

Lola at the Front Desk

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His novel had been about Lola, except he called her Meg and made her hail from Minneapolis. He wrote about her job answering a publisher's phones all day, never getting up except to go to the coffeemaker or bathroom or vending machine. He wrote about her childhood, about her sitting in a Jack in the Box with her father, Daddy calling her fat and then buying her a second double-hamburger when she cried that she was still hungry. How she grew up with a Botticelli face as blemish-less and full as a moon pie, flesh that creased bracelet-like over tiny, bird-like wrist bones. He wrote about seeing her naked for the first time, her breasts two full orbs, her stomach fat gelatinous, slightly cottage-cheesy. The low self-esteem she must have had, to sleep with a writer who had never sold a book and split the check for dinner and was married. She couldn't watch a movie without a pillow on her lap to hide the splooge of her thighs over the sofa.

In the book's last scene, she stood alone in the kitchen, fork half buried in a triple layer pumpkin tart (she was an excellent cook, a gourmet taster, a bountiful homemaker in search of a family to spoil). Alone on Christmas Eve, her lover home with his family, she was too nervous to suffer alone through her own and called them at the last minute with an invented migraine. Her fork slivered into the luscious dessert she had baked for the family gathering (sharp lines of cream cheese dividing each pumpkin layer, dark chocolate shavings cascading over top), but her wrist shook too much to press the bite to her lips. A few tears fell on the rounded center of the tart and flowed outward to form a moat around the crust. The book ended there, with her standing over the tart in an image fit for a motion picture.

People told Carl that it was impossible not to cry at the end. People who said they never cried at books or movies or even real funerals. They cried and bought his book. They gifted copies for birthdays and Christmas and Hanukkah. Oprah said the book was a

revelation, a harsh wake-up call for an America that couldn't see itself in the mirror anymore. That we could no longer hide from the emotional, as well as the physical, devastation lying behind our unhealthy relationship with food. The camera zoomed in on Oprah's face as she said this, close enough to see her pores, and then it cut to a commercial break where a skinny woman in sweatpants and fuzzy slipper socks wriggled on a red couch, eating a 100 calorie chocolate yogurt snack that the commercial claimed filled her for hours yet tasted like dessert, giving her 12 essential nutrients and what appeared to be a strange sexual pleasure.

Carl had the Oprah segment recorded. He liked to watch it at night when he couldn't sleep and his wife was up late taking emergency phone calls from clients. Before, lying in bed while she worked had been a reminder of his own dogged lack of ambition, the comparative defaults that kept him quiet beside her at dinners with their friends, her friends. Now, while she continued her harried efforts to progress her career, he lounged in bed as a mark of his arrival. Carl scooted to the center of the bed and turned up the bedroom television loud enough to block out the legal talk. He wallowed in the down comforter and in his own self-satisfaction.

He was almost surprised at how far the satisfaction extended. He had not even realized its absence, yet now he could zip his life fully inside it. He had worked for years in publishing and done rather well for himself. His life could be distilled into moderately satisfying cocktail-party chatter, garnished with a gossipy snippet about the author of the moment. Still, the book gave a fulfillment that he could never have imagined. It somehow made up for all the long days spent trudging through slush pile disasters and praying for some small nugget to build a career on, the sweat-slick meetings pushing his discovered manuscripts with the desperate pluck of a door-to-door vacuum salesman, the books that should have sold and did not, the books that sold and should not have in a market that demanded novelty and feared innovation. Then there were the long phone calls with his

authors, smoothing over their hopes and insecurities and elations and desperations, making himself a part of their lives, of their stories - until the publication date came and they disappeared as if they had never been. As if in all those months, he had been no more of a person to them than the dancing spellchecking paperclip on Microsoft Word.

Now, Carl never tired of looking back on all those days, all those conversations, reveling in everyone's – his authors', his colleagues', his bosses', his wife's – ignorance that he had working away on his own manuscript the whole time (and how many of them had ended up on Oprah? Sat on her storied couch beside PhaTMonies, seventeen-year-old rapping sensation?). What their faces would have looked like, if they had known.

