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Melissa Minetola

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“Leaving Lincoln Avenue”

Melissa Minetola

Luke Gabrielli let the red Oldsmobile grumble to a stop. He glanced out the windshield, at the row of duplex houses stretching along Lincoln Avenue. His family’s was the one with the cracked gray vinyl siding and cardboard turkeys Scotch-taped to the front windows. Beside Luke, his fiancée smoothed honey-scented lip balm – Luke’s least favorite flavor – over her lips. With her Prada pantsuit and gold-and-diamonds necklace (a thousands-of-dollars college graduation gift from her father), Courtney Braxton clashed with the impoverished, ethnic Southeastern Pennsylvania neighborhood in which Luke had grown up.

Luke jerked the key out of the ignition. Raising a perfectly shaped eyebrow, Courtney inquired, without looking at him, “Is something wrong, sweetheart?”

Heaving a sigh, Luke replied, “You know how things are between my family and me.” He stared out the windshield. “I just hate coming back here and having to deal with them.”

Courtney stowed the lip balm in her black leather handbag. “I know.” She opened her palm to Luke, and he reached over and took her hand. “But today is Thanksgiving, and we both can be thankful that by tonight, we’ll be back home. In just....” Courtney peeked at Luke’s Timex wristwatch. “In just seven hours, we’ll be back home.”

Luke squeezed her hand. Home used to be here, he thought, pushing open the car door. Used to be this house, on this street. In twenty-three years, Lincoln Avenue had not changed. Courtney came up next to Luke on the sidewalk and grasped his arm. Her long blonde hair – they had been dating for two years and engaged for one, and Luke still did not know whether or not Courtney colored it – blew across his nylon parka. Since he left Lincoln Avenue, Luke had changed.

“Let’s go,” Courtney encouraged, tugging Luke toward the Gabriellis’ house.

“Since when are you excited to see my family?”

Courtney’s high heels clicked up the front steps of the house. “I actually need to use the bathroom,” she confessed.

Luke laughed. Courtney grinned and rapped her fingers against the front door. Luke leaned against the side of the house. Across the street, he saw Mrs. Contadino stooped over a broom, her terse gray curls blowing in the wind as she swept the stone path leading to her house. The Contadinos’ Thanksgiving would be a happy one, Luke speculated. Unlike his own.

“Remind me,” Luke told Courtney, “to stop by the Contadinos’ on the way home.”

“The whose?”

“The Contadinos’ – they live across the street,” explained Luke. “They were like a second family to me.” As Luke described the Contadinos to Courtney, he could not help thinking of one Contadino in particular.

Michelina Contadino had been the love of Luke's life. Probably she still was, acknowledged Luke. He wondered if she too would be home for Thanksgiving. Of course she would be, reasoned Luke. Michelina had not left.

At that moment, the front door was opened by an older version of Luke. The man smiled, causing the wrinkles in his face to crease deeper. "How are you, son?" greeted Aldo Gabrielli, extending to Luke a hand shaky with rheumatism.

Luke clasped the hand in his own. Then, on second thought, he put an arm around his father in a loose embrace. "I'm doing well, Pop. How about you? How are things going?"

"Oh...they're going." Aldo laughed a rough laugh, the consequence of over fifty years of smoking cheap cigarettes. He turned his attention to Courtney, who had been smiling a synthetic smile for the past minute.

"Courtney...good to see you again."

"Good to see you again too!" chirped Courtney.

The wind was picking up again, so the three of them entered the house. "Do you remember where the bathroom is?" Luke asked Courtney.

"I'm surprised you remember where the bathroom is." The gruff voice came from the living room. Within seconds, Filomena Gabrielli materialized in the vestibule.

Luke sighed. "Hi, Ma...."

"We haven't seen you since Easter, for God's sake, and you live not even an hour away," Filomena persisted. "What's going on, Luke? Are you so much better than us now that you only drop by for the holidays?"

"Filomena, please...." Aldo looked apologetically from Luke to Courtney.

Luke, though, had smelled the sangria on his mother's breath the moment she opened her mouth to speak. Ignoring Filomena, Luke directed Courtney, "The bathroom is up the stairs, second door to your right."

"I'll be right back," Courtney promised Aldo and Filomena. Neither of them answered her, and she disappeared upstairs.

Luke leveled an even gaze at his mother. "How have you been, Ma?"

"You don't have to ask if you don't care, and I know you don't care."

