

DOMENICO DARA

The Fundamentals of Celestial Mechanics

NUTRIMENTI

Working draft

I

The Lunatic

The intense heat of that day made the air sizzle like doughnuts when they are first removed from burning oil, which Lulu had already tried the day before.

He had been on his way home when he smelt the aroma in the air that made him think about the village he grew up in. He had followed the smell and found himself looking through Arcangeluzza's window, where he could see the homemade 'zippuli' on the table waiting to be fried. The lady had wrapped a few up in newspaper for her grandson's birthday and also had a fizzy drink to give him too. Lulu was as happy as a clam that he even nearly licked the oil off the newspaper, but then he saw him, Caracantulu, there was a picture of an actress in costume. That scoundrel with his deadly tongue had spread gossip about Lulu suggesting he had lost his touch, that the villagers had to be careful of him, for if he went around licking newspaper figures of young women, sooner or later he would do it to the girls in the flesh.

Lulu however, unaware of the vast evil brewing, returned home satisfied and content to go and rest on his bed in chamber 6, hall F of the Girifalco mental institution.

Luciano Segareddu, known as Lulu, was born in Brancaleone Calabro on April 2. He was the second legitimate son of Vrasciò and Vitaliana Spordigna, and illegitimate son of Need and Necessity.

His father was a poor farmer, hassled by the owners and chance, whose pathetic salary was not even enough to buy a slice of bread. And his wretched wife, who cursed the sun, came home empty handed with holes in her socks, attempted in every way to feed at least once a day his poor kids. Gaetanu, the oldest, worked at least during the day, but instead Lucianu was a problem, because he was a weird kid who stuttered, an embarrassment, as his father called him before giving him a daily beating.

Lulu was always slow at school, like a lame dog, and the teachers just could not get the

idea of letters and numbers into his head. To him they were just irrelevant symbols that he could not make sense of. In Lulu's head, everything came and went like water in a basket. Everything except the love for his mum, or màmmasa as she was known to him, and for music, which were basically the same thing.

On Thursday morning, Vitaliana Spordigna carried the basket full of onions and bunches of garlic and oregano on her head while walking with Lulu to the market. Each time they entered the village from the Vuttandiari lane they would pass the open windows of master Malfare, where they would hear the music from his music player pour out into the street. She whispered to her son that he hoped there would be beautiful music to listen to that day. It was always obvious when her little one was around because màmmasa's face would light up. She sped up a bit until she was under the window, taking full advantage of the fountain opposite, and waited to hear the record player load and to hear the tune. In that moment she stopped, her eyes hazy, her face pale and her lips dry like a dusty plane.

'Listen Lucià, listen with your ears and your heart, I'm telling you that if Signoriddio came back down to earth, this song is what he'd arrive to.'

The little one listened intently, sometimes even closing his eyes thinking that miracles happen only in the dark, imagining that the statue of Jesus in the church, Chiesa Madre, coming to life and start to sing. He wanted to be part of this mysterious secret the music conjured.

She watched him and could see how happy he was, like when he ate his favourite dish of pasta and almonds. With each note he would smile and nod his head, and in that moment and in that place, in the barren and pale face of Vitaliana Spordigna, she saw herself as a young child in her son. Lulu had learned to love music through seeing the happiness in his mother's eyes when she listened to it.

She turned saying his dialect, 'If you knew, Lucià, the first time I heard this. I was young like you, maybe even younger, and it was the first time the world seemed good to me. I understood that thing Don Ciccio called paradise. Come here and give me a hug.'

Lulu climbed into her arms that smelt of cots and lullabies to him that for a moment even he was allowed to enjoy, thinking that in a world of so many troubles, here was a bit of perfection.

When the music stopped, màmmasa would get up, put the basket back on her head, and head towards the market. Before leaving they would always place a flower next to the statue of the Madonna and she would tell her son to make sure he always did it because his life would be blessed.

He never left his mother alone, especially in those early Spring evenings when she would sit out watching the light fade away, thinking that maybe even out there in the big universe, there was always a type of music.

'Lucià,' she would whisper in dialect, 'it's nice when the world is quiet and black like a cauldron, because when it's dark, we're all the same, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, clever and dumb, and even our troubles don't seem to be just our own anymore.'

One Thursday that Lulu had locked in his memory, when they went to the market and were sat by the fountain listening to the music, something new happened. He looked over and saw his mother cry for the first time, which was strange because màmmasa was only crying from her left eye.

'Why are you crying Ma?'

‘Because my love, this music is beautiful and beautiful things aren’t available to people like us. You will never be able to play music like this because school and instruments cost money and we are poor.’

Sometimes when he wanted, Lulu would leave his house and go to Muscedda’s to stand under the window. His music player was like the Chiàzza fountain, it was always on the go.