Although, in the end, he probably had them—even the worst of them, especially the worst of them—to thank for everything. If they had not been so unbearable, Lola would not have stood out so much. He was not even sure how long she had worked at the office. He only vaguely glanced over at the reception desk on his way into work. Lola always wore elastic waist slacks with a matching button-down top, something between an oversized shirt and a jacket, a contrasting shirt underneath it. They were always bright colors—deep turquoise, hot pink, red. That surprised him. The colors drew attention, and did not slim. He had never noticed before, but, when he thought about it, it seemed like a lot of big women wore colors like that. Perhaps in rebellion against society's efforts to sideline them, or perhaps clothing manufacturers out of some perversity or economy only made big clothes in those colors. He never said much to Lola, never anything that he could recall. He chipped in at Christmas with the rest of the staff to get her a massage, or maybe it was a manicure.

For Carl, Lola appeared the day that Aurelia Marchforth's op-ed came out in the *Times*. Two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning, life-time achievement award-collecting, staple in every best-of anthology-becoming, admittedly crotchety, reclusive, peculiar, Ms. Marchforth had sent her latest manuscript out under the name June Mayfield (making a

point—but for whom? For her own amusement? Out of boredom? Out of spite? Carl still could not decide). Every major publisher rejected it. Carl rejected it himself.

“These rejections show modern publishing as a broken industry, willing to dispense entirely with any pretense of concern over literary merit and social and moral value, shameless in its shilling of big names for easy marketing,” Ms. Marchforth trilled, listing Carl’s publishing house by name as one of the confirmed offenders.

“Reads like a second-rate Aurelia Marchforth imitation,” Carl had said in his rejection notes.

“Don’t worry Carl, even after years of experience, it still takes a special ear to —“ his coworkers said as he pushed past, apologetically protesting that he had an important lunch meeting.

He went out on the rooftop to be alone, but he found Lola there, sitting on a cement block, a half-eaten sandwich wrapped in parchment-paper beside her.

“Can I join you?” he said.

“I like to eat lunch alone,” she said.

“No one likes to eat alone,” he said. He could see the full panoply of his own lonely meals - his desk, the tiny corner table in the office kitchen, the deli on 54th, the deli on 56th, his own kitchen table, his own kitchen counter, did the dinners with friends count?

“No, I don’t buy it,” he said, no longer looking at her or even seeing her, ghosts of meals past still running through his mind like snapshots clicking through an old projector. Did one have to be both physically alone and to feel alone, or was it a sliding scale, where if you felt alone enough it was a meal alone no matter how many bodies pressed beside you,

chomping and churning their food in a lonely chorus with you? Would it be all of his meals, he wondered, if he thought about it like this.

“Oh, but I’m not *selling* anything,” Lola said with a gasp. Startled, Carl jerked to look at her, really looking at her face for the first time, her button nose, her scattered freckles, her eyes blue and lips pinched. She stared back unsmiling, then with a twitch at the left corner of her mouth so sudden that his immediate thought was stroke until a stifled burst followed and he realized: she was laughing. He had never thought that she had much of a sense of humor, although he flushed to think that he would hardly know, having never talked to her.

“Don’t worry, Carl, they’ll all forget in a few days. Aurelia didn’t consign you to lifelong loneliness.”

And they should forget - Carl was relieved she understood. He summarized the situation with Marchforth so that Lola could really understand. His summary spiraled, as far as he recalled, into a rather elegant discourse on the nature of authorship, of publishing, of careers at large, of the culture of work in our modern world and its consequences for individual identity. Lola said little; in retrospect, he could not remember if she said anything, but he could tell that she recognized the simple truths in his words. She nodded gravely as she crunched the emptied parchment paper into a ball. She crunched it quietly, thoughtfully, so as not to drown him out.

When he finished talking, Carl felt refreshed and reinvigorated and youthful, much as he imagined he might after a vigorous morning swim, if he swam.

“Do you always take lunch up here?” he said.

“I hate to say always about anything.”

“I’ll see you here again, then.”

