

LOLA

BY JONATHAN SANTLOFER

Hoboken

I met Lola on the PATH, the train that goes under the Hudson River, a thought I tried to deny twice a day when I rode it back and forth to Hoboken, the idea of the tunnel suddenly sprouting a leak, water shattering subway windows, pouring in, drowning me, always on the edge of my mind, which is why I focused on everything else.

Lola was sitting across from me, head buried in a paperback, one of those romance novels with a girl in the arms of a brawny he-man. Her black-red nails tap-tap-tapping the back cover had me hypnotized until she looked up, blue eyes lined with kohl, dark arching brows as if she were about to ask a question though she wasn't looking at me, just reacting to the sound of the subway doors opening and closing, but it was enough, a moment, a connection. She went back to her book and I noticed the gold band on her finger, which was disappointing, not like I was thinking we'd get married or anything, but I'd have preferred she was single, which makes things easier.

She was a little younger than me, maybe thirty though I'm no good at ages, no good at numbers of any kind, which is why they never let me do the measuring at the place where I build made-to-order stretchers for successful artists, which I don't mind, I like making them—I've always been good with my hands, and it's quiet work, just me and two other guys, and I take pride in it, sanding the edges and making sure the corners are perfectly square because there's nothing worse than a lopsided painting—though

sometimes I get a little resentful that I spend my days building stretchers for other artists, but that's life, right?

That first night, Lola was wearing gold sandals, toenails painted the same black-red, and she had really nice feet, nice legs too, bare because it was a hot day though the PATH was frigid. Every once in a while she rubbed her hand up and down her legs like she was trying to warm them, which was even more hypnotizing than her book tapping.

She had a good figure too, her top loose but made of some slinky fabric that outlined her breasts, and her skirt was short enough to see her thighs, which were thin but muscular. I thought about asking her to model for me, a line I'd once used that had worked—women are so easily flattered—but I didn't think she'd go for it, being married and all, and I couldn't come up with anything else, I hadn't prepared and I'm not really good with girls even though some say I'm very good looking.

When the train stopped at Hoboken I knew she'd get off—I didn't see her as the kind who'd live in Jersey City, and no way Newark. I waited for her to go past me, we were only a few inches apart and I could smell her perfume, something flowery but not too sweet, and I breathed it in trying to hold onto it, and then someone in front of her stopped short and she backed into me, her perfume in my nose and her hair tickling my cheek for just a second, and she said, "Oh, sorry," and I saw it in slow motion, her red lips yawning the words, *OOOHHHHH SSSSOOOORRRRYYYY*, and I never wanted the moment to end. So I followed her.

It was still light out, a mist coming off the Hudson River like a veil in front of the Manhattan skyline. She headed away from the water toward the main drag, Washington Street, which had become gentrified over the past years. Hoboken was sort of a dump, famous as the birthplace of Frank Sinatra and not much else, when I first moved there after graduate school because I couldn't afford Manhattan rents, not if I wanted a studio, which I did, and I have a pretty good one, my own building in fact, a small brick one

next door to Pablo's Towing Station on the furthest-back street in town, still not developed, a dark lonely stretch, which suits me, and practically no one knows I live in the building because I've done nothing to distinguish it, left the rusted steel door the way it was the day I moved in, and I've yet to clean the broken glass or ever-accumulating beer cans from the two-by-four plot of ground out front, so the place looks deserted unless you happen to see the lights go on and off, but there's really no one around to see that either.

She went into a liquor store, the yuppie one, not the wino one, and I watched her through the glass choosing two bottles of red wine and quickly turned away when she came out, then followed her again, leaving just enough distance between us.

She lived in a renovated brownstone on a quiet side street, a really nice one, so I figured she had money.

After she went inside I waited a few minutes then checked the mailbox. There was a letter addressed to Mr. & Mrs. Moretti, and a postcard, which is how I learned her name, Lola.

Lola. Lola. Lola. Lola. Lola.

I folded it into my pocket, went across the street and stood under the awning of a beauty salon that was closed, and waited until it got dark and a light went on in an upstairs window, and I watched Lola slowly peel her top off, and even after the light went out her image burned in my mind and I stayed up the whole night making one drawing after another of her, naked, framed by the window, smudging the charcoal with my fingers to capture the soft swell of her breasts.

The next day I stayed home from work and made paintings based on the drawings. I stopped just before six p.m., changed out of my paint clothes, put on a clean shirt, walked over to the PATH, and sure enough there she was.

