

## The Incredible Story of How Luca Was Brought Home in Time for New Year's Eve 2020



“Luca the wonder dog,” many have called him, though his name is more formal. “Luchino Visconti di Modrone” is the given name of this red-haired miniature dachshund, echoing out the clear signs of a family that reads too much, watches too much, and is binational, American and Italian. Unsurprisingly, no one calls him this and he is just known as “Luca” in the Upper West Side neighborhood where he has been wagging his tail around for seven years. Reading about a dog with a too-long name in this awful year of coronavirus and a tumultuous Presidential election might sound like the precise kind of escapism all those YouTube videos provide us with, and in a way, it is. But in another way, Luca’s cuddly nature, intrepidness, and handsome looks are not the reason to write or read about him. Instead, it’s about how for a few days this late December 2020 Luca became the touchstone of anxiety, fear, anger, and activism for thousands of people, near and far, and how all that concern and sensitivity actually turned a sad story into a joyful one.

First things first: what is the story? It is about a theft, an abduction, a dog-napping. On Sunday afternoon, December 27, after Luca was walked, he was tied up discretely but wholly unadvisedly outside a neighborhood market on the Upper West Side while one of us ran inside for a couple of items. Upon emerging seven or eight minutes later, Luca was missing. In shock and panic, 911 was called immediately. The 24<sup>th</sup> precinct police arrived within minutes. The shock was slightly lessened upon learning from the store manager that the surveillance videotape should show what happened, which it did indeed. When we finally got to see the video feed the next day, this is what we saw: A man passing by had seen the dog tucked into the corner by the fruit stands, patted Luca to see whether he bit, looked around furtively, untied the leash, heaved him into his arms, and walked off with him. “How to steal a dog in less than thirty seconds,” one person remarked on seeing the video. It’s true, with surprising deliberation and little fuss, this story began this quick and coldly.

What ensued in the following three days – Sunday evening until Wednesday evening, December 30 – was the opposite of cold; it was warm, filled with care, concern and energy. It’s an effort to

be celebrated, one that turned out an unexpectedly expert and ultimately effective community that included the police detectives and officers of the 24 Precinct of the NYPD, the Garden of Eden managers, small shop keepers uptown, family, friends and work colleagues, doormen, volunteer leaf-letters, social media, print, and television networks. The police followed leads, employing good old-fashioned gumshoe work, contacting pet shelters and the like, despite the lead detective's heavy caseload. Friends and colleagues with social media savvy put it out on their Twitter feeds. Dog-owners and animal protection networks flooded us with advice from personal experiences, useful links to the numerous local and national resources available to locate missing creatures, and offers (carried through) to scour Craigslist and other outlets to see whether Luca had been listed for sale. Dachshund lovers rallied, recognizing the loss of one of their own. These networks bolstered us with their emotional support, thank goodness. But for this story, these networks are even more important because they are the reason this story has a happy ending. Luca was brought home only because of all the care and hard work of so many different people working together, many of whom don't know each other, will never meet, and yet whose combined efforts effected change.

Here are the day-by-day details to respond to questions many of you have:

Day 1. To be honest discrete days didn't exist from when this started to when this ended. But let's try: from the evening of Sunday, the 27<sup>th</sup> until the early afternoon on Monday the 28<sup>th</sup>: there were tears, screams, pacing, running, panic, almost no sleep. Over the course of the day, we were reassured by the police of the 24<sup>th</sup> precinct that the complaint had been filed; the initial charge of petty larceny -- for property whose value was purportedly under \$1,000 -- was only a misdemeanor. The police upgraded the charge to grand larceny (a felony) in view of the dog's actual monetary value. Now with a felony charge, a detective was assigned to the case. Our dog walker started leafletting with the form initially recommended: namely, dog missing, not stolen, no offer of reward. Friends and acquaintances put it on Twitter feeds, and we began to get lots of advice about how to sharpen the message.

On Tuesday, after a sleepless night, there were two big breaks in the campaign: contact through international networks brought us in direct contact with a colleague in Nashville, who was spending the holiday with her family secluded in the mountains. This is an absurdly circuitous part of the story, but it was fundamental. Our Nashville contact had had the same thing happen to her in Brooklyn several years earlier. Someone had stolen her much loved Roko from outside a grocery store and within three days she had him back. She knew the drill; she knew the best chances of how to make the improbable possible. What we now call the "Greble" method was different from what we had been doing. We were thinking small, afraid of offending, hoping this was all just a big mistake. The Greble method demanded something different: total mobilization, leaflets, media, reward money, no-holds-barred "get Luca back with a roar."

The Greble method had clear dicta: People will judge about the dog being left outside the store: deal with it; you need him back. The thief might feel afraid of the media attention and do something drastic: deal with it; he already did something drastic; you need Luca back. The world is good but desperate; offer people incentives to help but also let people be part of the helping. Encouraged from her experience and now with a clear method absorbed, we contacted every New-Yorker dog lover we knew: editors, writers, activists, students, artists, and all the other

collaborators in all the day-to-day activities that makes New York City tick. For every person we contacted, we pushed the same message: spread the word. The idea was there are six degrees of separation between Luca's home and Luca's thief. Let's close the gap. Once we got the surveillance footage, we clumsily recorded it on our smart phones and sent it to everyone. Seeing that thief in the act of taking Luca, after looking around to insure no one saw him, was heartbreaking. But it was also motivating. We see you. This is not ok.