Carl marveled. It had been years since he had met such a good listener. Lola sat quiet and engaged, but with a slight side smile and unaccountable glimmer in her eyes that made him curious and paranoid that she could be holding in some thought vastly more exciting and amusing than what he was saying. He wasn't sure why he cared particularly what she was thinking. He did not know anything about her life. He imagined a sparse apartment, dinners out of a soggy microwave tray or perhaps order-in Chinese in front of the television. If he was feeling particularly harsh, hours scrolling through diet blogs, pictures of models for inspiration, wedding websites for hope. But where had she learned to listen like that?

Carl began eating by her at lunch, grabbing the occasional afternoon coffee breaks. When he heard footsteps near his office, he looked up with a foreign hope. And, while he always took care with the editorial assistants, fresh from college, lithe and bright-eyed, and was never one of the middle-aged editors hanging around their desks to their colleagues' break room scorn, now he was free not to worry what people might think - no one could ever think he was attracted to Lola and he never hid that he was married. It was refreshing to have such a sexless relationship with a woman, and yet somehow it seemed more replete with mystery and excitement than any sexual relationship he had had. He did not worry that he was in love with her - no, he dismissed the thought. He was in love with not being in love with her.

He did wonder what she saw in him. He would flatter himself that she was in love with him, especially when they were apart, but the idea wilted when he saw her - she was not complimentary, was not always even agreeable, skeptical of his opinions and pronouncements, haphazard with her attention. Sometimes, her eyes lit up as she argued fervently with him over some offhand comment of his or some issue from the newspaper. Other times, she seemed merely amused as he attempted to rile her into some expression. Still, he was confident that she valued their friendship, even if she refused to say. Why else would she reach for her jacket when he stopped by her desk, ready for a coffee or a walk?

Think of him when sending email forwards, always with a humorous note at the top, meant just for him? Ask him if he had ever been there or done this before, then insist that they go, that they do, together? Of course, it was quite possible that she had no one else. He did not think that she had any family in the city, although she mentioned a sister who must not have been too far away although he always forgot where—Connecticut, perhaps. But Lola did not have the air of someone who had no one at all. He always felt chosen by her, not as a default.

Those occasionally Saturdays when she would call him without warning, say, Carl, I feel like the park, what do you think? He always said, yes; thought, here is something for today, a hand extended to tug this afternoon out of the great indivisible pattern that I thought had come to compose all afternoons in my life. It was Lola that allowed him to escape the inescapable, the tiresome routine of the comfortable life that he worked so long to establish.

Lola was the first person he told when he started to write again, long before he imagined that she would become the book itself. Initially, he mentioned ideas to her casually, as if they had occurred to him that moment. He had a few ideas stored up from years back, stories that he hadn't written a word of but that darted in and out of his mind. He would think of little scenes as he stood in the bathroom at night, flossing his teeth while his wife talked about her day. He always meant to keep a notebook by his bed to scratch them down so he didn't forget. He never did, but he found scraps of paper to jot them down on occasionally and stuffed the scraps in his bedside drawer at home. He thought some of the ideas were quite good, really. Lola was unimpressed.

“Woody Allen. The Manhattan skyline, the forced cynicism, the gorgeous woman, the puddle-y milquetoast redeemed. There has to be something new in there,” she said, tilting her head inquiringly as she mimed knocking on his.

“They’re nothing like a Woody Allen movie. Or each other. This one is about an accountant. The last one was about a therapist for movie stars. They’re nothing alike.”

Lola shrugged.

“Don’t take it wrong. I’m not trying to discourage you. Figure out what you need to say and then...write.”

She paused before the last word, making a grandiose gesture with her right hand that encompassed and dismissed the whole seedy joint simultaneously, and then she left him at the bar. He was still unsure whether she was making fun of him.

He almost didn’t come to the showcase after the Woody Allen comment, although maybe he was fooling himself to say that. He resented Lola’s improv a bit, her improv friends always out and about, other friends that he assumed must be from improv classes as well. Of course, he was happy that she had some social network, but he could not understand why she had never invited him, never suggested he join them - like he was some old square, instead of a creative editor at an eminent innovative publishing house - who could these people be? So, when she invited him to her class’s showcase, of course he would go. He sat in the back so not to seem too eager and peered anxiously for anyone he knew.

