

*Thieves Never Steal  
in the Rain*



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*Marisa Labozzetta*



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*For Ethan and Luke*

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# Villa Foresta



It was raining on the Good Friday they arrived in Rome, coming down with a vengeance. The agent at the car rental said it had been going on like that for three days: water pooling in the narrow streets as well as in the piazzas; low temperatures and wind—unseasonable weather for March.

They had already dived head first into a disagreement about whether to purchase car insurance. Elliott hated paying the exorbitant fee; he liked to gamble that way. Of course, there was the time someone hit their passenger door at an Auto Grill in Naples while they were inside buying prosciutto and provolone panini. Two days later, someone stole the side-view mirror at a remote *agriturismo*. The damages had cost twice as much as the week's rental fee.

"But that was in the south," Elliott said. "What's the chance of it happening here?"

"Sure. No one ever has accidents in central Italy," Joanna said. "And everyone is honest."

It irked him the way she played by the rules. She paid her bills the day they arrived. Elliot, on the other hand, wrote the due dates of his on their envelopes, which he kept in chronological order on his desk and mailed no more than

three days in advance. Occasionally he forgot and had to pay a late fee. It infuriated her, but Elliott shrugged off the loss as a fair exchange for the interest he usually earned from money that remained in his bank account rather than in that of some utility or credit card company. He took the insurance this time, however; anything to make her happy these days.

She pulled the lapels of her raincoat tighter as they drove on the *autostrada*, unable to rid herself of the clamminess and feeling like a damsel in a British movie in need of the only cure for such ills—a cup of tea. He turned on the heat with some reluctance. After all, it was spring.

A fuzzy handwritten fax with directions to the villa lay on her lap. They were expected for dinner that evening; with a good hour-and-forty-minute drive ahead of them, she fished in her bag for some trail mix.

The travel bag had too many compartments, and it took her forever to locate anything, from her passport to a pack of gum. After unzipping and zipping several pockets, she handed Elliott an open sandwich bag from which he took a fistful of the contents, nearly emptying it. She, for her part, put a single almond or raisin into her mouth and rolled it around until she extracted all the saltiness or sweetness it had to offer. She then bit into its new softer state and chewed it well before swallowing. Each colorful M&M lay on her tongue like the Eucharistic host and remained there until the outer coating dissolved, leaving only the smooth chocolate center. The dry bump of chocolate clung to her tongue, grew smaller and smaller, and, when she could hold on to it no longer, vanished. As the commercial used to say: “Melts in your mouth, not in your hand.”

Of course they never melted in Elliott's hand, since he shoveled a mound of Trail Mix into his mouth, and with a few loud chews and a giant swallow, it was gone, sucked in like dirt up a vacuum cleaner hose. Although he denied it, she knew that eating was how he dealt with Jill's death. He had gained 35 pounds since the accident; he weighed 220 and counting.

He took another handful of trail mix and caught her look of disapproval. "What?" He barked.

She didn't answer.

"I eat too much. I'm a pig. That's what you think, isn't it? That's what you've always thought."

"It's not healthy."

"Nuts? Raisins?"

"Elliott."

"I know, Joanna. Everything in moderation. That's your motto. Better yet, that's your father's motto—the Marco Ficola motto."

"You know what I think."

"It's sublimation. So what if it is? You, on the other hand, can't let go of anything."

"That's right. Make light of your vice even if it ends up killing you."

"I've got to make light of something. You carry enough pessimism around to sink both of us."

His last sentence rang out loud and clear, uttered in the cessation of the rain as they entered a long mountain tunnel. She became claustrophobic in tunnels, and Elliott always tried to talk her through them. Even now, he made the effort.

"The Italians might have known that you can't move mountains, but they sure figured out how to barrel through



them,” he said. Once, in the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, he’d actually managed to make her laugh.

\*\*\*

It had long grown dark by the time they exited the *autostrada*. They sat for a few moments at a confluence of several smaller roads, studying a totem pole of signs that pointed in various directions. The “Gronda” sign seemed to suggest a road to the left. Elliott turned. After a while they came to a dead end and a decaying factory. Elliott drove back to the intersection. His stomach growled; a hunger headache throbbed at Joanna’s temples. They took another wrong road and returned to the intersection. No one from whom they might ask directions appeared.