One day when the street was empty, the old professor leant out the window to have a cigarette. Lulu pretended to be drinking from the fountain when he heard, ‘do you like music?’

Lulu looked up, looking towards the window.

‘I’m talking to you, you like music don’t you?’

Lulu dried his face and nodded.

‘Well then come up here, you’ll hear it better.’

He felt himself blush as he entered the house. His first instinct was to run but then he heard the tick of the portone opening and he froze.

‘Come on in, don’t be scared.’

The professor’s house smelled of basil. On the first floor he saw the music player on the table, he had never seen one before and watched intently as the disk rotated on the spot like a windmill.

‘This is where the music comes from? he asked

The man smiled, ‘it really is a strange contraption.’

‘How does it work?’

‘I’ll explain, this weird contraption...’

‘No, nothing bad comes out of here. This is paradise, my mum said it.’

‘Oh yes, your mum, I see you both here on a Thursday morning. That’s why I put the same music on, because I know she likes it. Wait a minute.’

He took the disc off and went to get another in a shelf full of them.

‘Sit here,’ he said pointing to the leather armchair, ‘you’ll be more comfortable.’

He did as he was told but wasn’t totally comfortable because he was so nervous to listen.

The professor put on another record and picked up some sheets of paper. The boy got up and went near him asking, ‘what are those?’

‘It’s the sheet music for what you’re listening to now.’

He thought it was a joke. He looked at the paper full of lines and dots and it reminded him of school. He was confused and thought that his mother had been wrong, that not only do you need money to play music but also a brain, and he didn’t even have that.

The professor then showed him the cover for the disc, which had an autumn forest on the front with brown and orange leaves.

‘The title of the music you like is Valzer Triste.’

He left half an hour later, like a bee full of pollen and ran home to tell his mother everything that had happened. He wanted to tell her what a record player looked like, what written music looked like and most importantly the name of the music she liked.

From that moment, the arrival of autumn made him sad because the sight of orange leaves made him think of that music, but it wasn’t a depressing sadness, it was a sadness that made you feel good, that spoke of a better life, however far that may be.

One day, when he was roaming through the Cannariari fields like a lizard, he heard someone singing.

Misticheddu Fricalora was holding a vine leaf, practicing playing music under an olive tree.

‘What you doing?’ Lulu asked.

‘Practicing conducting,’ the shepherd said sarcastically in the strong dialect.

‘How do you do it?’

‘Lulu, you’re gonna get eaten by the dogs in a minute, what sort of a question is that? Get a vine leaf and play, blimey I’m tired’

He got up annoyed. It was known that he didn’t like being disturbed while he was resting. He whistled to the dogs and made his way back towards the herd. But Lulu followed him like a sheep.

‘What’s with you Lulu, leave me alone I’m not in the mood today.’

But Lulu continued to follow him without a word.

‘Oh for goodness sake Lulu what do you want from me?’

‘Teach me how to play the vines.’

‘Oh the bloody vines!’

‘Help me to play music!’

Angrily he jumped round and raised his stick he had in his hand to give the boy a smack, but Lulu’s innocent face stopped him. He hadn’t moved, not even his arms to block the blow or even closed his eyes. He just stood frozen with fear in the shade of the chestnut tree.

Misticheddu hit the stick on the floor to let his anger out, swearing to the saints and the Madonna.

‘That’s just what I needed today, an idiot who wants to learn to play music!’

He got closer to the flock, Lulu still behind him.

‘You wanna know how to play? Fine but you gotta work for it. Take this bucket and go fill it up.’

Lulu did as he was told, like all the other people Misticheddu bossed around, and in exchange the pastor taught him how to pick the right vines, how to separate his lips and how to breath in and out properly to create the sound.

He was eleven years old, four months and three days, when he played his first melody and he would never have thought that it would be his last summer in Brancaleone.

It was a holiday, festa, in the village and the streets were lit up like a birthday cake. Lulu hadn’t felt well the whole day but he went along to the crowded procession of the Madonna anyway. At the end of the day, the procession would stop in the main piazza where the church was and everyone would all recite the Our Father.

It was right at that moment, the wrong moment, that Lulu, a stranger to himself, fell to the ground writhing and screaming like he had been bitten by a tarantula. The people recoiled in terror: the priest interrupted the prayer and in the dead silence of the square, his wails were all that could be heard.

When the police came, Lulu hit the sergeant in the face and he fell to the ground. When he rose he jumped on the boy to stop his arms flailing about. Eventually they pinned him on the ground while he continued whining like a rabid dog. An old man made the sign of the cross. Fazzuluaru, the medical officer of the village, arrived shortly after and understood immediately it was a seizure by the milky drool, the contractions of the upper limbs and his eyes rolling back. After a few seconds the convulsions stopped and the only sign left of the crisis was a deep gasp and a lot of phlegm.

