

A Real Story

Delia De Santis

It's an early morning in May and the sun is spreading gentle and warm over the town. It's not the brilliant sun he was used to back in Italy, but a sun that he has grown to love for its restrained, muted light. By noon, the temperature will be perfect. He has been in Canada for five years and the memory of spring flowers and their intoxicating perfume is starting to fade; everything is subtler here and he's happy. He whistles as he opens the door of his tailor shop, a bit earlier than usual as he has a very busy day ahead. He has done well, built up a good clientele. He has more customers than he can handle already.

Cornilio sets the right change in the cash register and goes into the back room, puts his lunch bag in the little fridge in the corner and hangs his tweed jacket on a hook behind the door. But before he can start his day, before he can do any work, he always looks up at a picture of Lucia on the wall. He does that every morning when he comes in, just as he makes the sign of the cross as soon as he puts his feet on the floor in the morning. That's what Lucia used to do, and he had learned to do the same.

He was six years old when one day Lucia made him go upstairs with her to make the beds. "Come on Cornilio, pull the bedspread on your side. You have to learn to do these things. Be a man!"

"But Papà doesn't make the beds."

She straightened herself up to look at him. "Never mind *Papà*... but you need to learn to do things so you will know how to do them when you're older. From now on you're going to start doing barn chores and help me in the kitchen."

"Uh," he says, bending his head sideways as if to rattle it. "None of my friends help their mothers in the kitchen."

"I am not your mother, so don't argue. Your friends have sisters who can help cook and clean. I can't do everything by myself."

Lucia did not waste any time and that very day she made a list of things he had to do before and after school. In the house, he mostly had to strain the ricotta cheese they made to sell and do the dishes and clean up the kitchen. Before dark, he had to feed the chickens and the rabbits. Cornilio grumbled for a few days, but then finally decided to give in. It was easier to do that than to make a fuss all the time.

He's just starting to organize his work one day, when the shop's bell

rings and the postman walks in. "How is it going, Corrie?" the friendly man says, pulling an airmail letter out from his pouch and handing it to Cornilio.

"Much better now that you brought me a letter from my sister. She always replied right away. It's been over two months."

"Well then... it'll be a good day now."

But when he's starting to open the letter, he suddenly stops and looks at the return address. The letter is not from Lucia but from his father. A strange sense of foreboding comes over him and he feels a trembling in his legs. He has to sit down. His father was a strange, silent man, who had never written to Cornilio. He hadn't even replied when he wrote to him for special holidays.

They live in the valley and he can see the couple coming arm in arm down the steep mountain path. Lucia draws a bucket of water from the well, and then stands watching the approaching couple. Cornilio whirls the water round and round with his hand until it spills over the rim of the bucket. Lifting his restless hand, his sister holds him still at her side. "Be a good boy," she admonishes.

"Who is that with Papà?" he says, looking up at her.

"I'm not sure. But, there has been talk—"

"What do you mean?"

"You want to know too much. Let's bring the water in. Soon it'll be time to cook the pasta."

Lucia makes the woman sit in the place that has been empty since Cornilio could remember. On her left hand, the stranger is wearing a gold wedding band. It looks like the one Lucia had shown him once, the one that had belonged to their mother, who had died when he was two years old.

It takes his father a long time to make the introduction. They're already half way through dinner when he finally clears his throat and says, "Children, this is Olga. She and I were married today."

Cornilio lifts his head up. "Does that mean she'll be doing the cooking and the cleaning so I won't have to help Lucia anymore?"

His sister quickly steps on his foot underneath the table. For a moment, they all stare at each other. Cornilio knows he has said something wrong, but doesn't know what to do about it. His father looks worried.

"Oh but I don't mind the housework," Lucia says quickly. "Besides, Cornilio is getting to be a good little helper."

"Well, good," his father mumbles, relieved. "Olga is not used to children and housework. She'll be helping me in the fields." The

woman gives a quick nod of approval.

After clearing the table, Cornilio goes outside with Lucia to bring table scraps to the chickens. "I don't like that woman," he says. "I am scared she'll beat me up."

"Don't be silly. She won't bother us—as long as we stay out of her way. She's only interested in Papà."

"Why is she interested in Papà?"

"Maybe she's in love with him... or maybe she doesn't want to be an old maid anymore."

"And what about Papà, does he love her?"

"Maybe. But I bet not as much as he loved Mama."

Cornilio has often wondered what his mother was like, but has never asked anyone. He has seen a picture of her in a box in his father's bedroom and in the picture, she looks happy. Lucia looks a lot like her.

"What was she like—Mama?" Cornilio wants to know, as he follows his sister back into the house.

"Well, she wasn't tall like Papà... she was small. But she was fast at everything she did, and she was the best seamstress around. You have her hands, delicate and slender... Here, you try cutting this," she tells him, spreading a length of cloth on the table.

"But what if I can't cut straight?" he says, nervously picking up the scissors. His hand is shaking, but at the same time he is eager to try.

"Go on. Don't be afraid. I'll guide your hand."

"But what if the scissors go crooked anyway? I'll be upset and won't be able to sleep."