When Luke was growing up, a black-and-white photograph of his parents sat in a china frame on top of the television set in the living room. The photograph depicted Aldo and Filomena, youthful and smiling, optimistic about their future together and very much in love. Everything Luke wanted out of life he saw in that photograph. He had not seen it in years though. Perhaps Filomena had moved it somewhere less perceptible, less painful. The years had not been easy on his parents, and through them, Luke had learned that true love does not assure happiness.

"I do care about you, Ma."

Filomena tugged on the gold crucifix that hung from her neck. "You never visit, you never call...."

"I'm so busy with work, Ma, and with planning the wedding...."

"Planning the wedding!" spat Filomena. "Her father is planning everything! He won't call us about anything either! What do people think of us? We don't deserve to be a part of anything anymore?"

"Jesus Christ, Ma...." Luke glared at his mother. "Do we have to fight every time we see each other? Really? Is that what you really want?"

"Luke, don't raise your voice at your mother," Aldo reproved. Disgustedly, dismissively, Filomena waved her hands at them both.

His mother had started drinking once Luke began kindergarten. Luke had tried to forget that year, but the memories loitered like leeches on his mind. Aldo, the sole provider for the family, had been laid off from his job at the regional sanitation company, forcing Filomena, who always had been a full-time wife, mother, and homemaker, to find a job. While Aldo spent his days looking for odd jobs and trying to secure a steady job, Filomena worked as a clerk at a local liquor store. The stress of working, worrying, and caring for her family led Filomena to become dependent upon the goods she sold.

At the same time, Luke's older sister, Reggie, dropped out of high school to marry Rob Querciagrossa, a high school dropout as well, living in a decrepit tenement on nearby Bari Street and struggling to keep as a job as a security guard at the county courthouse (Rob's violent temper often led to verbal and physical fights with his co-workers).

Even at the age of five, Luke discerned the tension in his family. The tension increased when Rob eventually did lose his job and his apartment, resulting in his, Reggie's, and their newborn son's moving in with the Gabriellis. Then the Gabriellis discovered that Rob abused not only his co-workers but also his wife.

Courtney returned to the vestibule. "Have you all been catching up?" she inquired.

"To some extent," Aldo told her. Diplomacy was his father's most distinguishing characteristic, Luke thought. Forbearance came in a close second. Since he left Lincoln Avenue, Luke had done everything but forbear.

Filomena faced Courtney. "So...how is planning the wedding going?"

"Well, Dad just booked the new atrium of the Aldie Mansion for the reception...."

"Aldie Mansion?" inquired Filomena.

"Oh, it's a beautiful old Tudor mansion," Courtney gushed. "It's about an hour's drive from Philadelphia...."

"Wasn't there any hall in Philadelphia you could have used?" provoked Filomena. "Or are none of the Philadelphia halls good enough?"

"Ma," interjected Luke, gazing at his mother, "when Courtney and I looked at Aldie Mansion, we fell in love with it, right away. We knew we wanted to have the reception there and only there."

"Well," rejoined Filomena, "I'm glad you fell in love with something, Luke." Meaningfully, she shook her head at him and withdrew to the living room.

Luke flushed. She was referring to Michelina. He glanced at Courtney. Her azure eyes sparkling, Courtney was relating to Aldo details of the fountains and terraces that ornamented the rolling lawns of the Aldie Mansion.

"Our pictures will come out beautifully," Courtney confided in Aldo.

Aldo nodded. "It sounds as though you and Luke have found the perfect place." He cleared his throat. "Reggie is in the kitchen," he informed them. "Maybe you can go say hello...."

"Sounds good," agreed Luke.

"And your mother and I will be right in," added Aldo, moving toward the living room.

Shaking his head – his mannerisms mirrored those of his mother, although he never would admit it – Luke strode to the kitchen, Courtney in tow.

Reggie Gabrielli (she had retained her maiden name after the unavoidable divorce) stood barefoot on the linoleum floor. She was mashing potatoes in a ceramic bowl, but she stopped when she saw her younger brother and his fiancée. "Well," said Reggie, setting the hand whisk on the Formica-covered countertop. "Happy Thanksgiving." A red velour jumper swelled from her shoulders, and Luke could tell that she had gained weight since he saw her last, at Easter.

"You too." Brother and sister stood awkwardly across from each other.

"How are you doing, Reggie?" asked Courtney.

"Good – good." Reggie shrugged.

"And how is Bobby?" continued Courtney.

"Oh...." Reggie reached for the hand whisk. "He's doing okay." She began mashing potatoes again. "He started the eleventh grade this year. It's been rough, but he's going to be fine. Not going to drop out."

"What's going on?" Luke worried about his seventeen-year old nephew. Last week, when he called to confirm Thanksgiving dinner, Aldo had conveyed to Luke that Bobby had received a three-day suspension for punching one of his classmates during the lunch period.