He was taken to a surgery and his mother was called and asked if this was the first time it had happened, to which she replied no. She explained that it had happened before but never as bad. She asked what was to happen to her son and was told that he was a danger to society and that the syndicate had been called and the medic to decide what to do with him.

However, sergeant Verratano, with his red cheeks and heart full of hate for parasites had already made up his mind. So the next morning Lulu received his medical certificate and the mayor's approval for the confinement of the boy. It was he who explained it to Lulu's father.

'Think about it Vrasciò. This summer has been so hot it feels like Hell itself has started it. You've seen how dry the land is, the dead plants, the springs are all dried up. Hunger is everywhere and you know it Vrasciò. You don't even have your own land to farm on, all it means is one less mouth to feed.'

Vrasciò agreed with the sergeant because there were days that they didn't even eat salads and had nothing but rubbish to eat, but his idiot son was always the one to eat if there was food. He had tried to take him to the farm with him but he couldn't even hold the rake in his hand, or anything without risking chopping his fingers off and pulling the plants out from the root. And now he had even got involved with that criminal Misticheddu. What could he do? The sergeant and the doctor had both decided, and he wouldn't be without food and that's what he would tell his wife while she made the sign of the cross. 'Verratano is like a hospital, he will always have a bed to sleep in and soup to eat everyday, it'll be good for him.'

Vitaliana was in the waiting room, looking at the calendar on the wall, was already crying because she was poor and illiterate. She felt that the dice had already been thrown for her and all she could do was say the numbers allowed. That was how her whole life had been. When they took Lulu to say goodbye, his mother began wailing and hugged her son so tight as though she were trying to put him back in her womb, so tight that no one could separate them. Lulu was crying too saying that he wanted to stay with them, begging her to not let them take him away, asking her to keep him with her always.

She wailed in the dialect, 'you're mine, I gave birth to you and raised you, you're staying with me, they can't have you, tell those men they can't have him! He's my beautiful little boy.'

Verratano got bored of this quickly. Separating them he said, 'look lady, lets get on with this, your son is going away and it's up to you to decide whether he goes to jail or the nuthouse!'

Vitaliana processed those words and threw herself at her son, holding him in her arms and whispering, 'my son,' to him for the last time. 'You are my life, and without you I'll die, don't worry, they're trying to take you away from me but I'm going with you, I'll be right behind you, don't worry. Don't cry just hug me.'

The police had to use force to get the two away from each other, and through the screams, the cries and the scratches, Lulu was taken away.

The next day Luciano Segareddu was thrown into the Girifalco loony bin like son many poor epileptic children. He was dosed up on medicines and made to sleep in a room with schizophrenics and maniacs. His life stopped, taken away from the light and his home, his weak brain stopped growing and he remained the same even if his body grew.

His only remaining passion was music whistled through the vines, that would amuse him

for hours on end, days, weeks and years. He always had his pockets full of vines which he would take out and play whenever anyone asked, in exchange for a lemonade, which was his favourite. He played everything, except one song.

Then one afternoon on the 9th August, Sciccapariddi, the doctor came to get him because he had a visitor. He had his hair brushed, his shirt changed and was led to the visitor room, which up until that point he had only seen from the outside. He was nervous and put his hands in his pockets to touch the vines that always calmed him. The door opened and a figure appeared. He got up, analysing it, noticing that old black dress. He looked at her up and down without a word. As she got closer, the lady put out her trembling hand towards his cheek and said with a breath, 'my little Lucianu, my boy is that you?'

The voice from so long ago that a trap door from another life. The poppy fields, a shepherd playing, a record player, hugs màmmasa, màmmasa, màmmasa ... the face in front of him, that was like the seeing Madonna of Ruggiero Torre that he had found one day at a fair and that he had kept at his bedside because it looked like someone but did not know who. It was clear now that he had kept it because that lady reminded him of his mother, his mother.

He didn't even have time to say her name before she pounced on him, hugging and kissing him as though she were trying to make up for all the time they had lost. This awful world that separates two people who should never be separated.

Vitaliana cried so much because it seemed impossible to her to be holding her son, the son she had looked for, for so long! That awful sergeant had made her believe they had taken Lulu to Sicily, and she had gone there in search of him but had not found him and she was left not knowing what to do. She dressed in black, thinking he was dead, until someone told her to go to Girifalco because there was a mental institution there too.

Lulu had never been so happy, it didn't even feel real, he thought it was a dream, that he had made up ever having a mother, and that this was the Madonna in disguise coming to relieve him of his sins.

Looking at the face of her son, he still looked like her little boy. Her heart was so full of emotion that she couldn't even speak, she just wanted to hold him and not waste a minute of their precious time together.

