

## Miles apart, but close at heart.

Every big change requires adaptation. The human being is programmed to get used to certain models and patterns, to accommodate to the circumstances around him. The brain develops an understanding of its surroundings, of the constant variables in one's own life. You may wake up in the middle of the night and find your way around your own room without needing to turn the lights on, but if you decide to one day simply move a piece of furniture, it'll take time for you to get used to the new position, and you might bump into it a couple of times.

The brain, however, is not the only one that needs time to get used to big changes. You don't really know how your brain is dealing with them since it happens on a subconscious level. What you *do* feel, though, is when another big part of you is still suffering from the changes: your heart. The conception of the heart as the emotional core of the body dates from ancient times, with Aristotle as the greatest exponent of that current of thought. A debate among scientists continues to this day about whether the heart does or does not feel.

Lincoln Loud was no scientist, he had no scientific sources to back up his beliefs, but he was absolutely sure that the heart could feel. He knew it first hand. He'd experienced it before, like that time when Goldy –the family fish– had, unfortunately, being flushed down the toilet. Lincoln loved that little fish, he always fed him and took him to his room to take care of him before falling asleep. He was devastated when Goldy was gone, and to this day, he could still remember his aching heart, the sensation of his rib cage being compressed by an invisible force, like someone was sitting on top on his chest.

He knew a heartache wasn't something you could resolve with an aspirin or by going to the doctor. The heart took its time to heal, and more often than not, that time was not short. It was understandable, thus, for him to be so worried about his sister Lori.

It had been two months since the Santiago family had moved to the big city across the state to live with their cousins, the Casagrandes. Lincoln missed his friend, Ronnie Anne. How couldn't he? They always spend so much time together, she was really cool, and they both loved to go to the arcades. She was a really good friend, and he was still trying to get used to her not being around.

In Lori's case, it was much, much worse. Bobby was her boyfriend, the third most important guy in her life according to her, just behind Linky himself and their dad. They had been friends throughout middle school and the first years of high school, until their senior year when he had finally asked her out. That day, Lori had become the happiest girl on the planet. She loved him so much!

And now he was gone.

Not like *gone* gone, but he was just so far away... Lincoln remembered how excited she was at first. They were going to go to college together! They'd be taught by Bobby's uncle Carlos, they had enough room in the Casagrande house she could move with them, sharing a room with her boo-boo bear. It was all perfect!

But then the days passed. Weeks passed. And her heart was still trying to get used to the change. She missed him. She missed him so bad she barely left her room anymore. She just laid down on her bed, staring at the ceiling. Her phone didn't ring as much as it always did. The whole

family was starting to notice her absence. The kids needed her leadership to be put in check. They were starting to fall apart.

And Lincoln couldn't allow that to happen.

When the whole family went to the cinema to watch a terrible movie and Lori declined the invitation—as she was now doing with almost every single invitation she received—, Lincoln decided to stay in the house too. This was his chance. After getting the TV ready, preparing some popcorn and opening some cans of soda, Lincoln went to Lori's room and asked her to come down to play with him.

She was surprised to find out that he had stayed behind. And at first, she didn't want to leave her room. But Lincoln could be very persuasive when he wanted to, and after just a few minutes of pleading and some puppy eyes, Lori finally agreed.

Once in the living room, they both sat down on the sofa, and Lincoln put the game on. She didn't like fighting games, but man, she loved some racing. Lincoln chose the longest circuit and set it up for ten laps. This would grant them at least half an hour of fun.

Lori didn't even seem to notice. She just nonchalantly chose her car and waited for the race to begin.

"It's been a while since we last played", said Lincoln, as the countdown appeared on the screen.

"Yeah, I guess so."

Even though she seemed absolutely unexcited about the game, as soon as the green light appeared on screen she accelerated and immediately passed Lincoln. They started to race, but all his attempts to start a conversation were nullified by short answers or outright silence. He tried to avoid the subject as much as he could, but eventually, he gave up.

"You miss him a lot, don't you?" He asked, still looking at the screen and his voice filled with worry as he drifted a curve.

She missed the curve and went off the track, allowing Lincoln to take the lead. She didn't answer. She didn't need to ask who was he talking about. She just stayed in silence. He took that as a cue to keep talking.

"Look, I don't... I know everyone's been trying to tell you to get over with the pain, to just wait and... and that it's not that bad. And I'm not gonna tell you those same things", he told her, crossing a new checkpoint and gaining thirty additional seconds for the countdown. "I miss Ronnie Anne too. I miss her a lot. I can't imagine just how much worse it is for you. I know you miss him. And I know you probably can't wait to meet him again."