"Oh, you know – high school." Reggie rolled her eyes, as if that explained everything.

Courtney set her handbag on the counter. "Is Bobby around? I'd love to see him."

"He and some of his friends went to the park to play basketball, but he'll be back in time for dinner," Reggie replied.

"We're eating at two o'clock, right?" Luke wanted to make sure.

"As always," verified Reggie.

Luke glanced at his wristwatch. One fifteen. "Is there anything I can help out with?"

"Or me?" chimed in Courtney.

Reggie jerked her head toward the oven. "The turkey will be ready in about five minutes; I could use some help with that."

From the living room trickled the angry voices of Aldo and Filomena. "Would you put that glass down for one minute and listen to me...."

"I've been listening to you for...going on forty years now...and it doesn't do any good...."

Luke nudged Courtney's arm. "Help my sister, will you? I'll be right back."

Courtney frowned at him. "Where are you going?"

"I'll be right back," promised Luke, loud enough for Reggie to hear. Disregarding Courtney's perplexed – and slightly irritated – gaze, Luke slipped out the back door.

He needed time to think, to clear his head. Luke walked through the alley behind the row of duplexes. He emerged on Bari Street and then turned left onto Lincoln Avenue. The neighborhood was the same. Same smells of garlic and gasoline. Same sounds of boys' yelling obscenities in the park – Bobby Querciagrossa probably among them.

"Luke Gabrielli...is that you?"

Luke turned. A young woman with shoulder-length brown hair was smiling at him from across Lincoln Avenue. Luke squinted, and slowly a smile tugged at the corners of his own lips. "Hey – what do you know – how the hell are you?"

Michelina Contadino laughed and hurried across the street, her arms outstretched. Luke engulfed her in his arms for a big hug. "I haven't seen you in ages!" exclaimed Michelina, embracing him. "Where have you been?"

"Well...." Luke shrugged sheepishly. He liked having her so close to him once again. "You must have heard – I got a job in Philadelphia. I live there now...."

"I did hear," confirmed Michelina. She stepped back, out of his arms, assessing him with her sharp eyes. They always had reminded Luke of cappuccino, the good kind that his mother's parents would send from Italy. "Still, Luke...Philadelphia is less than an hour away...."

"You're starting to sound like my mother," warned Luke, and they both laughed. "To be honest...I like Philadelphia. I like my life there."

"Life here wasn't as good, huh?" Michelina rubbed her hands together. Luke observed that she wore no engagement ring or wedding band. His heart throbbed.

"I didn't mean that."

"It's okay, Luke." Michelina nodded. "I understand. If I could leave, I would...."

"You don't need to leave," Luke argued. "You have a good family."

"I know...but...you know, Luke...." Michelina ran her fingers through her hair. "I'm happy here. But there's a lot I haven't experienced yet, a lot I don't know."

"What are you talking about? You're the smartest person I know."

"I'm not the one who got the full ride at Princeton...."

"Just because I could play basketball."

"Speaking of which – your nephew is pretty good. Very good in

fact.”

“Really?” Luke was interested. “That’s great. Maybe Bobby and I can play some ball today.”

“Are you only here for today?”

Luke looked at her. “Yes...well, today is Thanksgiving.”

Michelina shrugged. “Right, right....”

Luke and Michelina had grown up across the street from each other. Their mothers had been best friends and would take them to the park together, out for a movie matinee and ice cream together.... Not until middle school though did Luke begin dating Michelina. It seemed perfect, and everything was so easy. Until Filomena’s drinking escalated to full-blown alcoholism, and Reggie divorced Rob.... And then Luke decided to leave Lincoln Avenue. Get out. In the end, not even Michelina, the first – maybe only – person Luke ever truly loved, could persuade him to stay. Luke questioned love. He was surrounded by people – Aldo and Filomena, Reggie and Rob – who had been in love, madly in love. And love did not seem to work out, from Luke’s experience. So he chose basketball, Princeton – eventually Courtney – a new life – and left the old one, with Michelina, behind. Basketball, Princeton, and Courtney – they were easy. Not hard, like love. Like Michelina.

“Why don’t you stop by the house, before you leave?” Michelina invited. “We have so much food, so many desserts....” Her eyes shone with hopefulness.

Luke stuffed his hands into the pockets of his khaki pants. The Contadinos’ house always had been warm, inviting, like Michelina herself. Their first kiss had been on the couch in the living room, in fact.... “I’d love to,” began Luke, “but...I don’t know. I....” What would he do, bring Courtney along? What would that introduction be like? He never should have asked Courtney to remind him to stop by the Contadinos’.

