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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 piazze; 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.

Sometimes he forgot them and they burned; sometimes he forgot to put them into the oven altogether. But there were times when they were warm and soft and smooth, and the shell slipped right off when you peeled it back from the starlike points of the cross that had curled upward.

She thought of her father now, back in Boston recovering from pneumonia. He was too weak to make the trip to be with his youngest brother, who had remained in Italy with Joanna’s grandparents when her father and the rest of his brothers emigrated. She’d had trouble deciding whether or not she should be away from her father at this time, which was probably why she had come: to lighten the onus of responsibility and, of course, to satisfy Elliott’s desire for them to get away. Her mother was with her father; they hadn’t left each other’s side for as long as Joanna could remember—just in case. If something were to happen to him in her mother’s absence, after fifty-two years of marriage, she would never have been able to forgive herself. Growing up, Joanna had thought their relationship smothering. They were co-dependents in neuroses, always waiting for the other shoe to drop in a fatalistic approach to life Joanna could never, as a young adult, comprehend. Now she coveted the endearment in their fear of letting go.

Joanna hadn’t been with Jill when she died, and in the last three and a half years barely a night had gone by without her dreaming about her daughter. Parents are supposed to protect their offspring, ward off evil spirits. If you turn away from the crib for a second, she might suffocate. If you send her up on that jungle gym and blink, you might miss her fall.

Joanna’s father, however, hadn’t tried to stop Joanna from attending his brother’s anniversary party, though she
knew he worried whenever she went away. Before she left, he would dig his calloused hands into her shoulders and stare into her eyes as though he might never see them again: something might happen to him and she wouldn’t be there; something might happen to her.

“Is there anything else I can get for you?” Paolo asked. “I’m never moving from this spot,” she told him.

“You like the fire?” He was pleased.

“Very much.”

“Che tempaccio!” He indicated the beating of the rain against the windows.

“What’s the forecast?”

“Three more days of the same.”

“What time is breakfast?” she asked.

“Whenever you like, signora.” He waved his hands in the air as if to say: What does it matter? You’re the only ones here.

“Eight-thirty or nine?”

“Va bene.”

They said goodnight. She tore herself away from the fire and went up to the apartment and Elliott.

***

With their pick of apartments in the empty villa, and all for the same price, they had chosen the largest of the three. It was ridiculously big for two people: two living rooms of substantial size, a bedroom, a full kitchen, and a big sunroom with a dining set. Elliott was already asleep, fully clothed on the bed, when she arrived. He had placed her suitcase on a chair and unzipped it for her. She fumbled through it in the dark, feeling for the silk of her pajamas, and undressed in the bathroom so as not to wake him. She was too tired to wash. In her head she heard a movie star she had once seen on TV explain the secret of her flawless complexion: “Never, never, no matter how tired I am or how late it is, do I go to bed without washing my face.”

“Well, lady, you’re a better woman than I am—or a liar,” Joanna whispered.

In bed, she studied her husband as her eyes adjusted to the dark: sparse strands of hair, translucent eyelids, wafer-thin cheeks veined with fine red capillaries. Everything appeared so delicate, everything but his belly, which seemed to be growing like a woman’s whose gestation was the time that had elapsed since Jill’s death. By Joanna’s calculations, he would have been forty-two months pregnant. She tried to remember the excitement she’d felt during their first years together, when her attraction to this slender, calm, and very American-looking man had nearly consumed her. It should have been just an affair, she decided.

They lay there, the bed linens a barrier between them. He slipped his hand under the sheet and it found its way to one of her breasts.

“You should get undressed,” she said.

“So should you,” he mumbled, eyes still closed.

“I am.”

“Mmm.” The cadence of this murmur indicated disappointment that she was wearing anything at all.

“Someday I’d like you to come to bed naked.”

“You know I need to warm up first.”