Elliott had insisted on booking a room at Villa Foresta, but Joanna would have been content to stay with her family. How could she pass up the chance to be alone with him in a bed in a hotel room? He had asked. How was it any different than being alone in their own bed in their own house? She wanted to know. Did hotel rooms do weird things to all men? Signal torrid lovemaking, hedonism unattainable in daily living? That was unfair: there was a time when she too had relished the chance to hole up with Elliott for several days, but that seemed like a lifetime ago. Before marriage. Before the birth of their daughter. Before her death. Now Joanna just took each day as it came—her breath held in anticipation, as though the future were perched high on a cliff, ready at the least provocation to sail down, crash into the ocean, and be silenced forever. She wondered how two people who had loved so passionately could have such

misconceptions about each other, how a common grief could push them apart.

“We should have stayed at my aunt and uncle’s. You know they won’t hide the fact that we’ve insulted them,” she said.

“It’s an act.”

“I can’t believe you said that.”

“It’s true. Your father told me.”

“Well, I can’t believe he said that about his own brother. He just gets upset that this brother never visits the brothers who live in the States.”

“He’s got a point. Yet you and your father keep coming here.”

“We love it here.”

Up hills, down hills, around bends, through a small town, into desolation. The fog was thick and eerie. Why did they always end up searching for a place to stay in pitch blackness? Everything was so much more difficult in the dark, laden with a sense of urgency and desperation.

“Let’s return to Go and start over,” she said.

“Just a little longer.” Elliott dragged out the words as though he were talking to a patient he was stitching up in the ER.

After about a mile, a sign on their left indicated the villa. The gate was open, smoke rose from the chimney. They drove up the graveled drive to the long stone building and parked beside a horseshoe-shaped wooden portal.

Thanks to a lengthy layover in Zurich, they had been traveling for nearly 26 hours, and she just wanted to stop moving. Lately, a growing antsiness afflicted her on trips; being confined for longer than two hours nearly drove her

crazy. Elliott loved long car rides; he loved to travel. So had she once, but she'd become restless, fidgeting in her seat like a toddler. At least on planes she could read, or use the excuse of avoiding jet lag to drug herself. In cars, however, it was impossible to glance at print without being overwhelmed by nausea, and beyond the first hour Elliott and Joanna fell silent.

\*\*\*

"Buonasera!" Joanna called out, her voice bouncing around the terra-cotta floors, the white plaster walls, the dark wooden beams. She inhaled the aroma of roasting meat.

"Buonasera," someone sang from the kitchen beyond the vacant dining room.

In a moment, Paolo appeared, rubbing his hands together in eagerness to greet his guests, then pushing his black-rimmed glasses further up the bridge of his nose to see his guests more clearly. "Signora Ficola, *benvenuta*."

"This is my husband, Elliott," she said in Italian.

"*Benvenuto*, Signor Ficola."

Elliott stammered in the little Italian he knew to explain that his surname was not Ficola but Blake. He failed and remained Signor Ficola.

Paolo didn't ask for their passports or give them identification cards to fill out. She couldn't tell if he was acting out of kindness, since they stood before him like two refugees emerging from a tempest, or negligence.

He pointed to their bags. "Leave everything here for now. Come. I've prepared a special dinner for you. *Prego*."

They followed him into the dining room, where a table set for two faced a large hearth in which a few flames

struggled with damp wood. Still, the fire cast off enough heat to warm them. When she told Paolo that it smelled good, he smiled with pride, the eyes behind his glasses widening.

“Are there any other guests?” she asked.

“Only you. It’s still off-season.” His gaze lingered on them for an awkward moment as though he were waiting for them to ask another question. Then he returned to the kitchen.

“Odd fella,” Elliott said. “Did you notice his hands? They’re enormous for such a little guy. He looks like Mickey Mouse.”

“You know what they say about big hands.”