“Come on,” encouraged Michelina. “My mother made a chocolate mousse cake, an orange ciambella – all your favorites.”

“Well....” Before Luke could finish his sentence, a whirl of blonde hair appeared on Lincoln Avenue, moving close to Luke and Michelina.

“Courtney...hi.”

“Hi Luke.” Courtney glanced from him to Michelina.

“Courtney...this is – remember the Contadinos? The house across the street, from before?” Courtney stared blankly at Luke. “Anyway...this is Michelina Contadino...an old friend.”

Courtney stuck her hand out. “Hi Michelina, I’m Courtney Braxton, Luke’s fiancée.”

A mist clouded Michelina’s face. “Oh...it’s nice to meet you.” Michelina glanced at Luke. “Wow, I had no idea....”

“I’ve been so busy lately....”

“Oh...I understand.” Luke could tell, though, from the hurt in Michelina’s eyes that she did not understand.

“Luke, dinner is ready.” Courtney tugged on the sleeve of Luke’s

parka.

Luke nodded at Courtney. "Okay." He turned to Michelina, who was waiting patiently, as always, for him. "Maybe – maybe Courtney and I will stop by later." He glanced at Courtney, who shrugged.

Michelina smiled. "No maybes about it, Luke," she warned him. "You've been so busy for the past five years. We have a lot of catching up to do."

"I bet you do," agreed Courtney, glancing at Luke.

"Before you leave, stop by the house – both of you," encouraged Michelina. She smiled at Courtney. "My mother made all of Luke's favorite desserts – his old favorites. You would love them too, I'm sure."

"I love anything chocolate," divulged Courtney. She grinned from Michelina to Luke. "It's my one guilty pleasure."

The three of them laughed. "We probably should get to dinner," Luke said. He looked at Michelina. "We'll see you later, though. Around six?"

"Six is great." Michelina waved good-bye and disappeared across the street.

Luke and Courtney began walking back to the Gabriellis' house. "An old friend, huh?" prodded Courtney, knowingly.

Luke glanced at Courtney, who smiled and shrugged. "I have a couple old friends back home in New Jersey too, Luke."

They both laughed. Luke reached for Courtney's hand and squeezed it. She squeezed back.

When they returned to the house, Reggie called from the kitchen, "We were starting to worry about you, Luke!"

"I just went for a walk."

Courtney had set the kitchen table with Filomena's prized porcelain dinnerware from Crate and Barrel. The white plates glistened in the glow from the tiffany lamp, hanging overhead. In the center of the table, the turkey too seemed to gleam in the light. "Everything looks great," remarked Aldo. He sat at the head of the table. Filomena, directly across from him at the other end of the table, nodded listlessly.

"Would you like some water, Ma?" offered Luke.

Filomena turned her head toward her son. "I would," she said softly.

Luke opened up a cupboard. "Next one," Reggie assisted. In the next cupboard, Luke found a glass. He joined Reggie at the sink, where she was washing her hands.

"On my walk, I bumped into Michelina." Luke held the glass under the faucet.

Reggie grabbed a hand towel and rubbed her hands dry. "We're going Black Friday shopping tomorrow, Michelina and I."

Luke turned off the faucet. "When did you and Michelina become friends?"

"When you left." Reggie shrugged.

The glass trembling in his hand, Luke returned to the table. "Here

you go, Ma.” He slid into the seat to the right of his mother. Next to Luke, Courtney reached under the table and kneaded his thigh.

“Hey everybody.” The unmistakable voice of Bobby Querciagrossa boomed throughout the house, as he bounced through the back door. Sporting a black sweat suit that flaunted his striking street-sculpted body, Bobby beamed at his mother, grandparents, uncle, and aunt-to-be. “Happy Thanksgiving – how are you all doing?” He slapped Luke on the back.

“What’s up?” Luke grinned and lightly slapped Bobby back. At seventeen, Luke had been cool too, just like Bobby.

“Not a lot, man. Hey Courtney.” Bobby settled into the seat across from Luke.

“Hi Bobby.”

“You’re here just in the nick of time,” Aldo told Bobby.

Thanksgiving dinner turned out to be pleasant, to Luke’s surprise. While Courtney and Reggie chatted about the wedding, Bobby and Luke talked sports. Aldo would add a comment here and there, but he seemed content to sit back, eat, and watch his family. Filomena, evidently nursing a hangover, sipped water from the glass Luke had brought her and remained quiet throughout most of the dinner. Only towards the end, when Reggie asked if anyone wanted coffee, did Filomena blurt out, “We forgot to say grace!”