"Then I'll tell you two bedtime stories instead of one," she laughs.

Almost every night, when he goes to bed, Lucia sits by his bed and tells him a story to help him close his eyes. A made-up story, as he likes them a lot better than the ones in books. His sister has so much imagination, the words just flow with twists and turns. But one night, shortly after his eighth birthday, she's in a big hurry to tuck him in. It looks like she has to go somewhere. Maybe she has to go meet some young man. She never talks to him about boys and he never asks. But suddenly she laughs, saying to him, "You know Cornilio... once there was a little boy who was a real pest. He always wanted me to tell him a story—"

"Oh, not like that," he laughs shyly, wrapping her apron strings around his finger. "A real story, Lucia . . . the kind you always tell me."

She looks sad for a moment, then leans down to smooth his curly hair. She sits down beside him again. "Cornilio, listen to me. You're getting too old for stories. Look at you! You're a big boy now."

"Am I, Lucia?" he says, throwing his arms around her and squeezing her hard. Her breasts feel warm, like the loaves of bread he sometimes presses to his cheeks when Lucia bakes.

The thin sheet of paper trembles in his hands. Cornilio tries to fold it and put it back into the envelope, but he can't. "*Why Lucia?*" he cries out. "*Why?*"

It's a cool summer evening and Lucia is hurrying down the road, her long braids flying in the wind, her summer shawl spread out like wings. Cornilio can see a young man rushing towards his sister, and suddenly the two are into each other's arms. Cornilio can't stand watching anymore and he goes back into the house. There is a weight gathering inside of him and the weight presses on his chest like a rock.

That evening he goes to bed early, but his eyes just won't close. He waits until everyone is asleep and then tiptoes downstairs, to the room where Lucia has her sewing machine. A pretty white and yellow material is folded inside a bag—she had bought the material to make herself a new dress for the village feast of St. Anthony. Cornilio spreads out the material on a nearby table and picks up the scissors: he cuts and cuts until his fingers get sore and stiff from the heavy scissors, until all of the cloth has been reduced to shreds.

In the morning, shame keeps him in bed until late, but when he finally pulls himself out of bed and goes downstairs, Lucia greets him as though nothing has happened. She doesn't say a word about what he had done through the night. Everything was cleaned up, not even a thread can be seen anywhere.

"Guess what?" Lucia beams. She is making honey and hazelnut biscotti as she does every Sunday morning before going to late Mass. "Angelo proposed to me last night. He wants to marry me. He's from a good family and I think Papà will give his consent." Lucia is only fifteen.

Cornilio wants to say something nice to her, he wants to congratulate her... but he can't. His jaw feels stuck. He stares down at the floor; he doesn't want her to know how miserable he's suddenly feeling.

"Eh, what's the matter?" she says, tickling him under his chin, something she hasn't done since he was small.

"Nothing," he says, quickly bending down to fix his shoelace so that she won't see his face. "I am happy for you. Honest I am!"

She remains quite for a while, but then smiling, she says, "And you'll even be happier when I tell you about my plans for you. You'll have to stay with Papà after I'm married—but actually Angelo and I will be taking care of you. You will come and have supper with us every

night... and we'll make sure when you're finished your elementary grades, you'll apprentice with the best tailor in Naples. And when you're finished, Angelo says he'll help you find a way to go to Canada."

"Canada? But that's so far away. Will you come to Canada, too?"

"No, Cornilio. I have to stay in Italy. Angelo is an only son, and his family needs him here. They have a big farm. Anyway, he says you could go to France or Germany, but those countries are not as good as Canada. Look at how many people we know who went there and got rich."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Uh"

"In Canada, you can open up a tailor shop and get lots of customers. I heard that Italian tailors always find lots of work overseas. They're well liked and respected. You'll make plenty of money."

"And... and I'll be able to come back to visit you. And I'll buy you lots of material for new dresses. I'll come in the summer and we can go to all the festivals together."

"Yes, July and August. Those are the best months."

"And we will go on the Ferris wheel together... and we'll laugh like we always do. Weeeeeee..."

Cornilio hangs the CLOSED sign in the window of his shop. He walks back home to his little apartment and sits in his recliner chair. He has no tears to cry with—he's too numb. His father had written that Lucia had been advised by the doctor not to try to have another child, but she did not listen. She had died giving birth.

Cornilio had recently planned his first trip back to Italy. He had booked his flight for July... but now Lucia is not there anymore. She was the only person in the world he has ever loved. It would tear his heart apart to go back now. No, he would not go, not for a long time. His father had not even mentioned if her child had survived.

All day he sits, he doesn't even get up to make himself something to eat—he has no hunger. In the evening Cornilio tries hard to fall asleep and finally sleep does come to him. But in the middle of the night, he is startled awake by a strange dream: a Ferris Wheel slowly turning, without any people on it. The festival grounds are silent and empty, except for a man waving at him to "*Come, come...*" and as he's going toward the stranger, everything vanishes. He's left standing there, in the middle of a dry field, with nothing around him, the silence broken only by the sound of his own sobs.