“After all that time in front of the fire, I’d say you ought to be well done.”
hand-picked or raked the olives from the branches, then they gathered them into sacks and brought them into the cantina, where, covering the ground-level room like a rich black carpet, they were left to dry before being taken to be pressed. Jill’s new sneakers had gotten coated with mud, and Joanna’s aunt tried to clean them with a hand brush and a basin of soapy water. The stains remained, but neither Joanna nor Jill cared. They felt they had earned the bottles of Umbrian olive oil—the best Italy has to offer, according to Joanna’s uncle—that they would take back home.

The cantina now held two long tables that stretched the room’s entire length, with enough canapés and cakes on them to feed 100 guests, though only about 40 were delicately picking at the array. Joanna placed her gift, which now seemed paltry compared to the others, on the table where unwrapped presents like those of a young bride were displayed: sets of ornately decorated demitasse cups, white satin sheets, silver vases, enormous majolica flower pots—all worthy of a couple starting out. Her aunt, tall and slim with her hair recently permed and brightened with a silver rinse, wore a black suit with a white blouse. Black because it was fashionable, or black because that’s what elderly Italian women wore? Black because she only had one good suit, or black because she could not allow herself to be too happy because she was still in mourning? Her uncle, a few inches shorter than her aunt and heavier, had also donned a black suit with a white shirt. With his full head of white hair and unlined olive complexion he was a younger copy of Joanna’s father. The Ficola men aged well, Joanna thought. “Mannaggia!” they said, hugging and kissing her and shaking her shoulders, cupping her face in their hands. “Mannaggia!” That’s what they always said when they first saw her. We can’t believe that you’ve come, that you’re here! It’s like a dream!

“So much time has gone by since your last visit,” her uncle said.

“Yes,” she said, somewhat apologetically.

“You know that we understand. Everything. You know that.”

“Yes.”

“You know how sorry we are for you and Elliott. For my brother and his wife.”

“I know. Thank you.” Her eyes became teary and she needed to change the subject, but he wouldn’t let her.

“It takes time, carissima. And even then, there is not enough time in all the world. You understand?”

She nodded, hot with discomfort, though she loved him more than ever at that moment. “But today is your day—yours and my aunt’s,” she insisted.

“Yes. Today is a happy day. I won’t see many more days like this one.”

Finally they were past it. It was over. Her uncle turned to greet other guests.

“Take it easy,” she reminded Elliott as he filled his plate. “Pace yourself. You know what’s coming.”

When everyone left for the church, she looked back at the table crammed with food that her cousins and aunt had worked all week to prepare. It appeared untouched.

***

With a children’s choir singing the praises of a risen Christ, her aunt and uncle renewed their vows during the Mass. They did not leave the church with the briskness of newlyweds,
As they drove past a field of poppies, she thought about her thawing garden back home. The daffodils would surely be blooming when they returned. Tulips would follow. Perennials were faithful that way. No matter how you neglected them, they never abandoned you. The storm clouds gathered on the horizon, signaling the new tempest Elliott and she were about to enter as they drew nearer to Rome. He could think her mad—they could all think her mad. Wasn’t that a natural consequence of losing a child? And it could pour every day for all she cared; that would keep the treasure she carried from Villa Foresta safe. After all, Paolo had said it: thieves never steal in the rain.

They entered the dark mountain tunnel and her usual feeling of panic washed over her. She gripped Elliott’s thigh; he placed his hand over hers and kept it there until the daylight drew them out. This time he didn’t speak. At the entrance to the autostrada, she went for the bag of trail mix and held it out to him, but he put up his hand like a crossing guard and shook his head.

“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.

“What did you order?” 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.”

“Okay. Okay.”

“Let’s meet at The King of Siam,” he suggested.

She had read a few more pleas for advice that would not appear in the column but to whose authors she provided swift and logical plans of action nevertheless: A happens and you do B; B happens and you do C. You cut yourself; you bleed. You commit certain actions; you take responsibility for them. To quote her mother, it was all bel e chiaro—nice and clear, neat and tidy. People made messes of their lives because they couldn’t simplify; they couldn’t see what was coming next. Blanch off the skin, trim the fat, skim the grease, clarify the stock, boil it down—reduce!