Click "here" to see the footage.

That video went viral and was picked up by traditional news media, such as NBC TV News, who interviewed Victoria (Luca's mamma) by Zoom, as did ABC-TV the following morning. Assisted by several friends and colleagues, we upped the leafletting campaign. Our first flyer had shown Luca alone, in all his loveable beauty with all the info of how to bring him home. Our second flyer that we made Tuesday afternoon was not just of Luca, but also of the thief. Hundreds of flyers showcasing images of the two of them side-by-side (thief and abductee) were plastered throughout the Upper West Side, Harlem, Central Park, Riverside Park, anywhere where there was a park a little doggie like Luca might be walked to.

**Do You Know This Man? Have You Seen This Dog?  
\$1000 Reward on Dog's Return**



Luca, our family's miniature red long-haired dachshund with black fringed ears, was taken from "Garden of Eden Market" on Broadway between 107<sup>th</sup> and 108<sup>th</sup> Street at 4:45 PM on Sunday, December 27<sup>th</sup>. This video from store camera shows Luca being carried off by this man. Do you know him? It's possible he took Luca out of misplaced concern; we don't care. We just want him home.

If you have information, please call Victoria 646-221-6882,  
[vd19@columbia.edu](mailto:vd19@columbia.edu)

POLICE DEPARTMENT  
CITY OF NEW YORK

DETECTIVE BUREAU  
Wanted Flyer # 61863125

POLICE DEPARTMENT  
CITY OF NEW YORK

## WANTED

### FOR GRAND LARCENY OF A K-9

PERPETRATOR - PROBABLE CAUSE TO ARREST

/ MALE / WHITE

THE ABOVE PICTURED INDIVIDUAL IS WANTED IN CONNECTION OF A GRAND LARCENY THAT OCCURRED ON 12/27/20 AT APPROX. 1635HRS IN FRONT OF 2780 BROADWAY, LOCATED WITHIN THE CONFINES OF THE 24 PRECINCT. SUBJECT DID APPROACH AN UNATTENDED "DACHSHUND" K-9 WHILE VICTIM ENTERED THE ESTABLISHMENT TO MAKE A PURCHASE, WHERE THE SUBJECT PROCEEDED TO PICK UP THE K-9 AND HEAD TO AN UNKNOWN LOCATION.

Anyone with information regarding the above subject, please notify Det. MOURAD ARSLANBECK at 212-678-1863 OR Detective Borough Manhattan North at 212-694-1093

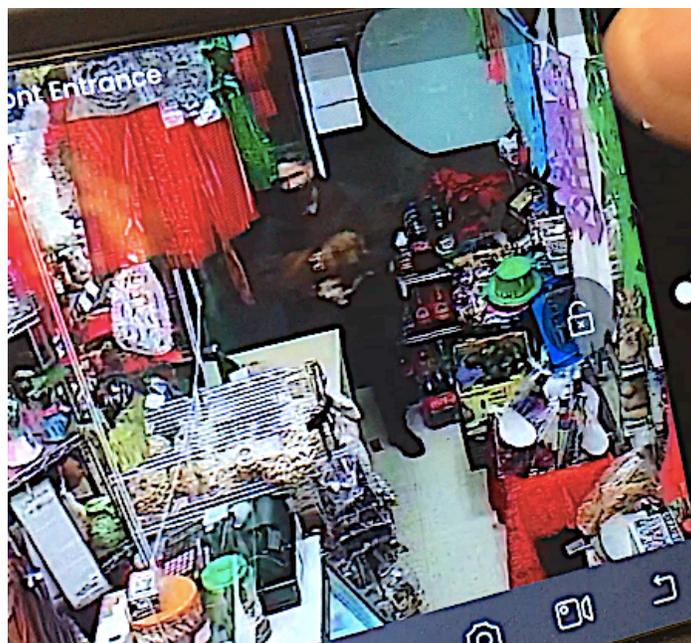
Investigator: Det. MOURAD ARSLANBECK  
Command Assigned: 249-24 DET. SQUAD  
Case# 2020-1876 Complaint Report# 2020-024-05215

By Wednesday morning, the police provided us with their own flyer to distribute, this time with the red-lettered "WANTED FOR GRAND LARCENY OF A K-9" flyer, with photo of the "perp," announcing the upgraded charge. By then, the detectives at the 24<sup>th</sup> precinct had also urged us to think about Luca's microchip as another way to narrow the search. We reported Luca's abduction to the various national pet registries. The police themselves contacted vets and pet shelters to provide that information, lest the thief – if he was part of an organized dog theft ring,—obtain the chip number by pretense, or worse, replace the old chip with a new one in order

to claim to be the legal owners of the dog. Meanwhile, the commanding officer of the 24<sup>th</sup> put out the story on his own Twitter feed, initiating the NYPD's own media blitz.

