



Luca

Picks

Mushrooms

A Virtual Romance
Sprouts in the Insular
World of Tennis Twitter.

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I first discovered Luca in late 2014, during a short-lived stint in amateur-tennis writing. It was an occupation I adopted from a tiny studio apartment above a car dealership in Switzerland, but which really came into its own about six months later from my giant apartment on Lake Geneva. The latter apartment, which I inherited for a year as a caretaker, charged the same rent as the tiny studio before it. A wealthy colleague had set out on an around-the-world trip and wanted somebody reliable to keep the place in check. Thus, my residential status was temporarily elevated.

I had a balcony overlooking the water, a study I never used, walls adorned with samurai swords, a dining table that could seat eight with ease, and a wine fridge that required restocking all too regularly. I drank and I played with swords and I performed wealth. I consumed so much prosciutto that I must assume European swine populations dwindled.

Perhaps it was the copious wine and spiced sausage, but that apartment imbued me with a level of personal and professional confidence I have not replicated since. The size of the space, the luxury of the surroundings, they felt somehow *correct*. Like goldfish in a tank, I believe the ego grows to fit its environment. My ego now had *seven rooms*, and Lake Geneva, and a fucking wine fridge.

My tennis writing, which had a not-unreasonable reach on social media, elevated in kind. I suddenly felt I was good at this. People were sharing my work, retweeting my pithy jokes, inviting me onto bona fide sports radio to give “opinion live from the tournament in Munich.” I wasn’t in Munich, but I was practiced in the art of improvisation, so I faked it. That’s how you break out, right? Lie until the lies are true?

The social media community that has grown around tennis, or *Tennis Twitter*, is deeply insular. As is true in most online communities, passionate factions have formed in which paranoia is rife. Every group of fans believes their idol is hard done by, that draws are rigged against them, that writers are cruel conspirators undermining them at every turn. A small criticism, a hint of anything less than awe, is taken as an assault and met with organized counterattack. To navigate these waters with a thin skin is tough, and I have always had a thin skin.

Tennis Twitter is also long-wounded by media who only show up to cover Wimbledon and the US Open, bringing with them striking misconceptions about basic rules of the sport, mispronunciations of names like *Safarova*, the inability to correctly call her *Li Na* rather than *Na Li*, and other assorted frustrations. Tennis Twitter wills the sport to succeed more in the mainstream, and then declares the results of that coverage disastrous, or humiliating. Minor infractions are a humiliating disaster to an insular community.

What I’m saying is, you can get a long way

in tennis just by *actually knowing or researching things*—a quality shockingly lacking in much coverage.

So, I was doing fine for an amateur blogger with no professional income or credentials in tennis. Luca was different. Luca didn’t appear concerned with social media clout. He was busy actually making money covering sports. He tweeted the occasional article, and photos of homemade mushroom pies. He was kindly, and relaxed. I admired his cool disinterest in clicks. He stood out.

Luca had wanted to be a professional skier. He dreamed of being Italy’s next big thing, but he turned instead to journalism, and collecting mushrooms from the forest floor in the Italian countryside. Like most Italian men, he knew his way around a kitchen, and so the mushrooms rarely went to waste.

Very few sportswriters are handsome Italian skiers. Fewer can bake.

Maybe it’s the high-end leather shoes, or the vast availability of olive oil, but Italian men always strike me as about 10 years older than they actually are. A 25-year-old Italian can walk into his local gelato shop and shout, “Marco!” and Marco, himself only 27 but already a successful gelato-shop owner, will respond with an enthusiastic “Leonardo!” and they’ll slap each other’s back, and Leonardo will acquire complimentary gelato for himself and the attractive tourist on his arm. Then, cooled by gelato, the couple will ride off into the afternoon on Leonardo’s Vespa, and he’ll make love to her until sundown with the sexual confidence of a deeply successful man in his late 30s. One assumes.

Luca had some kind of family connection to my home, the U.K. It rendered his accent odd; sweet Italian music undercut by clipped British consonants. Charm, sliced by boyishness. He once told me he liked to confuse people about his origins. I wasn’t confused, I was enthralled.

We existed together on Tennis Twitter

for a while, never really interacting in great depth, until one day he uploaded a photo of a pear tart. It looked sweet and fresh and I was desperately hungry for him. I mean, it. I saw a slim opportunity, and told him it looked delicious. He responded that he'd be happy to make me one. I told him I was allergic to gluten. He told me he was up for the challenge.

I grabbed a fresh bottle from the wine fridge. Something had begun.

But *nothing* had really begun.