If people only lived their lives the way they cooked, they would find their burdens much lighter. But that was another problem: people didn’t cook anymore, couldn’t even follow a recipe, and the majority of counselors were telling them that it was okay in this busy world; in fact, it was necessary for survival. Boy, did they have it wrong. Family mealtime had become as archaic as tea aprons wrapped around shirtwaist dresses.

She had been covering the police log at the local paper, where she was notorious for giving advice to lovelorn young reporters, when she was recruited for the column. Her instant success came as no surprise to her friends and family. As far back as college, Rosemary had been the Dr. Joyce Brothers of Lyndon Hall—the guru of heartbreak, of parental discord, of misunderstandings between roommates. But Rosemary remained convinced that her secret lay in the fact that she provided a recipe in many of her responses. The volume of pleas for help was so great that she couldn’t give a recipe with every answer, so it became a lottery of sorts. It was like having the discount gold coin drop from
Then there was Nate, who thought he’d died and gone to heaven when he was invited to spend Christmas Eve with the Ficolas. He’d heard about the seven fishes Italians ate on The Eve, as they called it, but he’d never imagined the feast that would be set before him. Never mind seven fishes—there must have been 70, each prepared a different way. He proposed to Rosemary on Christmas morning.

He was a man with appetites, and Rosemary knew how to satisfy them. Though a clean and beautiful home, good conversation and a weekly paycheck were all very nice, sex and food was the glue that held their marriage together, the staples Nate couldn’t live without. And while middle age had dulled the frequency of the former, the certainty of a healthy and creative meal every day, she knew, sustained him now more than ever. Providing good food to those one loved was, perhaps, the greatest gift of self.

When early in their marriage, Nate used to work late hours, Rosemary never failed to eat with her children at the normal dinner time and discuss the day’s happenings. A colorful plateful (indicative of a balanced meal) covered with waxed paper and ready for the microwave awaited Nate upon his return home. In fact a dish still waited for him these days, when he couldn’t finish his paperwork or avoid evening meetings.

***

“Julia called me today. She has another exam tomorrow. That makes 25, and she’s not even midway through the semester.”

