a trace of self-worth, a hint of self-respect. At any moment, she expected a grief-stricken woman to storm into the room, and drop to her knees, begging for compassion for her son. His innocence she would defend with her last breath. In the darkness of the city, multitudes of inconsolable mothers lay awake, praying for the young men whose photos now sprawled atop her husband's littered desk. Élise shuddered at the thought, grateful that both her young sons lay safely asleep in their beds.

Prince Hal, the yellow Labrador Retriever, pawed his way around the room, and saddled himself adjacent to the weapons. His canine eyes oozed disapproval as they remained guardedly fixated upon Élise's stiffened bare feet.

"He's likes you," Paul said teasingly. "You just don't want to be overly anxious, or move abruptly, or he'll take you down like a sumo wrestler." Bomb dogs were primarily interested in inanimate objects. That's what guaranteed their next meal. Hal was trained to uncover explosives, not to exchange particulars with an agent's wife.

“I’ll remember that,” she promised, cautiously retracting her legs from the dog’s reach. ATF’s finest breed continued to eye her ankles as though they were a rib roast. His eyes darted back and forth, from the illegal stash of guns to her bare feet, as though connecting dots. Élise shrunk deeper into the safety of the cowhide leather chair in an unobtrusive attempt to exude trust, and lessen Hal’s groundless misgivings.

Paul studied the photo of a Caucasian male searching for certifiable markings. Agent Martin was the only friendly face in the room. Élise and the children had long adopted him as a family friend. *How was it he’s still single? Makes no sense.*

He and Dru began working together more than eight years ago. They were both transferred to the D.C. Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) central office from New York City. At thirty-five, Paul’s boyish good looks and dark skin typecast him as the textbook undercover agent for the bureau’s top juvenile linked cases; cases involving eighteen-to-twenty-one-year-old gang members. As a black man, he had lived a privileged life. The son of an influential corporate attorney, he earned a law degree from the University of Virginia.

First to poke fun at himself, he laughed heartily, sharing details of an assignment as a part-time server at a burger joint in Baltimore. “Only in the movies do agents get the undercover jobs with the penthouse, the Porsche, and the girl! Me, I get a baseball cap, and an apron,” he would joke.

Dru and the two kneeling agents were inspecting and inputting make, model, and serial numbers of the rifles and handguns into their database without speaking to each other, except through eye contact, nods, and gestures. It was clear to Élise that these bounty hunters would be non-responsive to anything she might add to their non-conversation. As for Prince Hal, his heaving breath appeared to rise and ebb in response to each repositioning of her limbs. She was the intruder in his domain.

“Can I put a pot of coffee on for you guys?” she offered, purposely confronting the more offensive of the two men who kneeled on all fours. As he rose, revealing his towering height, the unshaven, muscular man begrudgingly nodded as if he had just consented to ingesting calamine lotion in order to rid himself of a pesky rash.

“No problem,” she grunted back, easing her way past the growling Prince Hal to the open door. “I’ll get right on it,” she said, heading for the kitchen, and leaving the men and their dog to do what they loved best. Wallowing in crime.

This was not the first time Dru and his buddy agents set up shop at the house in the middle of the night, though it never failed to alarm her. The sight of sawed-off shotguns, hand guns, and ammunition violated her sense of being, and left her feeling defiled. Weapons were physical reminders of the dangers of her husband’s work. Knowing a .40 caliber handgun was resting beneath the bed stand, or watching Dru slip into his holster and bulletproof vest before leaving the house, would never seem ordinary. She never lost sight of the bulge beneath her husband’s jacket, knowing he was armed,

whether attending the Saturday matinee of *Bambi*, or high mass at Washington National Cathedral. *How could that be normal?*

She envied other women whose husbands pulled into the driveway nightly at 6:00 p.m. to take part in a routine dinner hour, where family debated insignificant events. If only she had married any one of the men who had all but stalked her the years at the brokerage firm. There was the banker, the attorney, and the dentist. Frankly, even that short, shoe salesman from the Bronx seemed intriguing as she now plodded her way to the kitchen. What's the worst he would have brought home in the middle of the night? Maybe mismatched Manolo Blahniks.

