ONE TIME
is a GUPPY BOOK

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TELL ME

I wonder about you: who are you?

Dear Miss Lightstone,

I am Gina Filomena, age eleven.

Sometimes teachers think I am not paying attention, but what they mean is that I am not paying attention to *them*. I pay attention to lots of other things like what is happening outside the windows, and the noises in the room, like the humming and the tapping and

the snapping and the sniffling, and all the smells – some good, some bad. But I will try to pay attention to you.

I will try.

Your student,
Gina F.

When the new teacher asked us to write something about ourselves, that's what I wrote. I did not write about the angels or the boy with the visions.

No need to scare her.



NEW NEIGHBOURS

A month before school began, new neighbours and their cat moved into the house next door. When I spotted the cat sitting forlornly on Dad's parsley plants, I tried to pet it, but the fur on its back shot straight up. A tall boy appeared from behind the moving truck and snatched the cat.

'That's Mr Blue. You don't want to touch him,' he said. 'Cat is mean as spit.'

The boy seemed about my age. Hard to tell. He was tall and lean but not skinny, and he moved as if his bones and joints were loosely connected. His

hair was black and curly, shorter on the sides and longer on top so that it flopped over his forehead on one side. His eyes were black and shiny, his skin so smooth. In one hand, he held a jackknife and in the other hand a small piece of wood.

I liked that boy from the minute I saw him. There was something calm and relaxed about him, something kind, but most appealing was his smile: a wide, gleaming, welcoming smile.

Later, when I thought about that smile and its effect on me, I realized that people didn't often smile in that open, inviting way. When I met Antonio with that generous smile, I was caught off guard, stunned. Maybe you would have been, too.

'You going to live there?' I asked.

'Guess so.' He nodded at my house. 'You going to live over *there*?'

'I already do. I'm Gina.'

He tapped his chest. 'Antonio.'

An older girl came out onto the porch, scowling. 'Nut head! We need some help here!' Later I learned

that she was Carlotta, his cousin, and that his grandmother also was moving in.

I didn't see much of the new neighbours the first week they were there. Occasionally I heard someone calling for Mr Blue, but by the time I made it to the window, the cat was already dashing into their opened door.

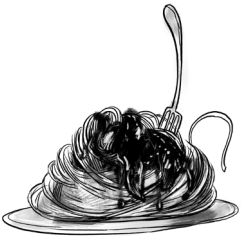
I asked my dad what he thought about the new neighbours.

He rubbed his hands together and leaned towards me. 'Ah! Spies, you think?'

My father liked to speculate.

One time, at the grocery, when a clerk took a long time ringing up our order, Dad wondered if she was tapping in an extra code. He examined the receipt closely as we left the store. 'Maybe there's a coded message here, like "Help me. I've been kidnapped."'

Oddly, that's kind of how I felt when I saw that Antonio boy, that maybe he was sending out coded messages into the air, through that smile. I felt a strong pull to help that boy, whether he actually needed my help or not.



THE ANGEL, THE GROUBES, AND THE CLACKERTYS

My grandmother, Nonna Filomena, liked to tell stories about the feisty and moody Angel Lucia who lived 'high up in the mountains of Italy, where the earth is the colour of chocolate and the sky the purest blue.'

One time, when the townspeople in the village below were bickering over a piece of land, Angel Lucia threw down buckets of hail – right in the middle of summer.

Another time, Angel Lucia pecked holes in all the pies sitting on windowsills to cool because one cook had denied a beggar a piece of fresh pie.

One time Angel Lucia swept through the town, snipping flowers from yards and gathering them into a bouquet for a poor girl who was getting married but had no money for a bouquet.

I never doubted the angel, no matter how outrageous the tales about her were. I welcomed her, adored her, depended on her.

Not everyone appreciated Angel Lucia. My mother, for instance, might say, 'Really? *Really?* Maybe Angel Lucia was hungry for pie.' Or, '*Really?* I'd like Angel Lucia to throw down some hail on the Groubes.'

The Groubes were the family who used to live next door, before the new neighbours moved in. They had three angry, nasty boys who swore and threw eggs on houses and whacked people with sticks and left stinky garbage rotting in their driveway. Dad told me to ignore them and said that if Angel Lucia could hear

them, she would coat their tongues with molasses so they would stick to the roofs of their mouths.

I was relieved when the Groubes moved out and the new neighbours with that tall Antonio boy moved in. They made no noise whatsoever.

This did not mean the whole neighbourhood was now quiet because at the other end of Hatch Street lived the Clafferty family with seven or eight children (hard to count) and a little yippy-yappy dog. Dad called them the 'Clackertys'. The kids ran around shouting and fighting, and the parents yelled at them to be quiet or get inside or go outside or quit hitting/punching/spitting/throwing, and the little dog yipped and yapped and yipped and yapped. I walked or ran the long way around the block rather than pass by their house.