This time she went into a little gourmet shop and I followed, brushed past her in the condiment aisle, keeping my head down inhaling her perfume, and on the way out I accidentally-on-purpose

banged into her and she dropped her bag and I said I was sorry and helped her pick everything up and offered to carry her bag home but she just smiled and said, “No biggie,” and this time I didn’t have to follow her because I knew exactly where she was going, so I waited, then went and stood under the awning, and when it got dark she did the same thing—undressed in front of the window, a little slower this time—and I thought I’d go crazy and was even thankful when the light went out so I could go home and make more drawings.

The next day I followed her from the PATH, and the day after I just waited under the awning until she came home. I didn’t want to rush it, didn’t want it over too soon. I brought my camera with the telephoto lens and took some pictures of her in her window, half naked, and used them for more paintings, which were starting to fill my studio.

It was later in the week that I finally saw the husband, pin-striped suit, gold-tassel loafers, a lot older than I expected, a lot older than Lola too, at least fifty, maybe more, balding, overweight, a surprise and no question in my mind that she’d married him for money, disappointing as I’d grown to think more highly of her, but still, I forgave her.

Over the next few weeks I got their routine down. Lola almost always came home by six; the husband not until eight, and some nights not at all, so maybe he traveled or stayed in the city if he worked late, my guess Wall Street, which was very convenient to Hoboken. One evening, I went over to where the ferries come in from Wall Street, and there he was with a scowl on his face like he was pissed off about something, like he didn’t have a gorgeous wife and tons of money, which annoyed me because some people don’t know how lucky they are.

A few times I followed Lola into the city. I was curious to see what she did all day. It turned out she just took long walks along Fifth Avenue or in Central Park or went shopping in fancy stores like Saks or went to art galleries or museums, which made me like

her even more; but I got to thinking she was lonely and how happy we'd be together and how she could be my full-time muse and I'd put her on a pedestal and she'd never be lonely again.

One night, a truck delivered a painting, a big one covered in bubble wrap, and when it got dark I went right up to her windows and peeked in and could see it leaning against the living room wall, an abstract, which I don't like, but figured I'd win Lola over to portraiture once she saw all the ones I'd made of her.

I knew it was getting to be time because I could hardly sleep or eat and no matter how many times I jerked off thinking about Lola's lips or her black-red nails on my flesh or her muscular legs wrapped around me, it just wasn't enough. I kept thinking, *Do it now*, but restrained myself because it seemed different this time, it seemed like love, and I never wanted it to end.

Sometimes, on the nights her husband didn't come home, if the weather was nice, Lola would eat outside at one of the restaurants near the waterfront, and I'd find a spot where I could watch her and take pictures, which I used for a series of paintings called *Lola Eating*.

I guess the thing that finally did it was the night I saw them together.

I was in my safe spot under the awning, Lola undressing in the window, and then I saw the husband tugging her toward him and he was about to switch off the lamp but she stopped him, and it was like watching a play, a horrible play, the window open—I could hear their voices though not what they said—the two of them naked, him kissing her, groping her, and if the damn light hadn't finally gone off I'd have burst in and killed him and made Lola my own.

I must have walked through all of Hoboken that night, along the waterfront where the air was hot and damp, that fishy smell coming off the river, the view of Manhattan like the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz*, so close you could almost touch it, but unreal. Then up to the college on the hill where a bunch of coeds were

walking and laughing and I had such murderous thoughts it must have been on my face because they stopped laughing when they saw me. Then along Washington Street, all the restaurants and bars open, people chatting and smiling and having a good time as if everything in the world was okay, when *nothing* was okay. I wove up and down the side streets, sweating, that fishy smell following me, mixing with the garbage stewing in the hot night air, and when I finally got home there was a rat rooting around in the small plot of dirt in front of my place and I got a brick and smashed it, over and over and over, then dragged my rat-bloodied hands across half the Lola drawings, smudging the charcoal until it turned to brown mush because I was finished with her; it was over between us.

After that, I was happy to go to my job every day, building stretchers, and stayed late so I wouldn't run into her. I was getting over her, the loss and all, and there was this new girl, a blonde, who rode the PATH and lived in Hoboken, alone—I know because I followed her—and she might have become the one—I was getting ready—but then, I saw Lola again.

“Don't I know you?” she asked. She was standing over me wearing skinny black designer jeans, the crotch right at my face blocking my view of the blonde.