He looked at her half of the screen and saw that she wasn't accelerating as much as before. She was going rather slow, carefully avoiding any new accident in the game, but there was no way she could win going like that. He decelerated too.

"Lori... I understand that Bobby is such a big part of your life. But... we are, too", he said, trying his hardest to look elsewhere and to keep his voice from shaking. "And we miss you. We really miss you. I mean... I do."

His eyes fell to his knees just as his fingers stopped pressing the controller's buttons. His car was stopped in the middle of the road now.

"I used to think that it was kinda annoying when you would check on me in my room so many times a day. I thought you were just meddling in my life. But... now I realize that you were just making sure I was ok. And I miss that. Look, I know you have every right to miss Bobby, and I know that this sounds incredibly selfish, but I just really need y-"

He couldn't even react. She dropped her controller on the sofa and wrapped her arms around him, dragging him closer. He also hugged her, his head resting comfortably against her chest. For the first time in several weeks, he was receiving a hug from his older sister, and he loved every second of it, from her fragrance to the way she gently stroked his ashen hair.

"Oh, Lincoln..." She said with a sigh. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize... I've been thinking about the future so much that I didn't realize I was missing on the present."

"The future?" Lincoln asked, looking up to meet her eyes. "Don't you mean the past?"

She pursed her lips into a sad smile, almost pouting.

"I miss Bobby. I miss him a lot. But... that's not what's been bothering me."

"Then what is it?"

"It's just... When Bobby told me about going to college with him, I was so excited I literally didn't even think about what that would mean for me."

"What are you talking about?" He asked, now completely dumbfounded.

"Lincoln... In a few months, I'll graduate high school. And if I want to go to that college, I'll have to move with him", she explained, her fingers tracing a line along his cheek. "And that means moving away. Away from my friends, my parents, my sister... my brother..."

Lincoln was absolutely taken aback. He did not expect this. He hadn't even thought about it! She was right. If she wanted to go with Bobby... she'll have to leave them.

"Oh..." he simply said, while that information was still sinking in.

"To be honest, I've always talked about moving for college, to have my own apartment and all that stuff, but now that the time to make the decision is getting closer... I don't know if I could live being away from you, guys."

"But... you need to go to college, don't you?"

"It's not that I *have* to... but yes, that's what I want to do."

"And... and you love Bobby?"

"Of course. I really want to be with him."

"Then... Then I guess you'll just have to leave, right?" He said, gloomily looking down.

"Hey, hey, look at me, Lincoln", she said, and he obliged. "Listen, I'm still trying to prepare myself for this, but when it happens, I promise you that you'll hear from me as often as college and my life there will allow me to, okay? We can have video chats and phone calls! And whenever my little brother wants to talk with me, he'll just have to text me, and I'll be writing him back within the minute."

Her now sincere smile, her playful tone and the way she softly and lovingly caressed his hair made him smile too.

"I'll visit you", he said. "I'll save my allowances to buy bus tickets and visit you as often as I can."

"I'm sure Ronnie Anne would love that. And of course, I'd love it too! But, you know, I think you're right", she told him, and now she sounded more like the regular Lori he knew, at least how she used to behave whenever she was feeling happy or caring towards one of her siblings. "I'm still here. I should enjoy being with you guys as much as I can. Right now, I think it'd be nice to restart this race, don't you think?"

"Yeah!" He excitedly said, his childish temper showing by how fast he changed humor. "And don't play nice now, 'cause I'm planning on beating you!"

They restarted the race, and Lori certainly didn't try to play nice this time. She was giving her outright best. And Lincoln loved it. He had missed this side of Lori. He had missed it so much.

"Everyone's gonna be happy if you return to your old self", he said, eyes still glued to the screen, unable to keep his mouth shut about this. "We need someone to keep us together, you know? Someone's gotta take charge in here."

"Yeah. I think that was the thing that worried me the most, to be honest", she admitted, starting her turbo and passing Lincoln on a curve with a skill that amazed the young boy. "I thought that there was no one here that would be able to take the responsibility. But I've just realized our sisters are lucky enough to have someone that will watch over them all. Someone who worries about them just as much as they worry about him. And I'm sure that he will do even a better job than I did."

In the end, Lori beat the crap out of Lincoln, she won by more than a ten seconds margin. It was an embarrassing defeat.

But not even that could erase the proud smile on Lincoln's face.