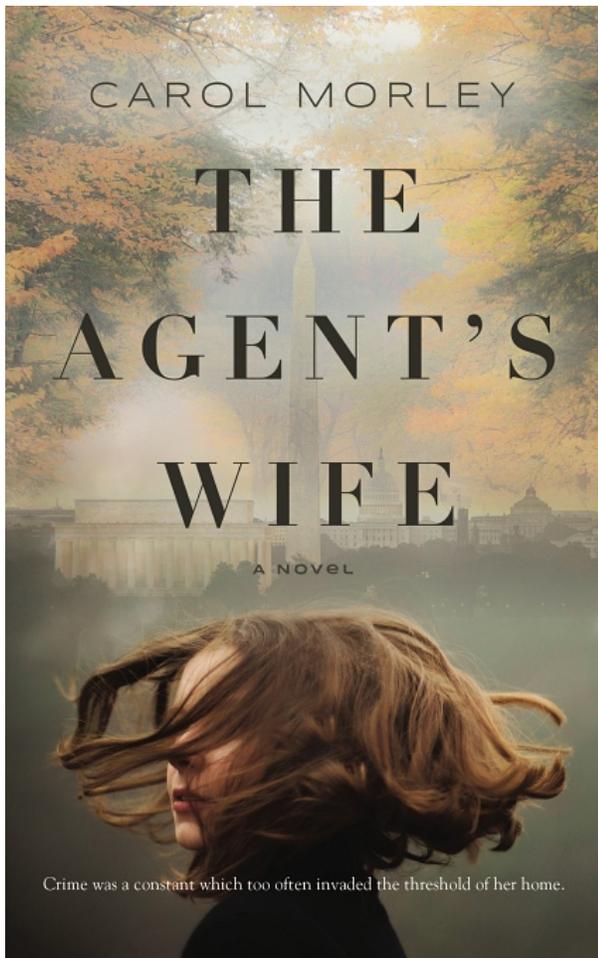
The pantry door slammed shut behind her, empathizing its displeasure at her plight. It was, after all, an ungodly hour. The coffee trickled into the pot, slowly filling the kitchen with an aroma that induced conversation. Élise heard herself replying to the bubbling inquiries of the steamy brown brew. "If your husband, who you hadn't seen in two days, turned up unannounced in the middle of the night with a troop of G-men and a truckload of weaponry, how would you feel?" The pot snapped back with a loud, bristling gurgle, its red light blinking on and off.

Paul Martin was ATF's rare exception. Despite the odds, he had succeeded in maintaining a healthy persona. It seemed the ATF academy in Georgia turned out armies of gingerbread men, oven baked at 400 degrees for exactly six months of arduous training, crisped to specifications. Except, now they interrogated rather than inquired, expected rather

than requested, petitioned rather than coaxed, and served rather than cared. Their cookie cutout bodies, armed and credentialed, buff and sinewy, reentered the real world speaking a new language; the language of weaponry, car bombings, explosives and snipers. They formed a people of and unto themselves. *G-men should have their own country*, she thought.

Through the hallway she caught a glimpse of her husband who had spent the better part of the last forty-eight hours holed up in an unheated surveillance van while munching on beef jerky and pretzel sticks, and washed down with Pepsi and Sprite. His work was grueling and dangerous but he wouldn't have it any other way. The reality was that his wife and children could never come first. And, now there would be a new child. Pouring cream into grandmother Saint-Cyr's cut-glass pitcher, and sugar into its matching bowl, Élise surmised the coffeemaker with a grain of skepticism.

"Can I trust you?" she asked. The pot remained silent. Élise took that for a yes. "My marriage, it's in trouble." There, she'd finally said it. The pot didn't look surprised. "I guess you already knew, huh?" The two quietly shared a moment like two friends openly confronted by a mutual problem. Gathering four coffee mugs from the armoire, she filled each cup with a steady hand. "Can we talk about this again later?" she whispered, while propping the tray on the shelf of her extended belly. The half-empty pot vibrated as it watched her walk away.



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