Everything was what he expected, except for Lola. In the office, Lola seemed incongruous with the waifish college graduates they hired and the waifish editors they aspired to be. But on the stage, Lola moved fluidly, boldly. While her classmates fumbled for laughs, she was the beauty of a perfectly-executed joke, simple and pure. Out of nowhere, he felt tears welling up in his eyes. He glanced furtively around him, but everyone else had their eyes fixed on the stage - they saw it too.

Relief flooded Carl. He suddenly knew why he had been drawn to Lola, what he had struggled to explain to himself - she was his inspiration. She was what he was always meant

to write about. That was why he couldn't stop thinking about her, couldn't wait to see her, found himself straightening his shoulders and tie when she approached, why details about her clung to his memory. What scarves she paired with what jacket. Her refusal to wash fruit before she ate it, saying she liked to incorporate a mild disregard for convention into her daily life. Her excuses to callers growing progressively wilder as the week wore on.

He never felt guilty writing about her, never felt like he was using her. He did not know enough about her to use her. He had no secrets to share. He was just had his impression of her to inspire him. She gave him something to imagine. When he started to write about her, he realized that his problem had been that he had been trying to write about characters too much like himself. He had always tried to follow the advice to write what you know, but then he got too tangled up in all the justifications and excuses. Writing about Lola, that was something different. He couldn't think of anyone he had less in common with. He could say whatever he wanted, writing the character of her, with no cost to her. The character was not her, just inspired by her, and what woman doesn't want to be a muse?

"Why did you make it all about food?" That was the only thing that Lola had said when she read it. She said nothing for a few days, ignored him until he finally stood in front of the front desk, insisting that she say something. She was the first one that he had showed the manuscript to, after it had been accepted for publication. He made sure to tell her this, as a demonstration of his respect for her opinion. "I don't even cook. All this time and you don't even know me. Am I just a caricature of a fat woman to you?"

She began pulling open her desk drawers wildly. "What, only pens? Where are my Ho-Hos, Carl? Where are my Little Debbies? Where's my emergency bucket of fried chicken? Is that what you think of me, Carl?"

“No, no, of course, I know, but this isn’t you. Just inspired by, you know. I needed a theme. Food is the theme, it fits.” He shrugged. He had thought that she might object to the similarities to herself as a character, but did not expect her to take the details so seriously, to overlook the story as a whole. It was a disappointment, evidence of a smallness in her that he had never suspected, or had blinded himself to.

“We never slept together.”

“It’s fiction. Sex sells.”

“We went to movies together that once. Remember? You cried because you had a fight with your wife and thought she didn’t understand you. I gave you a hug and you tried to grope me and then we both just pretended that it didn’t happen. It was sad.”

“I was in a vulnerable place.”

“You were pathetic.” He wondered how she didn’t see the beauty in it somehow, how the arc of their stories came together in her life and his imagination to make sense together, how she freed him to write after years of struggling. “Didn’t you ever think that we were meant to be together, that we belonged together in some tragic way? Except—”

“Except I was fat?”

He flinched.

“No,” she said. “Just because I enjoyed your company doesn’t mean that I ever wanted you. Are you so insecure that you can’t imagine someone enjoying your company without any need, without any goal?”

“But what do you think about the book?” He pressed, ignoring her biting tone, leaning forward, his mouth dry with anticipation.

“You’re the editor,” she said. “Faxing is my expertise.”

“I just wanted to make sure that it was okay with you.” He realized that it was necessary, but too late to adopt a new approach. The tightening of her lips was already closing the conversation.

“I don’t see that it has much to do with me,” she said, stressing the “me” with an unattractive nasal whine that he thought was really unsuited to her. “It’s nothing to do with me at all. None of it. I suppose that I was just fooling myself to think that it ever was.”