“I’d like to disprove that theory once and for all,” Elliott said, an allusion to his small hands and ample penis.

The demanding weight of expectation rose around them like the fog they had just escaped. No other guests to wonder about, whose relationships they could conjecture upon, and on whose childrearing capabilities they could pass judgment. No conversations on which to eavesdrop. No other lives to imagine. Just Elliott and Joanna.

\*\*\*

Paolo brought their antipasto: a plate filled with crostini, hot peppers stuffed with tuna and a slice of prosciutto.

“Do you like *pappardelle*?”

“Oh yes,” she said.

“I’ve prepared it especially for you. But I confess that the peppers are sent from my mother.”

The pasta, light and topped with a smattering of tomato sauce, slid down their throats.

She had been starving, and she ate so fast that, by the time the grilled sausages came, she could barely finish one. She gave the remaining two to Elliott, who downed them along with his own three, the potatoes, and green salad.

“Now I have a very special dessert for you.” Paolo added that it too had been made by his mother. He brought them fruit fermented in liquor, and some biscotti.

While the meal was delicious, it was simpler than Joanna had expected to be served at an inn. It was as though Paolo had tried to make as elegant a meal as he could from staples and his mother’s leftovers.

After dinner, Elliott went back to the car for the luggage. Since they were the only guests and it was raining, Paolo said they could leave the car out front for the night instead of in the parking lot down the hill.

“Did you lock the car door?” Joanna asked Elliott when he returned dripping wet once again.

“Don’t worry, signora,” Paolo said. “Thieves never steal in the rain. If they were that ambitious, they would get a real job.”

Elliott smiled when she translated; she knew he was thinking that perhaps he and Paolo were of like minds. Elliott carried the bags upstairs.

Joanna moved her chair directly in front of the fireplace, kicked off her shoes, and placed her feet on the low wall of the hearth. She began to peel the chestnuts Paolo had roasted in the fire. Chestnuts. They were something her father prepared every holiday. He used a sharp paring knife and made a cross through the shell. Then he soaked the chestnuts in water and waited until the family was just about to sit at the table before he put them into the oven.

## Deluxe Meatloaf



"Sorry I'm late, honey." Rosemary was a ball of energy, never coming up for air. "Was this the only seat? Did you ask? I hate sitting in the middle of a restaurant like this. I really don't feel like seeing anyone tonight. I'd rather hide in our little corner by the kitchen."

"I didn't ask for another seat," Nate said.

"Why not?"

"Because I just didn't. It wasn't that important."

"To you."

"Look, Rosie, you're the one with the secret identity. Everyone knows who I am."

"Lots of people know who I am."

"Are we going to start counting names?" Nate asked.

"I'm too hungry. Let's order first." She opened her menu and scanned the pages.

"I already did."

She looked up surprised. "How come?" she asked.

"I don't know. I just felt like it. I've been sitting here for some time."

"I hope you told the waiter not to bring your meal until mine came."

"He'll get the idea."

“What did you order?”

“The usual,” he said. “Two Lovers.”

“I don’t feel like shrimp tonight.”

“You didn’t order it. I did.”

“But we always share, Nate.”

“Well, we don’t have to tonight.”

“What bug’s up your ass?”

The couple across the aisle turned their heads to get a look at the woman with the dirty mouth in the jeans and white pullover sitting across from the man in the gray pin-striped suit, white shirt, and red tie.

“Mind lowering your voice? Nothing like not wanting to be noticed.” Nate took a sip of his margarita.

Rosemary laughed. It was throaty like a smoker’s laugh.

“I don’t know why you insist on drinking margaritas with Thai food,” she said. “Margaritas are for Mexican food.”

“What does it matter? They’re both spicy foods. Would it make you feel better if I called it a *loi krathong*?”

“Is that Thai for margarita?”

“No, it’s some Buddhist holiday I read about that they celebrate in Thailand.”

“I’ll have a *loi krathong*, please,” Rosemary told the waiter, who had approached the table pen and pad in hand.

Nate shook his head in disbelief. The waiter furrowed his brow.