Without the benefit of being a swarthy Italian almost-athlete, I did not make a habit of posting photos of myself that revealed my appearance from the neck down. Luca had only a photo of my face. Now, I have a nice face. Not an extraordinary face, but a face that photographs well with the benefit of years of experience finding the right angles to give oneself a boost. I looked good in my profile photo. It was designed thus.

So maybe Luca is a flirt who casts a broad net, or perhaps he genuinely found me at-

tractive, or perhaps he found me unattractive but charming nonetheless. Perhaps Luca is just a nice man who wanted to make a friend.

The public back-and-forth about pear tarts evolved into a private discussion.

We chatted for several weeks about baking, skiing accidents, the rich variety of mushrooms found in the forest. I teased that he must be some kind of daredevil, what with hurtling down snowy mountains and dodging poisonous fungi. Always remind a man he's brave. We're all terrified of not being brave.

In this private discussion I discovered that Luca was writing a novel, a fantasy epic he said I could read one day. Of course, I said, I'd love to look at your book. It was true as long as it was good. I still wonder. I imagine him in his little Italian cottage, sitting on a three-legged wooden stool and crouched over an old worn desk. In this imaginary workshop, Luca is a sexy Geppetto, trying to craft his novel into a real boy.

I was working on a novel too. It was about the elderly father of a famed Parisian fashion designer. A journalist had discovered the old man once owned a factory that supplied prisoner uniforms to concentration camps during the war. Would his history tarnish his daughter's success? What was the tragic romance he'd long abandoned to memory? Was he a Nazi, or an innocent, or some gray thing in between? It was a terrible novel.

One day, among our chatter, something shifted.

It was late summer 2015. I sent Luca a note checking in on his day, and he told me he'd just that moment finished up a tennis match. There was a heat wave in Europe that week, I said he must be hot. He said he was sweating. I told him that didn't sound so bad.

He sent me a photo.

Luca was sitting on the court with the camera by his feet, so the eye was drawn up his outstretched legs, wet hair clinging to them, and then up over his clay-stained



shorts, to a shirt tightly hugging his body. One hand was in his deep brown hair, which had somehow maintained volume. He stuck his tongue out in faux exhaustion.

In another context, this photo would have been tame. Here in this private space with Luca, it was pornographic.

I stood alone in my cavernous apartment, suddenly haunted by past disappointments, by perverse men who didn't deserve me, by the cruel Tennis Twitter commenters who thought my writing sucked, all their voices combining to mock me as I considered this man I couldn't possibly deserve. I heard laughs tumbling out of the future. You? With *him*?

The walls closed in, pushing painfully on my thin skin, shrinking my ego back down to its natural size.

I thought of all the times Luca and I had pointed out to each other how close we actually lived. Northern Italy was barely an hour from my home in the *Swiss Riviera*. Luca wasn't a fantasy at a safe distance; he was real, and close.

Too close. Luca was brave, just like I'd told him, but I was not. I liked Luca only in theory. I liked him at a safe distance.

I took a breath. I had a plan in motion that would protect me.

During our months of conversation, I hadn't mentioned that I'd been offered a new job in America. I'd spent these months hiding behind words and one great photo. Hiding suddenly seemed futile, but I could run.

I responded to the photo with an apology. I told him he shouldn't send me things like that, that I was going away. That it didn't make sense to flirt when an ocean would separate us, that the timing was awful and that I was sorry. That I had really, genuinely enjoyed being his friend. I apologized again and again. Too many times.

Do handsome Italians worry that they failed to impress in flirtatious, sweaty photo-

graphs? I wonder if Luca believes I was disgusted, rather than overwhelmed. Or maybe he understood things more than I ever did. After all, here I am, still reckoning.

Luca responded with a signature calm. It was just a picture of him tired after a tennis match, fully clothed. We were just friends, with maybe the hint of a spark. There was nothing to fear.

I ran from Switzerland, and left Luca behind me.

Eventually, I'd do the same with Tennis Twitter, bruised by an incident involving an at-the-time prominent figure and a minor homophobic slur directed my way. The slur bothered me; the lack of support from the community in my defense hurt me more. This person had friends who worked for the WTA Tour. They were popular, famously cruel, and apparently above reproach. I decided that word, *community*, was a misnomer.

I should have endured, but my skin was too thin. Years later, I've returned to my own quiet corner of Tennis Twitter, an outside observer who knows himself better, thin skin and all. Being thin-skinned is underrated. I'm now steely in my defense of it.

A month after my arrival in America, I lay in my modest apartment in Maryland and reflected on Luca's last message. The apartment was neat, and precise. It overlooked a busy railroad. It was a place where my ego could reconcile. In the most part, Luca's message was right.

He was right that it was just a picture, and that we were just friends.

He was wrong about fear.

I've always found plenty to fear. 🍷

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