

LUCA

A short story, a scion in cahoots with The Biggest Lie

by

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The Biggest Lie

Betsy Moonfish Cover Design

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Thank you for respecting the hard work of the author.

For Emma my unromantic niece.

Love you immensely.

The story of Luca

2008

Three months that summer or My summer with Lana?

Luca played with both sentences, whichever way he said them the conclusion came out the same; his world had been filled with a rapturous delight.

Luca spent most of his time travelling; he'd been to every continent on the planet. He'd faced - and escaped - the unwelcome gestures of a remote tribe in Peru.

He'd fled with barely his life intact from drug barons living in the isolated jungle deep inside Thailand's farming communities.

In 2004, after the destructive tsunami, the Indian Government gave authorisation for Luca and a crew of eleven men and women - fellow anthropologists and archaeologists - to set sail around the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean to ascertain the level of catastrophic destruction the tsunami had left behind, more specifically; North Sentinel Island. They discovered that the Sentinelese Islanders had survived and were ready to fight; a hail of stones and iron lances assaulted their boat; they were lucky to escape with no injuries. The Sentinelese were known to either retreat into the deep jungle when ships and boats verged too close to their coral-ringed island, or they would stand on the beach menacingly with arms and armoury raised high, ready to attack, and probably kill, anyone who came too close. Here lives a tribe of peoples who have had no close contact with the outside world and for them now to have that contact would certainly mean their death sentence through contamination and disease.

Luca himself originated from Australia. And that was the life he lived.

* * * *

He'd been in Cambridge for less than a week; a visitor on a three month assignment at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. It was his first time in Cambridge and he hadn't yet found his way around, it seemed to be a dizzy place where the streets were placed haphazardly, he had no idea how to get from one destination to the next, but today that wasn't important, today the time was his own.

Luca had been sat on the terrace for two hours, writing notes and reading between top-ups of coffee, water and juice.

He was in no rush to go anywhere, the tables around him were full; over the last couple of hours he'd seen the faces on the terrace change several times over. He'd purposely chosen one of the smaller tables; he wasn't in a mood to chat to strangers, no matter how charming they were. Today, he was enjoying the stillness.

It was nearly lunchtime; Luca felt he should make a move to allow the office crowds a chance to sit in the sunshine, he would have one last cup and then he would go...

He didn't see the woman aiming her stride in his direction.

She arrived at his table and pointed to the vacant chair; 'Is this chair free...is someone sitting here?' she asked.

'No, please...' He replied politely as he had done numerous times that morning, Luca stood up and held the back of the chair for her, indicating that she was welcome to take a seat.

The woman thanked him; Luca nodded, smiled and picked up his paper, an excuse not to have to make small talk. Luca took no offence when the woman moved the chair a few inches further away, she wanted to avoid conversation too.

A young girl came to take the woman's order, Luca interrupted before she left and ordered a coffee for himself, after this one he would make a move and maybe find a new way back to his apartment through the old backstreets.

Luca was pleased when he saw the woman take a book out of her bag; it freed him from feelings of obligation to speak to her.

She put her sunglasses on; they hid her eyes and created another barrier between two strangers.

It takes place without thinking doesn't it? Those natural reactions when something happens; someone may trip and drop their shopping – without a second thought you run to help. You see something amusing and you laugh, a little snorting noise meant only for yourself, a private chuckle.

A bike rode by pulling at least half a dozen dogs lounging lazily in a brightly painted trailer; the young guy pedalled furiously pulling the weight behind him.

The woman caught a glimpse of the top of a Westie's head - her heart always flipped at the sight of one - she gave her personal laugh, at the same time as Luca gave his.

Their conversation started from that one moment.

Luca couldn't remember who spoke first, who said what, but somehow, he was talking to this stranger with an easy, carefree feeling.

'I play the cello.' Luca said in response to a question which, later, he couldn't remember what she had asked.

'I don't know anything about classical music...apart from the obvious one's...Vivaldi...' She told him.

'It's not just the music though,' he smiled, 'it's the story behind the composer which *changes* the music, which makes it real and brings it to life, each piece has a story.'

Her name was Lana, she told him. She didn't live in Cambridge so she had no idea how to get around the quaint back streets either. Lana lived in a village half an hour's drive away.

‘I don’t have anything on for the rest of the day so, if you’re not doing anything would you like to...we could go to The Peterhouse Theatre...there’s a classical concert at the college this afternoon...’ his voice faltered towards the end of his sentence. ‘Sorry,’ he apologised at her silent response, ‘I get rather over enthusiastic about music, I run away with myself a bit...’

