

## **Luigi and school and Dauphine**

On the Rue de la Balue sat the Ecole Jacques Cartier, a boarding school of mixed reputation that also accepted a small number of local day-pupils as part of a community engagement scheme. A meeting of the Community Governing Group was taking place in the dining room of the school, after normal school hours. As always, it was well attended by the local clergy, the school administration, and several prominent members of the local community.

Dauphine was bored with the meeting. She now had more time and money than she knew what to do with, since her dear second husband had recently passed away with a heart attack. She was a woman of action and struggled with the endless rhetoric and eulogies that the board members indulged in, most of which were of no consequence at all.

‘May I cut in,’ she said across the vice-chairman’s monthly update. ‘I think we need to be talking less and doing more. You say there are bright children in local feeder schools, but we haven’t managed to get any onto our sponsorship scheme in the past two years.’

‘What do you suggest, Madame Dauphine?’ enquired the Chairman. He wasn’t scared of her, although he recognised that most of the rest of the board were.

‘Let me meet the most promising candidates, and I will personally vouch for the top three, and they can start here in the autumn. At least we are then doing something, rather than just talking about it’, and she scanned round the room laying unspoken accusations at the feet of all the other attendees.

‘Just send me the details,’ she said to the secretary of the meeting, and then got up and clumped out of the room.

‘I wonder if she bullied and bossed her last husband into an early grave?’ said one of the town councillors under her breath.

‘Well, if anyone could do it, it’s Dauphine, for sure,’ said another behind his hand.

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At the end of the summer term, a dozen interviews had been arranged for the twelve most deserving candidates from local schools. They were all high achieving in their studies and looked, on paper at least, to be the ideal candidates for the sponsorship scheme. Eleven short interviews had already taken place, each child being polite and well prepared, but Dauphine had quickly got bored and was regretting having volunteered for this. None of them stood out and they all had the same well-rehearsed answers to their questions. The sponsorship scheme would be ‘a great opportunity to prepare for University’. They were all ‘ambitious and keen to give something back to the community once they had a good job’. Any three of them would be fine with her.

‘Who is this final boy?’ Dauphine asked the Deputy Head, yawning blatantly in front of her.

‘Ah, yes. Legrand. Well, he’s an interesting case, a little different, and not really like the other children that we’ve seen so far.’

‘In what way ‘different’?’ asked Dauphine.

‘He’s a bright boy, no doubt about that, but he’s a bit of a trouble maker. No, that’s probably too harsh, it’s just that Luigi is definitely a handful for his teachers.’

‘I don’t follow.’

‘He’s a contradiction, I suppose. He makes a lot of jokes, tries to make his classmates laugh, so he’s very popular, but he’s also a bit of a loner.’

‘He sounds more interesting than the others we’ve seen. Let’s bring him in.’

Luigi didn’t really know what to expect. When the sponsorship programme was originally proposed, he had doubted that his father would give his consent. His father had managed to sober up long enough to attend a meeting at the school and once he realised that the programme wouldn’t cost him anything, he had agreed that Luigi could be put forward. Luigi had applied more out of boredom than anything else. School was slow, moving at the speed of the slowest in the class. Luigi could be out on the streets, making money and living off his wits, rather than sitting in a classroom desperately waiting for something interesting to happen.

The Deputy Head’s office was small and musty, and full of the rich sweet perfume that Dauphine was wearing. Luigi sauntered in, shook hands with them both, and sat on the chair on the opposite side of the table, smiling at the two women. One of them he had met before, as part of the introduction to the programme, but the other, the large fleshy woman with bleach blond hair, was new to him.

‘Well,’ started the Deputy Head after they had made their introductions, ‘Why don’t you tell us a bit about yourself.’

‘Sure, so I’m Luigi,’ he began. ‘I live locally in the central apartments with my dad. Top floor, good views.’

‘And what does your father do,’ asked Dauphine.

‘Nothing right now. He’s been signed off, under the doctor, but he worked as a mechanic, down on the docks before.’

Dauphine examined Luigi’s application. His father was listed, but his mother was...oh, no. His mother was deceased. Involuntarily she put her hand to her mouth, and then looked back at Luigi.

‘What do you like at school?’ asked Dauphine.

‘I’m a good footballer, and a runner.’

‘And academically?’

‘I’m really good at languages, not so hot on maths, and my French is pretty good. It’s all a bit slow, really. What about you. Were you good at school?’

Dauphine laughed at Luigi’s cheeky question but answered it anyway.

‘No, I wasn’t particularly good, but I wish there had been the sort of opportunity that we are offering here today. That might have made all the difference. Anyway, back to you, young man. What languages do you speak?’

‘Well, French obviously, and Italian from my Mum...then my English is pretty good, a bit of German and I can understand Spanish pretty well but get mixed up with Italian when I try to speak it...and then Portuguese is just a total mystery to me.’

‘And do you enjoy those classes at school?’

‘They’re alright, like I said, a bit slow maybe. I learn more from talking to the tourists.’

‘So, you would definitely benefit from more advanced tuition in languages,’ said Dauphine triumphantly, her mind already made up. ‘What do you know about the Ecole Jacques Cartier, Luigi?’

‘Honestly?’ replied Luigi, grinning his crooked grin at Dauphine.

‘Yes, let’s go with some honesty, young man,’ replied Dauphine.

‘It has a uniform, which means people have money. You can stay over during the week, which means people’s families don’t mind not having them around, and the football team is rubbish. We beat them seven nil last month.’

Dauphine giggled at Luigi’s answer and her whole face wobbled as she laughed.

‘And anything positive?’ cut in the Deputy Head. ‘About Jacques Cartier, that is?’

‘It’s the best school in the area, and all the bosses and big business men came here, so it must be a good place to start off, if that’s what you want to be.’

‘And is that what you want to be, Luigi? A big boss?’

‘Dunno,’ replied Luigi. ‘I kind of like the idea of being my own boss.’

Dauphine closed her file and nodded at the Deputy Head. Luigi would be offered a place, along with any two of the other children that the Deputy Head wanted to include.

‘Have you any questions for us, Luigi?’ asked the Deputy Head.

‘If I get on the programme, do I have to wear a uniform? It’s just, well, it’s a bit naff.’