“I don't think so,” I said, holding my breath, my heart beating fast.

“Sure,” she said. “It was at Caterina's, you know, the gourmet place? You knocked a bag right out of my hand?”

“Oh—right—sorry about that.”

“No biggie,” she said and started chatting, asking if I lived in Hoboken, and I told her I did, starting to feel lightheaded because I'd been holding my breath, and after a minute, when I didn't say anything more, she went and sat down opposite me and put in her iPod earphones and crossed her legs, top one bouncing to the beat of the song in her head, her lips moving too, and when we got to Hoboken she gave me a little wave, then got off, and I purposely lagged behind—I really wanted to be finished with her—but when

I came out of the station there she was, and she smiled, and that was it, like we'd never broken up.

I started making new drawings and paintings of her and stayed home from work for a week, and when I finally felt ready to show them I showered and changed and combed my hair and went and waited by the PATH train until I saw her.

"Hi," I said.

Lola looked up sort of confused like she didn't recognize me, then smiled and said, "Oh, hi," and I just sort of fell in line with her as she walked. I'd prepared some small talk this time, stuff I'd Googled about Hoboken to impress her.

"Did you know they held the first baseball game here?"

"Really?" Her dark eyebrows arched up.

"And it's where Lipton Tea and Maxwell House Coffee were made."

"I didn't know about the tea. But the big Maxwell House sign is still there, and I like it."

"Right," I said, a little annoyed with myself that I'd forgotten about the sign.

"You're like a regular Hoboken tour guide," she said, and that's when I told her I was an artist, a painter, and she asked, "What do you paint?" a question I really hate, but said, "Portraits," and she said, "Really? Of who?" and I wanted to say, *Of you*, but said, "All sorts," and she asked, "Where do you show?" which is my other least-favorite question, but I said, "I'm between galleries," and she said, "Oh, that's too bad," and I said, "It's okay," and quickly added, "I'm having a show in Europe," and she said, "Where?" and I said, "Japan," because it was far away and I didn't think she'd be going there anytime soon, and she said, "I thought you said Europe," and I laughed and said, "Oh—it's all the same to me," and she laughed too and said, "My husband goes to Japan all the time, to Tokyo," and I said, "Why?" and she said, "For business," and I asked, "What kind of business?" and she said, "Finance," and I said, "My paintings aren't leaving for Japan for a few weeks if you'd

like to see them,” and she stopped and looked at me, dark eyebrows arching up again, and I said really quickly, “I don’t mean to be forward, I just thought you might like art,” and she said, “I do, but—” and I said, “That’s great,” and added my warmest smile, the one I practice in the mirror, and she said, “Well . . . maybe,” and I said, “How about tonight?” and she gave me that look again, then started laughing and said, “You *are* forward,” and I laughed too so she’d think I was a good sport though I was no longer sure why we were laughing, but she said, “I can’t tonight,” and I said, “Of course, I understand,” which is what people on television say all the time, and that was that. I was disappointed but not defeated, because one thing I have is patience.

I waited a couple of days so it wouldn’t feel forced, then timed it so I’d bump into her on the PATH again.

“Hi,” I said. “Oh, hi,” she said. And right way I started telling her about my job, which she said sounded interesting, and I dropped some names of famous artists I built stretchers for, and she’d heard of a few. But I didn’t push it. I didn’t want to ruin it.

Over the next week, I made sure we happened to meet but I never asked her to come see my paintings, though I’d drop a reference to them like, “I painted half the night” or “I think I finished the last painting for the Japan show,” and finally she asked *me* if she could come see my work, and I said, “How’s tomorrow night?” but real casual, the whole time my brain going, *Lola Lola Lola Lola*, and she said, “Where do you live?” and I told her and she said, “Really? I didn’t know *anyone* lived way back there,” and I said, “Oh, it’s nice, and my studio’s really big,” and she said, “I don’t know . . .” and I said, “It’s right next door to Pablo’s Towing Station and Pablo’s got guard dogs, so it’s perfectly safe, nothing to worry about,” and used my practiced smile again, and she said, “Oh, it’s not that . . .” and seemed to be thinking it through and finally said, “Okay, but you’ll have to come get me because I’m not walking all the way back there alone at night,” and I said, “Of course not, I wouldn’t want you to,” and she asked if we could do

it on the later side because she liked to have dinner with her husband, and I tried to keep my smile in place when I said that was fine though I was afraid she'd say she wanted to bring him along, which would ruin everything, but all she said was, "How's nine?" and I said, "Perfect," and started walking away, my mind seeing Lola in all sorts of naked poses, but she called after me, "Hey, don't you want my address?" And I turned and said, "What?" And she repeated the question. And I said, "Oh, right," and laughed maybe a little too hard.