‘I’d love to go.’ Lana said quietly, she was in two minds whether to buy a piece of John Maltby sculpture from a gallery further up the road, but it would wait for another day...

‘You would?’ he asked, surprised.

‘Yes!’ She smiled broadly.

Luca couldn’t make out her age, her hair was still dark and her skin was that of a young woman; the signs of maturity manifested when she bent her head forward, showing a slight distortion in the folds of her neck. It didn’t matter to him whether she was forty-three; the same age as him or whether she was forty-eight, all he knew was that he wanted to spend time with her.

Lana was fifty-five and had broken away from a relationship of more years than she cared to count, a relationship which had broken her soul and left her feeling worthless both as a woman and a human being.

That afternoon was the start of Lana’s indoctrination into the world of classics.

Each story Luca told her had her hankering for more.

He told her how, in his deafness, Beethoven chopped the legs off his piano so that he could feel the music beating into his body through the floor - which drove his neighbours downstairs crazy of course. Who was the mysterious lady; his *dearly beloved*? A question which had scuppered and tested the minds of many an academic then, and since...

Mozart; wild and flamboyant who once was engaged as the court musician in Salzburg and died a pauper...

Every spare hour that Luca had he spent it with Lana. They went to London and Luca recited the complete ballad of the Lady of Shallot as they walked along Regent Street after spending the afternoon at The London Coliseum; they'd been to see The Magic Flute, Mozart's fairy tale opera which Luca said was the easiest to get initiated with.

Luca's biggest hero, his real love of music came from Franz Liszt.

* * * *

He told her stories of his life as an anthropologist, travelling to remote places with his work. Lana was enthralled by him and the life he lived.

He told her how there exists a hundred or more groups of people scattered over our planet, tribes who have never had contact with the outside world.

'They have no knowledge of our existence,' he told her, 'all they want is to be left alone, they don't need us and our diseases and they certainly don't deserve to have loggers forcing them off their land and even worse, pointlessly killing them for their land. These tribes,' he told her, 'know nothing outside of their jungle clearing.'

'They must be petrified.' Lana was aghast at such brutality.

'They are. They have no notion that anything else exists, can you imagine their terror...?'

'I can't *believe*,' she told him as they ate dinner in a small Italian trattoria in Covent Garden, 'that, by pure chance I meet someone as clever and wonderful as you! All I did was stop for a coffee...' she laughed and shook her head in amazement, '...boy, this spaghetti is good!'

Luca's very presence allowed Lana slip back to her old self.

Luca was interested in *her*, he wanted to know about the things she liked, the things which got her heart soaring, the loves she'd had and those she had lost.

And so as she told him everything, she felt unleashed. She told him how she had only ever loved one person in her life, but that was long ago...

'Joe, was married,' she said, 'I'm not proud of that fact but I couldn't help it, I tried not to love him...but I did,' she glanced at Luca for his reaction, hoping she wouldn't see a look of distaste curling the corners of his mouth.

Luca's dark brown eyes shone with depth and warmth, he enveloped her with a strange feeling of security. She had to remind herself that he was *not* Howard, most people were not Howard, Luca wasn't waiting, ready to pour sand on her joy.

'Before all that though,' she leaned across the table with a conspiratorial laugh, 'there'd been a flock of turkeys flapping around in my life...and now, there's *you!*' she laughed again, 'what a frigging mixed bag of toys you all are!'

Luca didn't fit in with the world of economics and concrete, he was a gentle, beautiful person, he was probably more suited to a bygone era of flowers in the hair and ban the bomb slogans on t-shirts with flowery flared pants, lazing the day away in a meadow of buttercups and field mice. Luca had insight and knew Lana better, in those few weeks since they met, than Howard did in all the years they were together.

* * * *

I've booked us into the Langham Hotel in London for a couple of days - Luca pinged the text over to Lana's phone; *are you up for it?* He followed before she had a chance to reply to the first one.

I'm there already, waiting... she replied with a smiley face at the end.

Tuesday, early July, the weather was rather overcast but it didn't distract from the gladness Lana felt as she drove to Cambridge and parked at the serviced apartment Luca was renting. They caught the train to London then a cab to The Langham.

'Whoa, look at this shower Luca!' Lana called as she did a tour of their room; he came up behind her and put his arms around her. 'A shower made for two, whaddy think of that?' she teased as she pressed her body against his.