Rosemary took a sip of her Chardonnay.
“Med school’s not like college,” Nate said. “I got a text from Thomas today.”
“What’s new?”
“He’s about to take another group rafting down the Colorado. Maybe someday he’ll get a real job.”
“He has a real job. It makes him happy.”
The waiter delivered their meals, and Rosemary wasted no time digging in. Nate, on the other hand, pushed the food around with his fork.
“I really wish they had chopsticks here,” he said.
“They don’t usually use chopsticks in Thailand.”
“We’re not in Thailand. Besides, some Thai restaurants have chopsticks.”
“Only for the culturally confused like you, Nate.”
“And what about us? Are we confused?”
Nate asked that question with such regularity that Rosemary accepted the tedious dialogue that usually lifted him out of his doldrums as dutifully as the discomfort of her annual mammogram. It was always his needs that weren’t being met. Poor frustrated Nate. After they’d gone around in circles and she’d either convinced him that he was too demanding or promised to make a few changes, she usually steered the conversation in the direction of their retirement or vacation plans and ended it on a more upbeat note.
Tonight, however, she was a little surprised, since they had made love that morning, and lovemaking usually put him in a good mood for a few days. He worked too hard, and he was getting older and wearier. Just a few more years until Julia graduated, and then he could stop. And her? Maybe she’d take on an assistant. Yes, that would be the way to go, because she wasn’t ready to kick the bucket like dear old Lydia, even figuratively. She was kind of tired herself tonight, so she skipped over the messy stuff and headed straight for the happy ending.
“I know you want to go to Australia this spring, but I was thinking we could extend the vacation and go to Italy too. My cousin Joanna discovered a great villa.”
“I couldn’t take that kind of time.” He put down his fork and took a large gulp of his margarita.
“You’ve worked so hard to bring the company to where it is, and it’s only made more work for you.”
“That’s why it’d be nice if Thomas came into the business.”
“You had no interest in your father’s business.”
“That’s because my father was a pain in the ass. You know I couldn’t work with him.”
“What makes you so sure Thomas could work with you?”
The hurt look on his face brought her up short.
“I’m kidding. Look, he just needs to do his own thing. Who knows? Maybe in time he’ll want to sell insurance. You can hang on for a few more years, can’t you?”
He didn’t answer.
“Well?”
“Rosemary, there’s something I have to tell you.” He stared down at the table.
“Sounds serious.” She put a forkful of pad thai into her mouth. Her attempt to lighten the heavy part hadn’t worked.
“I’ve been seeing someone else,” he said in a low voice.
She stopped chewing. She wanted to spit the noodles out but opted to swallow them fast. She had to get rid of them.
“Another woman?”
“I feel terrible about it, but I’ve been warning you for years.”
“You’ve been seeing her for years?”
“No, no. Only about five months. But I want to move in with her.”
“What?”
“I’m in love with her.”
“Who?”
“Just a woman I met at Dunkin’ Donuts, believe it or not.” He laughed at the absurdity of it. “She’s a teacher. Not in our school system.”
“I’m so relieved,” she said sarcastically. “You let things get this far without saying anything to me? No marriage counselor?”
“Oh please, Rose. I’ve suggested seeing someone a million times but you always say we don’t need one. You think you can fix everything with meatloaf.”
“We’ll go to counseling.”
“I don’t want to anymore.”
“Nate, I don’t understand. We’ve always talked.”
“I’m tired of talking, Rose. I’m tired of saying the same things. I’m all talked out. And I know I can’t spend another 27 years like this.”
“Like what? What’s so awful about your life?”
“I need someone who wants to be with me.”
“And what do you think I’ve been doing all these years? Killing time until someone else came along? I guess you were.”
“Of course I wasn’t. But I need more. I’ve always needed more.”
“Fuck you! How old is she?”
“Thirty-two,” he mumbled.
“Married?”
“Never been.”

“No, no. Only about five months. But I want to move in with her.”
“What?”
“I’m in love with her.”
“Who?”
“Just a woman I met at Dunkin’ Donuts, believe it or not.” He laughed at the absurdity of it. “She’s a teacher. Not in our school system.”
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Rosemary wouldn’t remember what she did next: pushing back her chair and standing up, putting on her jacket and gloves, slipping her purse strap over her shoulder, lifting the edge of the black Formica table and tipping it onto Nate’s lap. (It was lighter than she’d ever imagined.) She seemed to float out of the restaurant, though she could hear the clicking of her boot heels on the sidewalk like the tick-tock of a grandfather clock or, better yet, a cooking timer counting down the minutes until the marriage was done. Click. Click. Click. She had to stop the sound. She turned into an alley, bent over, and threw up 26 years.
At the next stop, Saint Dalmas de Tende, a man, most likely in his mid-30s, entered the car carrying a paper bag in one hand and guiding a little boy with the other. Quickly, he scanned the car. Then, in a very determined manner and without asking permission, he placed the large suitcase in the aisle and settled the boy into the seat. The businessman seemed about to protest, but the new arrival’s actions made it clear that his son would occupy the seat. Nancy smiled. The man across from her pursed his lips and returned his gaze to the window. The father crouched next to the small boy, whose legs stuck straight out because they were too short to bend.

He was a big boy for his age, but Nancy had been an elementary school principal long enough to comfortably estimate him to be around three. He was a happy boy, at least he was happy to be there with his father, whom he resembled, with a round face, eyes like large black olives, and plump skin—not fat but meaty like sausage in its casing. The boy was lighter in skin tone with brown hair. One might first assume that they were Italians: they were unlike the man opposite Nancy, who based on appearance alone—auburn hair, fair skin, pointed nose—would have been taken for a Frenchman. The businessman, however, had used his cell phone to speak to an associate in Italian, while the father addressed his son in French. But then, many of the French in these towns looked Italian and the Italians French, since they lived in an area that had changed ownership again and again at the whims of rogues, land barons, and kings.