“Just kidding. A glass of Chardonnay, please. And a tom yum soup, and the pad thai with chicken. You can bring it all at once.” She closed her menu with the finality of finishing a five-hundred-page novel.

“Did I embarrass you?” she asked Nate.

“I stopped taking responsibility for my wife’s actions a long time ago.”

“That’s a good answer. I should jot that down for my column.”

“I probably got it from your column.”

\*\*\*

When Nate had phoned that afternoon, Rosemary had been answering her favorite letter of the day, one that would surely make it into her column:

*Dear Lydia,*

*I’m fourteen and would like to be able to talk to my mother about sex, but I can’t bring myself to say anything. She’s never brought up the subject. Do you know what would make it easier for me to open up to her? I have a steady boyfriend and need to make some decisions very soon. Please help before it’s too late.*

*Too Shy in Torrington*

(Of course she wasn’t Lydia. Lydia had choked on the olive in her daily martini ten years before. No one had suspected that she was 82 until the obituary appeared, because she had used the same photograph for 50 years on the column syndicated to 23 small New England newspapers. When Rosemary was asked to become the new Lydia, she was told that she could change neither the picture nor the name.)

Rosemary had suggested that the troubled teenager prepare meatloaf for her tired working mother. Even if the



mother didn't work, she was a bad cook, Rosemary was certain. This was about building courage and self-esteem—confidence. If she could whip up a meatloaf with roasted potatoes, peas, and a salad, she could approach her mother about any subject. Meatloaf was perfect, a comfort food that could be prepared by a novice with relative ease. She attached her recipe for Deluxe Meatloaf to her e-mail response.

Maybe tonight Rosemary would make meatloaf herself, she had thought. Nate loved meatloaf—hers, that is. His mother's meatloaf had been one giant burnt hamburger. That had been Thursday's meal. The other days of the week she had turned out something equally bland and overcooked: gristly steak on Sunday, spaghetti with ketchup on Monday, broiled-to-death chicken on Tuesday, salt-encrusted cod on Wednesday, and cold pizza delivered on Friday. The chicken reappeared on Saturday. The same menu was repeated every week. She considered fresh vegetables too much trouble, so she boiled canned peas for twenty minutes to feel, Rosemary guessed, as though she was really cooking. Yes, today would have been a good cold day to turn on the oven and bake a meatloaf, but then Nate called to suggest dining out.

"It was going to be meatloaf—one of your favorites," she had told him.

"It's all my favorite."

"With mashed potatoes."

"I'd really like to go out."

"Got a yen for something?"

"Anything. I don't really care."

"So why do we have to go out?"

"You know, most women would love for their husbands to take them out."

# Acknowledgements



Throughout the writing of this book my parents were healthy and of sound mind. However, this is very much a book about the supernatural, as well as love, and loss, and I feel compelled to say that, while I was writing about a beloved home going up in flames, a neighbor's house burned down. By the time this printed edition of the collection emerged, my father had developed cancer, albeit a different form than Marco's, and died, and my mother was indeed suffering from dementia.

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Several of these stories have previously appeared in a somewhat different form in literary magazines and journals: “The Swap” and “Pretty Face” in *Perigee*; “Comfort Me, Stranger” in *American Fiction*; and “Forecast for a Sunny Day” in *Italian Americana*.

## About the Author



Marisa Labozzetta is the author of the award-winning novel *Sometimes it Snows in America*, and *Stay With Me, Lella*. Her collection of stories, *At the Copa*, was a finalist for the 1999 Binghamton University John Gardner Fiction Award and received a Pushcart nomination. *Thieves Never Steal in the Rain* was an Eric Hoffer eBook award winner. Her work has appeared in *The American Voice*, *Beliefnet.com*, *The Florida Review*, *The Penguin Book of Italian American Writing*, *Show Me a Hero: Great Contemporary Stories About Sports*, *When I Am an Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple*, among other publications. She lives in Northampton, Massachusetts.

A reading group guide to *Thieves Never Steal in the Rain* is available at [www.marisalabozzetta.com](http://www.marisalabozzetta.com).