She sang a ditty which she'd made up; '*Shoo-bop-be-doo let's doo-ka the Lana-Luca*' she sang the words in time to a tune on the radio; Luca threw himself on the bed and laughed aloud as she danced around him, singing her nonsensical song.

Luca couldn't get enough of her; the way her mind worked thrilled him.

'I could never be bored in your company,' he'd told her many times and meant it. Lana's eagerness to learn new things; how she soaked up his words; how she silently listened in sorrow as he told her of the lives of innocent tribes and wild animals which had been shattered by the interference of mankind.

Without words, they were both aware that once Luca's assignment was over, he would be leaving, back to that life which took him to continents far away and beyond civilisation.

Without words they both accepted that.

* * * *

They spent the next morning in Covent Garden watching street performers and wandering the shops and indoor markets.

Late morning Luca said he knew just the right place to get a light lunch, Lana happily followed his lead as they made their way toward Charing Cross Road where Luca hailed a cab, he asked the driver to take them to Wigmore Street, a short walk

from their hotel.

Once they reached Wigmore Street Luca instructed for the driver to stop in the busy road.

He'd planned this over the phone and via emails, he hoped that they had it all set out, ready as he had instructed. He would have liked to go in first; just to make sure...but he would just have to trust that they had done as he asked.

This was the main reason why he had brought Lana to London.

'Close your eyes!' Luca held his hand over her eyes and guided her down the street and through a door, 'no peeping! Careful there's a step here...' He led her down a corridor following the concierge who walked silently in front of them until they reached a door, the concierge opened the door and Luca led Lana in.

It was a small room which had a tray of sandwiches, Leonidas chocolates, fruit juice and hot water with herbal tea bags laid out on a table. A comfortable chair sat on one side of the tiny space and a dining chair sat opposite, Lana had no idea what was about to happen.

'I would have ordered champagne but as you don't drink alcohol I asked them to substitute it with herby tea bags...I didn't want to risk coffee without a barista in the building!' Luca smiled knowing that they both were rather fussy when it came to how they liked their cappuccino, latte and espresso's. 'I'm just going to go and get something so,' he turned to the small buffet, 'help yourself to a bit of lunch ma'am, and I'll be back shortly.'

Lana laughed at his craziness, she had no idea what he had planned, but, whatever it was she knew it would be special, something thoughtful, no nasty surprises to knock her off her balance and make her feel useless with this man.

She took two tea-bags; she liked it strong so that the spices bit her throat, she pressed a button on the flask-like container and hot water trickled out into the mug;

she put a few brown bread finger sandwiches onto her plate and sat down on the hard chair. After a few seconds she got up and moved to the easy chair, she put her plate and mug on the small table placed at its side.

Lana didn't know which chair she should be sat in so she stood up again and took a small white, brick of a chocolate, from the box; she ate it in two bites and went back for another as she waited for Luca to come back.

'Sit down,' he said as he came back into the room all excited and big smiles, he put his hands on her shoulders and navigated her to the easy chair as she ate the whole chocolate she had just put in her mouth, she held another two between her fingers.

'Now, close your eyes again and *do not open* them, not until you hear me say you can.'

Lana did as he asked, she trusted him without question, she put both of the chocolates in the open palm of her left hand, hoping they wouldn't melt, and raised her other hand to cover her eyes, just to make sure she didn't open them with some kind of reflex reaction.

It was less than a minute later when Luca came back into the room, Lana heard sounds but couldn't make out what it was; then came silence.

Silence, before one note quivered through the air, the haunting notes of a cello weeping, it filled the room with such beauty she felt her breath being taken away from her, every hair on her head, her neck, her arms tingled.

Slowly she moved her hand away from her eyes and watched the vision before her, Luca was in another world, his grey and dark streaked hair flopped down over his face as he played the first few notes of Pachelbel Canon, then, out of the speakers in the room came the accompanying sound of a violin, more cellos joined in and more violins filled the air, a flute made its way into the room and together Lana had her

own personal concert, a magnificent cloud of music to raise her out of a life she had once known, all of this, being led by the finest cello player she ever did see, sitting in front of her very eyes.

She wanted the moment to last forever; she wanted to die in that room with that music carrying her off to wherever it is a soul moves on to.

Luca looked up at her and smiled, she found it very difficult to hold back her tears; it was one of the most beautiful things anyone had ever done for her.