The father worked hard to keep his son entertained as the train made its way down the snowcapped mountains of the Maritime Alps, and the child’s smile never faded. That made the boy ever so endearing, because it was a genuine smile, eager and full of appreciation, one that could belong only to an individual who was experiencing such a ride for the first time. Clearly secure and content, his good disposition never waned even for a moment. He was the type of child you wanted to hug and take home, to give hot chocolate and cookies to, because it would be impossible to spoil him. Some children are good-natured from the moment they emerge from the womb.

The father performed something like “Itsy Bitsy Spider” with his hands and then did a magic trick, making a coin disappear and reappear. Next, he was a creeping bug climbing the boy’s leg, threatening to and then succeeding in tickling the child’s stomach. The boy’s body convulsed with such delight that several times Nancy laughed out loud, catching the father’s eye. The Italian across from her shifted in his seat. The old man began to snore.

How the father’s thighs must have ached, crouched as he was at his son’s level. Where were they going? To visit grand-mère—the father’s mother, of course. But just for the day, since they had no luggage. Why wasn’t Maman with them? Perhaps she needed time to herself, or was in the last trimester of pregnancy with another child—a girl—and was too tired to make the trip. She was a beautiful woman, Nancy decided: luscious golden tresses like Catherine Deneuve’s, slim when she wasn’t expecting, blue eyes and a light and clear birdlike laugh. They had grown up together—the mother and father—and fallen in love in grade school. Oh, she hadn’t admitted to liking him at first, because he wasn’t the cleverest student and always played the prankster, but
he had won her over eventually. And he adored her, and had settled down. They weren’t rich, but they got by. How proud he was of having won her love, secretly convinced that he didn’t deserve it. Her parents, Nancy went on to speculate, had never fully accepted him and often reminded her that she could have done better; but, nevertheless, the husband was tolerant of his in-laws.

A good father. A perfect father. Would Jean-Georges have been capable of such devotion? He had demanded so much attention since she had lured him away from France after her junior year abroad and transplanted him to Boston (unlike her friend Judith, who moved to Torino with the Italian she had fallen in love with). That’s why she hadn’t insisted on having children: it had seemed the logical and right thing to do—or not to do—all these years, until now, when they were in their early 40s, and Jean-George’s failing kidney and her biological clock obviated the decision.

As though it were another magic trick, the father removed a pastry from the paper bag and gave it to the boy, who evidently had a good appetite. He bit off large chunks, yet there was nothing repulsive about his eating habits. On the contrary, Nancy watched him enjoy the pastry with the pleasure a mother feels with a child who eats anything she puts before him.

Her cousin’s children, Matthew and Elena, were finicky eaters, while Jill never ate period, and Thomas and Julia would take only what their mother had prepared. The holidays she hosted proved a disappointment. Despite the efforts she put into pleasing the youngsters, Easter biscuits in the shape of birds took nosedives onto the dining room carpet; heart-shaped pink mashed potatoes, carefully arranged on their plates for Valentine’s Day, perished of neglect. This boy wouldn’t have let them die. This boy would have relished such novelties, his eyes glistening with gratitude.

The boy was still eating when the father motioned something to him that Nancy couldn’t make out. The child nodded and the father turned around, opened the door to the foyer between the two cars, and closed the door behind him. He had obviously gone to look for a lavatory, leaving the boy content to munch on his pastry. Nancy wasn’t sure she would have left her son alone, had she been fortunate enough to have one; Americans are so paranoid about kidnapping. When she was no more than five, her mother let her walk to the corner store, on the busy avenue, with two quarters wrapped in a shopping list she presented to the grocer. An unthinkable task to assign to a young child nowadays, one that smacked of stupidity, even negligence.

But the boy was safe, really, with all eyes on him (at least Nancy’s, of which the father had been well aware). There were always those stories of people stealing children in toy stores and department stores when their mothers had turned their heads for a moment, then whisking the children off to a restroom stall, disguising them in dresses and wigs, and walking out of the store with changed-sex toddlers before any alarm had sounded. Where could one to go with a little boy on a moving train?

