

LUCA

By Reyna Marder Gentin



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Nobody wears flip-flops in the middle of December, but when Luca called at two in the morning, they were the only shoes I could find. I stood shivering in the street outside his house in my pajamas with a fleece thrown on top, my toes turning red. My sister was smart. She stayed in the car with the engine running and the heat on.

Luca finally burst out of the front door and onto the lawn. His normally neatly gelled hair was going in ten different directions, and I could see in the light from the porch that his face was streaked with tears. His father, in only an undershirt and navy pajama bottoms, followed a few steps behind him in the front hallway.

“I’m sorry I called. I’m fine,” Luca said. “Please, go home. Go back to bed.” But his eyes pleaded with me not to abandon him. I could hear his father yelling from just inside the doorway. Ugly words, getting louder. I was afraid to leave and afraid to stay.

I turned and ran back to my sister’s car.

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I'd met Luca three years earlier, on the first day of seventh grade.

The town where I grew up on Long Island had four public elementary schools that fed into one middle school. The population of each neighborhood was basically the same – Jewish kids with second-generation American parents who'd made some money and quickly left the Bronx and Brooklyn behind, and a smattering of the new up-and-coming Asian immigrants – Chinese, Korean, Japanese.

Not everyone went to the public elementary schools. Luca Dinapoli was a graduate of St. Paul's, the town's Catholic elementary school. He lived on the other side of town, across the main commercial avenue. It wasn't the "bad side," like you hear about with the railroad tracks, because the whole town was pretty well-off. Besides, the railroad tracks were nowhere near where Luca lived. There wasn't more crime or police patrols or infrequent garbage pick-up or unruly parties at three a.m. in Luca's neighborhood as compared to where I lived. But the houses were generally smaller, and they were on smaller plots of land. Everything felt a little closer together. My mother called it "modest." She might have meant that in a snobby way, but she was on to something. After the first few months of middle school, nearly all of my new friends lived in Luca's part of town. They were nicer kids, not so stuck on themselves.

In fact, Luca's house wasn't small. It was a sprawling structure set on stilts on a steep hill with a stream that ran through the front yard and a bridge you had to cross to get out to the street. It was downright strange looking though, perched where a house had no right to be. Precarious. My mother used to warn me to be careful of the stream when I went over there (apparently, she bought into the theory that you could drown in a teaspoon of water). If we'd lived in an earthquake zone, for sure Luca's house would have been condemned. But we didn't, so instead it was just a weird architectural wonder that made it stand apart.

In comparison, my house was plain vanilla traditional suburban. Brick exterior with white columns and a flagstone porch, a majestic weeping beech out front. My life was quiet. Homework and dinner at 6:00 every evening, just me and my parents, watching the evening news, my older sisters already out in the world.

Luca's was where the fun happened.

He was the third of six kids, and his parents had them close together, so everyone was still at home when he and I became friends. His older siblings wouldn't move out until they married some years later. It was loud at Luca's – music playing – music by bands I didn't know, doors slamming, people shouting to be heard. And it was messy. Clothes hanging over the banisters and piled on the stairs, shoes everywhere. The kids smoked pot, even Luca, and the smell permeated the basement where we hung out. It didn't feel illicit; it's just what went on there. The whole house had a distinctive smell – a combination of weed, Lysol, maybe cats – I'm not sure. But something was always going on in that basement.

On Sunday afternoons, Luca's mom cooked dinner for the whole family and assorted hangers-on – aunts, uncles, and cousins, guys who worked for Luca's dad at the store, girlfriends of Luca's supercool older brother Michael with the long blond hair. Sometimes, two different girls would show up on the same Sunday for dinner, and Michael would have to choose between them. And if I happened to be at the house, I was invited to stay. I loved those dinners. They always started out

with some huge amount of pasta and homemade gravy. Everyone talked at once. It was mayhem. It was heaven.

One Christmas Eve, I was invited to come see the tree lighting. There weren't any gifts for me under the tree, and I didn't bring any. I just showed up. No one expected much of me. Maybe that's what I liked about it at Luca's.

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When the phone rang that night, I was still awake. I'd gotten into the bad habit of binge-watching Mary Tyler Moore reruns, two back-to-back episodes at 1:30 and 2:00 a.m. My parents had finally relented and let me have a T.V. in my bedroom. If they'd known about my sleep habits, for sure they would have taken it away. I'd grabbed the phone on the first ring. I knew it was Luca immediately, even though I'd never heard him cry before.

"He found out."

I was going to play dumb, but everyone knew. Except Luca's parents, because they didn't want to see.

"How?"

Luca's parents didn't ever go down to the basement. The heart and soul of Luca's house, a parent-free zone like an indoor treehouse, away from prying eyes. Luca was counting on that when he brought David down there. It didn't matter that they were only kissing. Apparently, Mr. DiNapoli had gone ballistic, picking up an empty beer bottle and threatening to crack it over Luca's "faggot head." David ran up the stairs and out the front door. I wondered why Luca's father had come down to the basement in the first place, but I didn't ask.

"I got past him and went up to my bedroom," he said, "and the strangest thing happened. I locked the door and lay down on my bed, and I felt totally calm, like I was apart from my body and looking down on myself. And I thought that's how I'd like to be, outside of myself. I went into the medicine chest in my bathroom, and I took a razor blade—"

"Luca!"

"It's okay. I'm okay now." I could hear his father banging on the bedroom door. I couldn't make out what he was saying, but the tone was angry. That was when the phone went dead.

I threw on my fleece over my pajamas, grabbed my flip-flops, woke up my sister, and she drove me to Luca's.