* * * *

‘If things had been different, circumstances...’ Luca looked across the table. It was their last dinner together; tomorrow he would fly back to Australia. His eyes were smiling as he looked at her.

‘You,’ she leaned across the table, ‘have given me the most wonderful summer I have known in years and you’re right...if circumstances were different...I would be on the next plane; following you to Aus.’ She smiled at his smile.

‘It’s been good, hasn’t it?’

‘It’s been the best.’ She said truthfully. In a matter of weeks Luca had, effortlessly, revived the characteristics and confidence which had been snoozing in her marrow, he brought her back to that comfort zone where she came face-to-face with her old self again. In just a few short weeks Luca had annihilated the inadequacy, that which her life during the previous years had slowly ingrained in to her spirit. ‘I’ve never known anyone as gifted and lovely as you,’ Lana told him honestly.

‘I absolutely *adore* you, I’ve cherished every moment I’ve spent with you.’ Luca pressed his lips against the back of her hand, ‘I love the way you gobble up knowledge...how you’re are always hungry to learn more, how you come close to tears when you hear something beautiful, whether it’s music, words or a lonely bird

singing. *Aw,*' he sighed, 'how you laugh out loud...sometimes, it's a *very dirty* laugh, yet other times it is full of joy and fun.'

'I love your passion for music and your knowledge...Wow, you have no idea how I could sit and listen to you for hours and days; you've seen and experienced so much, you've no idea what it has meant to me...you sharing those stories with me.'

'Ah! I love these self-appreciation conversations that we indulge ourselves in...they nourish the ego!' Luca's laugh rang out.

'Well, another thing...' Lana smiled light-heartedly, '...how you always keep a few pound coins in your pocket,' she saw Luca pull a face at her words. 'Aha!' she chortled, 'every time we walked past a homeless person busking in the street or stood with his hand open, *I saw you*, you'd slip money into his hand or flip it into his hat!' Lana made the motion with her hand secretly sliding into her thigh pocket and flipping coins on the ground, '*Purrphwat*' she clicked her tongue.

'Oh well, if we're getting on to that sort of behaviour, *you* went one further, so *I* heard...'

'Nah...' she sniggered in a strange way, 'what did you hear?' Lana didn't know what he meant, but it still made her laugh.

'That busker who sits near John Lewis-'

'Oh no!' she covered her face with her hands in embarrassment before regaining her composure, 'Oh well, anyway, he's another one you regularly flip a coin at...'

'Yep! He told me that you went up to him with a bag and, in that bag you'd put a few tins of dog food and biscuit treats for his mutt and some Frontline for his fleas...'

'The poor animal always scratches! A bit o' frontline on the neck...that's all he needed...Maybe the old boy should have used a drop or two on himself.' They snickered and chortled as they talked.

'Oh, yeah, by the way...he sold the tins of dog food.'

‘What? No!’ her laughter stopped.

‘He had to, because he had no sodding way to open the tins.’

Her laughter bubbled over his words.

‘Look what you’ve done to me!’ she told him as her laughter finally subsided. ‘A chance meeting and you’ve eliminated all the shitty dross it took Howard *years* to build up in me. Tsk, he would be *so pissed off* with you destroying all his hard work...’

It may have been her, she had often thought, you know how some people bring out the bad part of you? The not so good side, how they irritate you for no reason on earth and make you feel angry and annoyed?

She could have been that person in Howard’s life; the one who released the brute inside of him which he then took out on her. Maybe in some obscure way, it *had* been her fault after all.

‘I still can’t get my head around it...how anyone could treat you in such a way? If you were mine...well, not mine because we don’t own people...but you know what I mean...if you were mine then I would want to make very single hour of every day special, to share it with you. I would take you to Milan and Naples...we would see *Nabucco* and *Madama Butterfly*, then fly off to India where the elephants roam freely along the beach. I would sit quietly under a tree and watch them, and I would watch you...you doing your yoga.’

Lana wanted to write his words down, have him dictate them into her new hi-tech smarty phone, there to listen when she didn’t feel as strong as she did at that moment.

‘And if you were mine,’ she replied in the same tone, ‘being with you every day would be special enough for me.’

These were not the seriously cheesy words of lovers blinded by a romantic liaison; it

was truthful, frolicsome banter between two friends, transient lovers who would go their own way, each one fulfilled differently by their encounter.

‘That’s the summer gone then,’ Luca whistled as they walked out of the restaurant, ‘soon, your favourite season will be here,’ he looked down and smiled at her, he opened his arm inviting her to put hers through his before they set off walking back to his apartment.