They sat, màmmasa not letting go of his hand once.

'How are you my darling? What have they done to you?'

He just smiled, without saying a word, and smiled again, bubbling with joy like a pot of boiling water.

'Your father died, but not a day went by that he asked what I thought you were doing. He worried about what had become of you. Oh my darling, I've waited for this for so long. I dreamed of holding you in my arms again every night, but now I've found you, I'm not leaving you here. No sweetheart, now I've found you màmmasa will take you with her, because now those awful men have left the village, those awful men who hurt you. I'm going to look after you now. You don't need medicine, I know exactly what you need. What a miracle that I've got you here in front of me. Oh, even the professor passed away, you remember the one who played the sad music?'

In that instant Lulu remembered, he nodded his head and pulled the vines out of his pocket and chose one. He looked his mother in the eye as if to tell her to listen and he began to play. It sounded more like a flute than vine leaves and it struck a chord with his mother. She listened to him play the song they would listen to on Thursday mornings,

that Lulu had never played out loud because it was the Madonna's and his mother's song and only they were allowed to hear him play it.

His mother cried from her left eye, watching with pride as her son played like an angel. It was his lips that produced the sound of Autumn and Spring, his breath that told the story of lives ruined and failed.

Màmmasa wept with joy and sadness, as though a whole life, billions of seconds, millions of hours, years and years of sunsets, were all condensed in that moment, in fact, in an incalculable minute, it was as if births, tears, love stories and neglect did not serve other than to prepare the stage for this moment, in a fleeting single act, that represented life alone, only that moment, nothing else before or since, like an actor who prepares a scene for years, then disappears forever behind the scenes. With a heavy heart, his mother closed her eyes and found herself at the fountain, sitting with her son looking at an empty window, and thinking of all the beautiful things in life, that perhaps there was another hidden life somewhere that was waiting for her, paved roads of music and springs. Then the music ended. Vitaliana opened her eyes and hugged and kissed her son on the cheek saying, 'you're amazing Lucianu, my beautiful boy, you've become a master, a professor, you're amazing.'

The door opened and there was Sciccapariddi.

'Don't worry my darling, I'm going to the director now to find out what I need to do to get you out of here and then I'll take you home with me forever my Lucianu. We'll never be apart again.'

She hugged him one more time and then went to the door. 'I'll be back soon my Lucianu, I'll be back soon.' And just like that, the light bulb came on again in Lulu's brain and he was able to speak. 'Ma don't go! Ma don't leave me, take me with you!'

Vitaliana couldn't bare it, so she went back over to him, held him and comforted him like she had when he was young and had a nightmare. 'Màmmata would never lie to you, don't you worry, I will be back to get you. Take this, it's a picture of the Madonna of Polsi, she'll protect you and it'll be as if I never left. She'll look after you while I'm gone. Pray my darling, remember to pray to the Lord, do you remember? Pray that the Lord will bring us together again.'

For Luciano Segareddu, whom everyone called Lulu because that was how his stammering tongue uttered his name, that was the last time he saw his mother. For Vitaliana, when she closed the door, thought that a different life was possible because of the music, she thought that her son had ripped the leaves from a hedge which concealed this life and other happinesses, that now open could let in the light for them.

She went to the manager and told him that she intended to bring Lulu home. But that was not the case. A few years' seizures were treatable with medicines, but there were medical practices that had to be followed and first and foremost the mayor had to sign papers to specify that the carer – Vitaliana's- was capable of providing the needs of the patient. After which the state of the patient must be analysed. To the woman even the words of the director sounded like music, just other leaves torn from the branches. She walked away from Girifalco her heart excited like a small child.

Poor Vitaliana, how stupid you were.

Did you really think that people like you could have a different life? Did you think that a person has the power to decide when to change their course as and when they please? You were right to think there was a different life, one with fresh bread and sweet smells

of figs, but not for us, not for those who were used to eating nothing or rubbish, never for us.

And so Vitaliana Spordigna died three days later from overexcitement in her weak heart that had been sad for so long. She died in the night sitting outside while listening to the sweet yet sad music that spoke of a different life.

Lulu never knew what happened to his mother. And so he went through life waiting for her to come and get him and take him home. Màmmasua who was climbing the stairs last time he saw her, Màmmasua who looked like the Madonna, who never lies, who he went looking for every day asking people if they'd seen his màma.

Even that night all those years later, in his room in corridor 14, hall F of the Girifalco mental institution, as he looked up at the stars as if one was going to fall on his head, he felt as though he'd seen her just the day before.

It was hot and he leaned out of the window when he suddenly smelled a new fragrance. Something in the air like rosemary and fresh clover, that lingered in the air like an open bottle of perfume. He looked around in search of where the smell was coming from.