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Like a Caterpillar Losing its Cocoon: Rediscovery of Self in Marisa Labozzetta's *Thieves Never Steal in the Rain*

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Abstract: We ward off loss as best we can, but rarely are we so lucky. We attach significance to our rituals and collected items. This theme of warding off loss and searching for ways to cope with it is woven through the linked stories of Marisa Labozzetta's *Thieves Never Steal in the Rain*, especially in the stories about Joanna and Barbara. Barbara's ritualistic collecting links her directly to the past. Through these objects, the past and present become fluid for Barbara, and she believes that they can even affect her future. Because of this, she gathers objects in an attempt to preserve her luckiness as she has been since she was a child. This idea of actively working against or shielding oneself and loved ones from loss is also apparent in Labozzetta's stories that feature Joanna. Joanna's daughter, Jill, died in a terrible accident, and Joanna blames herself because she thinks she should have been able to prevent Jill's death. Joanna also emphasizes the importance of things in a way that is similar to Barbara's. When she thinks she has lost her artistic eye, Joanna reclaims the things from her childhood desk. Unfortunately, and despite their best efforts, neither Joanna nor Barbara is able to stave off loss forever: Barbara's house burns down and Jill cannot be resurrected. However, Barbara feels liberated after her house burns, and Joanna rediscovers her artistic eye. Perhaps what we need to remember, and what the stories in Marisa Labozzetta's *Thieves Never Steal in the Rain* remind us, is that we can't prevent loss and somehow we have to cope with it. In coping with the loss, we can rediscover our best selves.

Keywords: loss; Marisa Labozzetta; *Thieves Never Steal in the Rain*; Collecting objects; stories about coping with loss; Self Rediscovery

1. Introduction

Over ten years ago, my father was diagnosed with heart disease, and from the time he was diagnosed until the second anniversary of his heart transplant, I did everything I could to forestall his death. I wore the dove necklace he gave me religiously, kept one of his scarves hanging on my coat rack, and convinced myself that if I watered his houseplants, I could keep him alive. I dealt with his illness through rituals and through deals with whoever was listening: if I do this, my dad will live longer; if I stop biting my nails, he won't die.

We ward off loss as best we can, but rarely are we so lucky. We attach significance to our rituals and collected items. This theme of warding off loss and searching for ways to cope with it is woven through the linked stories of Marisa Labozzetta's *Thieves Never Steal the Rain*, especially in the stories about Barbara and Joanna [1]. Perhaps what we need to remember, and what Labozzetta's stories remind us, is that we can't prevent loss and somehow we have to cope with it, and in that, we rediscover ourselves.

2. Barbara from "The Birthing Room" Collects Impedimenta

In Labozzetta's "The Birthing Room," Barbara collects things: pictures, vases, antiques [2]. And her assembly of odds and ends is ritualistic, but the items somehow link Barbara directly to the past.

For Barbara, the past was forever leaking into the present and the present slipping away into the past. This drove her to chronicle everything, from family barbecues and vacations to spelling bees, class plays, and athletic events. Her walls were like museum exhibits; images of ancestors in gilded frames worked their way up her staircase wall and traced her children's lineage on both sides [2].

She is creating of an archive of history, and through this, she feels able to connect to the past. For example, Labozzetta writes, "When she picked up an eighteenth-century piece of porcelain, it vibrated in her touch, transporting her to its place of origin" [2]. There is something metaphysical about an object's ability to carry her mind back in time, and through these objects, the past and present become fluidly united for Barbara.

Just as she feels able to connect to the past through her treasures, Barbara also believes she can affect her future by gathering and tending these things. She believes it will guarantee her future luck; since she was a child, Barbara was "[l]ucky to have been born lucky: the envy of her cousins at every church bazaar and fireman's fair when they were growing up, winning handsome talking dolls, a bicycle, even a deep fryer" [2]. And Barbara's luck stayed with her into adulthood.

She had been spared widowhood on 9/11 because that husband, who arrived daily at eight a.m. at his brokerage firm in the World Trade Center, had run over someone's mangled muffler and had gotten a flat tire on the George Washington Bridge. She had conceived twins on the first try [2].

And the tally of her luckiness continues. Because of her past luck, Barbara believes scouring antique shows, restoring the items, and keeping them will sustain her luck and will thwart loss.

Indeed, when her parents moved from their home, Barbara was deeply upset about "all the items her mother had given to the Salvation Army or left out in the street for greedy antiques dealers—complete strangers—to snap up" [2]. Barbara thinks, "Her mother could have jinxed their luck, temped the

fates by discarding objects that had held an important place in their lives and in those of countless others..." [2]. And because of her belief that collecting things will maintain her luck, Barbara is verily frightened when her mother. Labozzetta writes, "Apart from the genuine desire to preserve history, in some bizarre way she [Barbara] sensed that if she did [collect and protect old items], her family would continue on a trouble-free path" [2].

3. Joanna from "Villa Foresta" and "St. Mary's Window" Thwarts Loss

This idea of actively working against or shielding oneself and loved ones from loss is also apparent in Labozzetta's stories that feature Joanna. Joanna's daughter, Jill, died in a terrible accident, and in "Villa Foresta," when visiting Italy for the first time since her daughter's death, Joanna thinks "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" [3]. Joanna so desperately misses her daughter that she finds Jill's likeness in the hotel maid's daughter, Elisabetta. And Joanna feels that she can take better care of Elisabetta than her biological mother; so much so that Joanna takes Elisabetta shopping, buys her trinkets, and then tries to the child with her to Rome [3].