He ignored Lola for a few days after the conversation. He needed to cool off from the disappointment. He had looked forward to telling Lola, surprising her with the finished product after she witnessed all his struggles with dead-end ideas, his halting efforts to begin writing again. Now, he had no one left that he cared as much about telling. His wife had already seen him working on the book over the past few months, had raised one bemused eyebrow to tell him that she thought he had given up writing years ago. He sniffed and told her that he had never given it up, that his ideas had just been percolating. She was happy for his success for the book, of course, and they went out to dinner to celebrate before returning home to both work late into the night.

Lola began leaving work for lunch. Carl would never even get the chance to see her before she bundled into her jacket and out the door. One day, she did not come back. The office manager told him that she got a job at a law firm closer to her apartment.

That was two years ago. Carl wasn’t sure if she still worked there. The next time he saw her was on television. She had lost 75 pounds and was on a daytime health talk show to tell her story.

He never would have seen her, except he had started taking his lunches out of the office alone sometimes. There was no one worth talking to in the office lunch room. He was sick of seeing baby pictures and receiving engagement notices and hearing about who didn’t empty the dishwasher. He also guessed that his coworkers did not know how to respond to

his new success. The editors were mostly thwarted writers, he suspected, as he himself once had been.

That afternoon, he sat in a deli two blocks away from the office, eating a sandwich with his notebook open beside him. Sometimes he jotted down notes about the other people in the deli, the old men chewing slowly alone at the counter, the couples squabbling over lunch, the mother and daughter neatly slicing a sandwich in two. He wanted to write another book. He just was not sure about what yet. Nothing seemed right.

Most of the time, though, he did not end up writing in the notebook. An old television hung in the corner. He watched it idly. He almost didn't recognize her, still a bit on the pudgy side but not obese like before, wearing bright coral lipstick as she perched on the couch on a women's health show.

"I was the Girl at the Front Desk," she said, leaning in towards the interviewer, using the title of his book with a glint in her eye that he thought must be for him. "And look at me now!"

She had to know that he was watching, somehow. She threw her hands in the air and stood up, smiling, as the audience clapped and hooted. The interviewer held up a copy of his book. Carl let his sandwich splat into the red plastic basket. A "before" picture of Lola flashed up on the screen behind her, beside the animated "weight-off-o-meter" that dropped to show her weight-loss with a zany cartoon boink. After the commercial break, she showed the talk show host how she lost weight and satisfied her appetite by preparing five tiny meals a day in under ten minutes. She told them how yogurt at breakfast quelled her appetite for the rest of the day and then gave out her recipe for her favorite oatmeal cookies with applesauce as a sugar replacement to take away the afternoon cravings and the extra inches at the same time. She was starting her own brand of dietary supplements.

A few days after the program, he wrote Lola a letter—by accident, really. The letter began as an attempt to track down her address, just out of curiosity, but that ended up being much easier than he thought—she still lived at the same place as before, and he wasn't sure why he had been so completely convinced otherwise. And once he found that out (so easily, it was a letdown really), he decided that he might as well send her a note. He asked her to call. He told her that it was unfair, really, to object to inconsistencies to her character in the book and never give him the chance to know her real character.

The weeks after mailing reeled by in a sequence of imagined phone calls. Carl would excuse the book to her, explain it a little - it's hard to write about happy people. Even Tolstoy said that. And I'm no Tolstoy (she would have to smile a little there, let down the defenses). It's not that there aren't happy people; no one is saying that. Just that the happy people are hard to write about and not very interesting to read about, so the fact that it was not a happy book meant nothing about what I think about you, was no reflection on your life. That's what Carl would tell her.

Lola never called. She wrote him a note back to meet her in the park by his office during lunch. He found her sitting on a bench. She wore a bright pant-suit, much as she had before, but more lipstick than she used to, and a wide white belt girding in her middle to show that she had a waist now, or at least a traversable torso if not yet a waist in the traditional, concave sense. She seemed like a stranger. He waved as he walked towards her and, once he dropped his hand, he found himself having to clench and unclench his fist. She smiled.