It was a "bring Luca home" media storm by Wednesday afternoon. Friends and well-meaning strangers kept contacting us to help, to walk the neighborhoods with flyers and perceptive eyes. Walking, talking, and leafletting. Tacking up the signs throughout Riverside Park, taping them up street corner lamps, telephone poles, and store fronts. Sometimes it was hard to focus on "just Luca." We felt the economic devastation the pandemic has brought ever more. There was no lack of boarded up store fronts to poster. There was also very little pedestrian traffic except, of course, on the concourses in the park, at the dog runs, and on Broadway around favorite food stores, City MD offices, Verizon, and so on. There were many homeless people, some with dogs of their own. Several dignified-looking men in front of the shelters promised to stay on the lookout. Wednesday morning there was a stake out of sorts at 96<sup>th</sup> and Broadway, where smartphones had captured from the rear somebody walking a mini-dachshund who looked like Luca and even had a red leash just like his. But it was just another sweet doggie walking with his owner. It was hard not to start feeling like perhaps this was all in vain

With heavy rain forecast for the next day, on late Wednesday we got a big break. It was about 4:00 pm when an attentive small business owner in the vicinity of the 137<sup>th</sup> Street subway stop saw the surveillance video on her phone's news feed, and recognized the thief as the person who had tried to sell them Luca the previous Sunday evening. From the way he held the dog, and how the dog acted -- covering and moving away from the guy when he was set down for a moment -- the shop owner knew the dog couldn't belong to him. When the shop owner said so, the man ran off in a rage, apparently to try to sell Luca somewhere else. The shop owner emailed. We spoke by phone. They followed up immediately by sending a snippet from their surveillance tape that showed the man, recognizable even with his face mask, and little Luca in his arms. We fumbled with the iphone for fifteen minutes (my god, how much fumbling with that thing happened



during this whole fiasco) before finally figuring out how to send the information to the police at the 24<sup>th</sup> precinct. The police acted promptly, thoroughly and with great energy. After the detectives spoke with the shop owner who had seen the thief going into another nearby business and coming out without the dog, they went right to that address where they learned the identity of the person who had bought the dog. That person was wholly cooperative. The dog had ended up at somebody's house in the Bronx.

Within two hours, the detectives called us. Luca was in the car and they were on their way. When the police put Luca down in the apartment building's entryway, he rushed around, as if he were welcoming everybody back home. Once in the apartment, he yawned as nervous animals do and he hid for a while under a desk looking at once puzzled and ashamed. From his chubby hedgehog look, it was clear he had been overfed with Cheetos and deli dog food. Once he had been walked, he made the longest pee and biggest poop in his life. And then, once home again, Luca settled down to sleep in his hutch. By the next morning, he was back to being his usual civilized, affectionate, handsome, food-grubbing self. He'll never sit outside a grocery store waiting for his family to grab "one quick thing," again. But he surely prefers that. Luca hates being left out of the action.



#### NYPD 24th Precinct

Thanks to the 24th Precinct @NYPDDetectives - Luca was reunited with his owner this evening. Thank you to the entire #UWS community for spreading the word. #bettertogether

As for the thief: He has not been apprehended, and no one knows his actual identity. He appears to be an addict who lives on the streets, hand-to-mouth, mostly by petty thefts of baby strollers,

unattended packages, the kind of activity we see more of when times get really rough. He was seen again in the vicinity of 137<sup>th</sup> street yesterday, and will likely be apprehended. How he will be prosecuted for this crime surely depends at least in part on his existing record of arrests and convictions. What is clear was that he was up to no good when he caught sight of Luca unattended, and that he was a gross amateur who wanted only money for his next fix. As we learned from another tip, he tried to sell the dog even as he was leaving the subway station at 137<sup>th</sup> Street, but ultimately made the sale (our guess for a sum of perhaps \$100) at a hair salon near the store on 137<sup>th</sup> street. The man who bought Luca didn't think he was taking a risk at receiving stolen goods and he paid for his stupidity out of pocket.

The upshot: this was a dog story and a human one. It is the feel-good in extremis story that we Upper West Siders (#UWS) love to tell about our community. It's about New York's Finest doing their professional best as they worry about the meaning of "defunding the police," even as they gear up to the crime wave that is being unleashed by Covid. It's a New York story that says we live in a giant village, not the jungle of the city. But it could also be read as a bigger, more meaningful political story at the thought of the utter disarray, ineptitude and inhumanity we have experienced from our national government over the past year.

What do we mean by that? Well, it begs this question: What if we could bring all of that amazing outpouring of resources, energy, smarts, experience, commitment, belief in action and empathy that was brought to bringing Luca home to our great common weal? On that note, with gratitude to one and all, let's treat Luca lost-and found as a wonderful augury for 2021. We certainly all need to have some hope. This story perhaps is just a harbinger of what we can do if we keep trying to work together. Thank you everyone, from Luca, Victoria de G and James P.