Police officers came regularly to Nancy’s school and lectured the children on personal safety: what to do if a stranger approached them on their walk home; what to do if their parents failed to pick them up. But this father would be back before the train reached the next station, and one did have to have some faith in human nature. Still, Nancy
Passengers began to gather their belongings: duffle bags, suitcases, and laptops were retrieved from the overhead rack and placed in the aisle. One young woman destined for the beach removed a six-foot inflated yellow float. In an effort to be the first to exit the train when the doors opened, the Italian businessman picked up his attaché case and enormous valise and disappeared behind the glass door. The old man, ignorant of the fact that the boy had a father, since he had been asleep when the pair boarded, awoke promptly as the train pulled into the Nice station.

The boy grew uneasy, his gaze locked on the door behind him as the passengers, standing up, suddenly loomed over him.

“I’ll wait with you until your father returns,” she assured him.

She crossed over and took the businessman’s seat beside him as the passengers, standing up, suddenly loomed over him.

“Let’s go and find him.” But the boy, his head turned away from her as he continued to monitor the door, didn’t respond. It was at that point she realized he hadn’t uttered a word throughout the entire trip and that he might in fact be deaf.

Her overnight bag in one hand, the boy’s hand in her other, Nancy set out to look for a conductor. No one had entered their car to punch tickets, but this was not uncommon on this line.

The train came to a stop, jerked forward, as though it had tripped, and stopped again. The boy looked around, his mouth still holding its cherubic smile. He took another bite of the pastry and settled back into his seat. Nancy looked up at the glass door of the vestibule. The old man’s head banged against the window. The man across from her made another business call.

When the train pulled into La Trinité-Victor, the boy looked back at the glass door.

“He’s gone to the toilette, right?” Nancy asked in French. The boy stared, wide-eyed.

“He’ll be back soon. The train is very crowded. There must have been a long line.”

Maybe he’d met a friend and struck up a conversation, and was on his way back at this very moment; not that much time had passed. The stations were quite close together as they neared the city. Nancy leaned forward.

“What’s your name?” she asked

He didn’t answer. His parents must have instructed him not to talk to strangers.
Marisa Labozzetta

The Swap

It was the first day of spring—too cold for swimming, yet the outdoor pool of the Richmond apartment complex was already uncovered. From her ground-level window, Nancy noticed a mallard with his iconic emerald head and gilded beak confidently gliding on the water’s surface; the white neckband, like a starched collar against his rich brown chest, gave him the air of a dandy with not a care in the world. “Lucky ducky,” Nancy said.

The two-bedroom flat was sparsely furnished; it only needed to see them through five weeks of recovery. Nancy had barely had time to locate the nearest supermarket and stock the kitchen with necessities like coffee and tea, milk and cereal, canned soups, eggs, yogurt, peanut butter, and bread. Until she felt up to cooking, anything more elaborate would have to be delivered. Her mother desperately wanted to come down from Boston to care for her daughter and son-in-law; her cousins said they’d put everything aside to be there for her, but Nancy refused their offers. The strength required for what she was about to do for Jean-Georges must not be susceptible to the anxiety of others and hovered over by nervous hens as though it were a communal incubating egg. On a more selfish note, she did not wish to

lavatories, and find the locked door behind which the father would be discovered, collapsed on the floor, deathly ill or worse. Poor man. Should he manage to return to his car before the conductors reached him, all he would find were crumbs on an empty seat.

Nancy gripped the pudgy hand of her new charge as tightly as a coveted prize, anticipation nearly overwhelming her.

“There is no one, Madame,” they confirmed as, one by one, they returned. “Your friend is not on the train.”

An anxious Jean-Georges smiled when at last he spotted her entering the terminal. He beamed in much the way an expectant father might have greeted the doctor leaving the delivery room after a difficult labor. And just as the father’s relief would have turned to concern while he awaited the news, Jean-Georges’ eyes now demanded an explanation for the child walking beside his wife.

It’s a boy, she wanted to say.