After dinner, Courtney disappeared again to the bathroom – Luke vaguely wondered if she still was struggling with bulimia – he thought she was doing better – while Reggie and Filomena began washing the dishes. Aldo, Luke, and Bobby regrouped in the living room.

“Green Bay is playing Detroit – want to watch?” Bobby grabbed the remote control, while Aldo relaxed in the rubberwood-framed glider rocker.

Luke glanced at his watch. It was nearing six o’clock. “Sure...for a minute.” He sank onto the pastel couch. Bobby sat on the floor, his back against the couch.

“So, I hear you’re a basketball star, huh?”

Bobby shrugged. “I like to play. Not in school though. Just with the guys in the park.”

“Why not in school?” wondered Luke.

Bobby aimed the remote control at the TV, and it flicked on. “I was on the team freshman year,” he told Luke. “I don’t know if Mom told you or not.”

“Oh...I think she did....” Luke could not remember the last time he and Reggie had a more than a five-minute chat.

“Yeah, well, I just hated all the practices, not to mention the coach always telling me what to do.” Bobby found the Green Bay-Detroit game. “Here we go.”

“In the end, all the practices are worth it.”

“Worth what?”

Luke glanced at his father, but Aldo had begun to snore softly. Bobby was gazing intently at Luke. “Well,” began Luke, “take me, for exam-

ple. I hated all those high school practices too. And my coach wasn't the easiest person to get along with. But I got good at basketball, and it was my ticket to...college. A better life for myself."

"I don't want to go to college anyway." Bobby turned his attention to the football game. "Even if I did go, it would be for all the wrong reasons."

"What wrong reasons?"

Bobby rolled his shoulders. "Parties. Girls." He smirked at Luke. "I'd want to meet someone like Courtney. I wouldn't be worrying about class or any college stuff like that."

Luke paused. "What do you think of Courtney?"

"She's hot," Bobby answered immediately. "Really hot. And nice too. Good choice, man."

Good choice. At Princeton, Luke and Courtney had met at a party, after Princeton's basketball team crushed Harvard's. Courtney had been pretty, perky – the perfect person with whom Luke could celebrate. Their relationship commenced on pure physical attraction. Gradually, though, Luke and Courtney began to appreciate each other's personalities. They complemented each other well: Luke with his pragmatic and reflective demeanor and Courtney, full of fun and laughter, who secretly sought the time and affection she never received from her father.

"I don't know, Bobby," began Luke, but Bobby was glued to the game.

At six o'clock, Luke and Courtney said their good-byes to the Gabriellis. After Aldo closed the front door, Courtney said, "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Not so bad," agreed Luke. He put his arm around her shoulder. "Do you still want to stop by the Contadinos'?"

"Sure, if you want to...."

Michelina opened the front door of her house with a smile, a plate of chocolate mousse cake, and three paper plates. "My parents went to visit my aunt and her family, but they told me to tell you hello," Michelina greeted Luke. She led Luke and Courtney to the living room. The three sat on the couch. They ate cake and chatted.

"I'm so glad you came." Michelina smiled at Luke.

"I was glad to – both Courtney and I were glad to," he corrected himself.

After a silence, Courtney asked Michelina where the bathroom was.

"Upstairs," Michelina directed. Luke watched Courtney hurry up the stairs. Shit.

"So...." Michelina paused. "I've missed you, Luke."

Luke nodded. "I've missed you too, Michelina. I really, really have."

"You just left."

"I didn't just leave – we had talked about it...."

"You had made your decision to leave, without asking me what I thought." Michelina's voice trembled. "You just stopped talking to

me...stopped calling, stopped coming by when you came home for breaks, if you came home...."

Luke closed his eyes. His body ached. "I made some mistakes," he whispered. "I did, and I know it." He looked at Michelina.

"Are you happy with the way everything turned out, Luke?"

Luke ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't know," he replied. "I got everything I thought I wanted. I should be happy. But...I have regrets, for sure. My biggest regret is...."

At that moment, Courtney reappeared in the living room. She smiled from Luke to Michelina. "What have I missed?"

Quietly, Michelina rose and began cleaning up the paper plates.

On the drive back home to Philadelphia, Luke glanced toward the passenger seat. Courtney was filing her fingernails. "Hey. Courtney."

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Is everything okay?"

Courtney looked at him. "What do you mean?" She reached over and lightly kissed his lips. "Everything is great. Perfect. Things could not be better."

Luke drummed his fingers against the steering wheel. "Okay...if you say so."

Courtney looked at him a moment more before returning to her fingernails.