When Joanna takes Elisabetta out for a day, the same emphasis on things that is evident in Barbara's actions is also evident in Joanna's. Labozzetta writes, "How easy it was to please a child: a cup of cocoa, some gelato—a butter dish" [3]. Indeed, when they return to the hotel, "[t]he child is suddenly bubbling with commentary about the butter dish, the ice cream, and the priest, as though she had saved it all in a treasure box until now" [3]. This quote shows that again, things and memories are closely linked and so important that they are stored in the safest places like treasure boxes.

4. Joanna Retreats to Impedimenta

In a later story, "St. Mary's Window," Joanna runs to the attic when she and her husband begin arguing about Jill, or really about their ways of coping with Jill's death [4]. There, Joanna retreats and rummages through

bags of old appliances she had been saving for Jill's first apartment. Unable to navigate the cramped space with its low slanted ceiling, she threw her body onto the bags and boxes and began to swim over what her father would call crap... until she readied a carton labeled in blue ink in her mother's handwriting, "Joanna's desk." [4]

Like Elisabetta's mind full of memories, this is Joanna's treasure box, filled with letters and talismans of the past [2,4]. The box included a map of the Middle East, on which, in grease stains was the face of Christ [4]. As a child Joanna could see his image, but as an adult it eluded her and she feared she had lost more than her daughter: "[h]er artistic vision—her ability to make lips suggest a smile, eyes threaten to blink and tear, veins pulsate and skin radiate warmth—had been blinded" [4].

5. Barbara and Joanna Cannot Stave Off Loss

Unfortunately, and despite their best efforts, neither Joanna nor Barbara is able to stave off loss forever. Indeed, a ghost burns down Barbara's house on the night of her husband's, Lenny's, birthday

celebration [2]. The ghost that haunted Barbara and Lenny's house further illustrates Barbara's connection to the past; it also makes the connection between objects and emotions even more real as the house is clearly connected to the ghost's soul. The ghost wants Barbara and Lenny to leave, and as Labozzetta writes,

Lately, Barbara had begun to dream that she and Lenny had sold the house. She walked through the echoing rooms..., and she wept, not understanding why she was giving up the home she loved--the home where she had raised her children and into which she had poured her identity, the home and belongings she would pass on to generations to come [2].

And when the house burns down, Barbara is devastated:

Helpless, she watched the years she had put into documenting, refurbishing, and polishing objects dear to all of them being consumed in an evil paroxysm. This is it, she told herself, this sick feeling in the gut, nothing but darkness and emptiness beyond the present moment; this is how it feels. This is ill fate [2].

This is after all the first time that Barbara wasn't lucky. Despite all of her collecting of and tending to things, she lost her luck.

However, while watching her home burn down in the company of her husband and children, Barbara realizes that the fire isn't ill fate.

She was shocked by her shift of emotions and by the realization that in fact nothing horrific had befallen them. Rather, something very good had occurred. They had survived. Something powerful and catastrophic had taken place, yet they had been spared. Good fortune had prevailed, and Barbara felt an overwhelming sense of being lucky--and liberated [2].

She is liberated indeed: from the ghost, the house, and all the things she spent so much time tending. The loss of the house, while devastating, turned out to be more like a caterpillar's loss of its cocoon.

Joanna goes through a similar liberation, and she rediscovers her artistic eye. Joanna and her husband go to see an outline of Mary that formed between the panes of glass in a hospital window [4]. The crowd gets out of control while they're there; the devotees become enraged at the possibility of the hospital taking the window down. After she and her husband leave the scene, they have a nice lunch, and return home in peaceful states of mind. After having sex with her husband for the first time in awhile—maybe since Jill's death—Joanna stares at the painting near their bed.

There she remained staring sideways at the painting... that hung on the opposing wall, until the man in the tuxedo and the lady in a long purple gown began to sway to the notes the musician beside them coaxed out of the trumpet he caressed. Round and round they twirled, sinking their feet into the wet sand. The tide repeatedly kissed the shoreline goodbye and pulled farther and farther away. It grew chilly as the orange sun dipped ever so slowly below the horizon, where the woman with the leopard kerchief and perfectly applied makeup smiled at Joanna, lifted a brown-sleeved arm, and stroked the bay [4].

It is in this moment that Joanna's artistic vision returns, that her grief over Jill's loss is assuaged.

6. Conclusions

Perhaps what we need to remember, and what the stories in Marisa Labozzetta's *Thieves Never Steal in the Rain* remind us, is that we can't prevent loss and somehow we have to cope with it. After my father received his heart transplant, I grieved and felt guilty for grieving because my dad was still alive. After reading this collection, I realized that I was grieving for every deal I made and for every habit that I thought would keep his heart beating. I had lost something—like Joanna's worry over her daughter or Barbara's carefully maintained house—but in losing it and in forgiving myself, I also rediscovered who I am. Like the stories in this collection show us, in coping with loss, we can rediscover our best selves.

References and Notes

1. Labozzetta, Marisa. *Thieves Never Steal in the Rain*. Newton: Laura Gross Literary Agency, 2011.
2. Labozzetta, Marisa. "The Birthing Room." In *Thieves Never Steal in the Rain*. 2011.
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