‘I can take you to the airport tomorrow,’ she said.

‘No, I’ve got a car coming to pick me up...it’s probably better that way.’

‘Yes, you’re right,’ she answered thoughtfully. ‘Luca?’

‘Hmm?’ he bent and kissed the top of her head.

‘Will you recite the Lady of Shallot again for me?’

Ten minutes later they arrived at his apartment, just as he spoke the last line of the epic ballad.

They made their way up to his apartment in silence whilst holding on to each other, each one had their own thoughts.

* * * *

Luca had told Lana the story of Abraham Lincoln and his wife Mary Todd, how they loved each other so deeply, even though, at times the storms whipped their relationship into a frenzy.

Luca told her that he didn’t know much about Mary Todd but he knew enough that, in her own right, she deserved her story to be told, they tried to claim that she was insane, but Luca wasn’t sure and, as he had never got around to buying a book to explain all these things; he wouldn’t pass judgement on her as many critics had.

Lana scoured dozens of reviews on the internet of numerous books about the life of

Mary Todd Lincoln; she came across one which seemed to shine above all the others. One, which, she finally decided, was most probably the best one for him; at least, she *hoped* that it was: *Mrs Lincoln and Mrs Keckly*.

When Luca got up the next morning to go to the bathroom Lana placed it on his pillow. She'd wrapped it in colourful paper and swathed it in ribbons, she'd attached a small four-inch cello inside a water-tight Perspex box which had been moulded and shaped to fit the miniature replica; she tied it to one of the ribbons. The cello had been hand-carved from a piece of maple; the fingerboard, tailpiece and pegs were made of ebony, and the four strings were titanium, it was a small perfect replica complete with its own matching bow.

Lana had called antique dealers; old contacts from her days with Howard. One of them had sourced this perfect specimen for her.

'What's this?' Luca jumped on to the bed, he touched the Perspex covering.

'It's only something small; to keep with you when you come upon *uncontacted tribes*, you can charm them with your music.' She touched his fingers as she spoke and showed him how to open the Perspex box to reveal the perfectly formed cello and bow.

'Whoa...amazing,' he said slowly as he carefully held the instrument. He moved the bow over the strings to produce a small tinny note. 'I love it!' He said quietly as he closed the seal of Perspex back around it.

'And that,' she told him as he unwrapped the book, 'will, hopefully, answer all those questions you have about old Abe's missus.'

'You, are bloody amazing!' he jumped on top of her and made her squeal with laughter.

Luca had been sent to her on a brief expedition; her guiding spirits had brought him to her to show her the old world she knew and the goodness of people in it, to lift

her back into that place where she should be and revive her heart and soul.

‘Those busker’s will miss you,’ she told him thoughtfully. ‘And I will too.’

* * * *

Luca watched the tarmac speed by, the plane rose into the sky, in his melancholy he felt a solace settle inside of him. Luca was used to unexpected adventures jumping out to grab his arse; surprising him with their intensity, but meeting Lana had been a different, though a no-less remarkable, experience. He’d been living in a world which excluded the twenty-first century, cutting himself off from the present time, he felt more comfortable and at ease in a world without the consumerism, where nature thrives and the smells of the jungle, mingling with murky rivers, were the first things to catch hold of his senses each morning when he woke up.

And then she had come along, out of nowhere, making him laugh and filling him with fascination, she briefly brought him back to the world he was born in to and he loved her for that but now, it was time for him to return to that sphere he was truly at home in; remoteness, sounds echoing and rustling through the jungle, the rolling ocean and a mass of stars overhead.

* * * *

Lana put the suitcase on her bed. She felt a bit of an emptiness swimming inside of her but, it came hand in hand with the anticipation of something exciting. Three months had turned back time, she was back to her old self, she was ready to move on with life.

She opened the suitcase; a carrier bag sat on top, a carrier bag from the gallery in King’s Parade. Lana had never returned for the ceramic sculpture on that day she first met Luca, but she’d pointed out the gallery to him, she’d told him jokingly that

by meeting him, on that day nearly three months ago, he'd saved her a heap of money.

She read the small card Luca had written; *I don't think I can ever forget you.*

Lana unwrapped the sculpture from the bubble wrap and tissue. Standing on top of a black sculpted plinth was the contemporary figure of an angel. Underneath, the artist's hand had written: *Angel and Wall – John Maltby.*