"I brought you some applesauce oatmeal cookies," she said.

"Thank you," he said. She held out a little plastic bag to him and he took one, taking a bite larger than he planned. The oatmeal leached onto his tongue in clumps.

"I can't believe you eat these," he said.

“I don’t,” she said and laughed. He placed the cookie down on the bench, and it tumbled through one of the slats. “I haven’t changed that much, Carl. If I’m going to eat a cookie, I eat a real cookie. What’s new with you?”

“Nothing that you don’t know,” he said. “Still at the office every day, still coffee break at half past two.”

“No new books?”

“Not right now. I mean to start writing soon,” he said.

“You should be happy anyhow. Everyone liked the last one.” She pulled a cigarette out of her purse. “Capitalize on your success.”

“Like you did? I saw your interview.”

She shrugged.

“You don’t smoke,” he said.

“I’m exploring a darker side of my character,” she said. “You should be happy.”

“You don’t want to get cancer.”

“Ah, that would complicate the storyline too much.” She nodded sagely. “See? I picked up a few things at the front desk. Not just pounds.”

She blew out another puff of smoke and coughed. Her hand was shaking a little, and he wondered if she had ever really smoked before.

He picked up the pack sitting between them. He knocked one out and rolled it between his fingers. He had never smoked, not even as a teenager. She watched him.

“Here’s an idea. What a symbol. You don’t have to explain a thing. Just show me picking up the cigarette once and I am either a rebel or a schlub. I was fat, so I can’t be a rebel. Then I’m a schlub, no self-control, no self-respect. Just one image and the reader knows it all. I read the book, remember? I know how you do it. How you create the character of me.”

He flushed and fumbled the cigarette back into the pack, thrust it away. She laughed.

“I hope you know that I don’t really think about you that way,” he said.

“I hope you know that I don’t really care that much about what you think,” she said, then stopped. “Maybe I do. I do want you to know that it wasn’t because of you. The weight-loss. I had the surgery scheduled before we even started talking. I didn’t do it because of what you said.”

“What surgery?”

“The gastric bypass. Do you think I lost all that weight eating yogurt? Please.”

“Well, you look great,” he said, and she snorted. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. You do, though. You look happy.”

“Of course, I’m happy,” she said. “I get my day job and talk show superstardom.”

He could not tell if she was serious. She told him that another daytime women’s show called her, asked her to come on after seeing the interview. And why wouldn’t they want the real Girl at the Front Desk? She did look like a natural on the show he saw, turning and pivoting to the applause. When he watched his own tapes of Oprah, he had to ignore the beads of sweat glancing down his forehead on the screen. He could tell how far it was in the segment by the sweat stains on the underarms of his shirt, which expanded with the constant

regularity of the minute-hand on a clock. It was why he never showed the videos to anyone else, even though he kept them. He just did not look like a success on them.

“Well, since you asked,” Carl began. “Here’s how I’m doing. The book’s published. I want to write. Everyone keeps asking me if I am, and I say yes, but I can’t think of anything to write, anything that works.”

“So write a sequel. Maybe I lose weight, but regain it. Or maybe I lose weight and keep it off, but realize how empty my life is, that it never really was the weight holding me down after all but some sadness inside of me that I can’t diet off. Or maybe I lose too much weight and go into the hospital or become a model or both,” she said. “Look at all those ideas, and I’m not even the writer.”

“It was my book, and yet you’re the success story. You’re the one who changed,” Carl said.

“Maybe I have.”

She sat silently for a moment, looking out across the park. Carl tried to see what she was looking at, but he could not tell if she was looking at anything at all. She looked down and rubbed her eyes, as if suddenly tired. She then began to gather up her purse. Plastic wrappers crinkled inside it.

“Look, it’s been good seeing you,” she said. “I have to get going though. Take care.”

“Wait, Lola please. There’s just one thing I want to know and then I’ll leave you alone. Are you happy?”

“Well, you’re the last person that I’d tell, now aren’t you?” Lola said as she stood.

For a second, he thought he saw a slip in her smile, but maybe she was just changing her expression as she turned away.