I stayed up all night arranging and rearranging all the portraits till everything was perfect, then cleaned the studio and scrubbed the little storage area behind it, which has stone walls and is dank and dark and must have been used for some kind of cold storage at one time and served my purposes really well. I even sprayed it with Febreze because I wanted it to smell fresh for Lola, and put a clean sheet on the cot, and made sure the cuffs were not rusted from the dampness. Then I showered and washed my hair and shaved and used Old Spice and put on a new white shirt I bought at the Gap just for the occasion.

The air was heavy with that fishy smell and I worried it might rain and I hadn't thought to bring an umbrella and had forgotten my gloves, so I pulled my jacket over my finger when I pressed Lola's doorbell.

A minute later she appeared, smiling, but her eyes looked red as if she'd been crying.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Fine," she said, but the minute she closed the door behind her she got upset because she'd left her keys inside.

"Isn't your husband home?" I asked.

"No," she said. "He's working late," and I thought, *My good luck!*

Lola said she had a key hidden under a mat at the back door and I followed her. The whole time she was waving a hand in front of her nose, "Oh, that Hoboken smell, it's always bad when it's

going to rain,” and said she’d better get an umbrella and unlocked the back door, and I said I’d wait but she insisted I come in.

When she flipped on the lights we were standing in her kitchen, which looked right out of a magazine with Mexican tiles on the floor and fancy appliances and pots and pans hanging over a huge island in the middle of the room, and when I said it was really nice she said she never cooked so it was a waste, then said there were lots of umbrellas in the front hall closet so I followed her, careful not to touch anything, past a dining room with a long table and stiff-backed upholstered chairs and the living room with that abstract painting I could just make out in the dark, and when we got to the front hallway she stopped, and turned, and kissed me, her tongue in my mouth, and I couldn’t breathe I was so excited, but then she pulled away.

“Oh God,” she said. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

I told her it was okay, but she started crying and said she was a terrible person, that she was unhappy and didn’t love her husband but couldn’t leave him because he was rich and how was she going to make it on her own, and leaned against me sobbing, and I patted her hair and tried to breathe normally, thinking I couldn’t do it *here*, not in her house, and then she pulled away again and said she was sorry but I had to excuse her, that she couldn’t possibly come to my studio, not now, and I stood there a minute thinking how it had all been ruined, but then she kissed me again, and we stumbled into the living room, our mouths glued together, and she hiked her skirt up and practically ripped her panties off and tossed them across the room and tugged my jeans down and we sort of fell onto the floor, and when we were doing it she said, “Put your hands around my neck,” and I did, and she tossed her head back and forth and I asked, “Am I hurting you?” and she said, “No, I like it,” so I squeezed a little harder and felt her nails dig into my back and couldn’t hold on much longer and told her, and she said, “It’s okay, I’m on the pill,” and when it was over she said, “You’d

better go, my husband might come home,” and led me through the kitchen and helped me on with my jacket and hugged me really tight like her life depended on it, which was kind of ironic I thought, and kissed me really hard again, and when I got outside I felt confused and it took a minute to gather my wits—my head was spinning—and I hadn’t gone a block when a police car screeched to a halt and two cops got out and one slammed me against the cruiser and twisted my arm behind my back, while the other one fumbled my wallet out of my jeans. “What’s going on?” I asked, but they didn’t answer, just clamped handcuffs on my wrists, then one of the cops kneed me in the balls and I doubled over, and the other cop said, “Shut the fuck up,” and the first one said, “See if the knife’s on him,” and I said, “*Knife?*” as the cop slipped on a rubber glove and brought a small kitchen paring knife out of my pocket, covered in blood, and there was more blood dripping down the side of my jacket onto my jeans, and I heard the other cop on his radio say, “We’ve got him, weapon still on him too, a real bozo. The husband’s dead in the upstairs bedroom, multiple stab wounds. Wife’s okay, but someone from the rape squad should meet us at the OR,” and I said, “No, no, it wasn’t like that—” and the cop elbowed me in the gut.

Then an ambulance pulled up and I saw her, Lola, being led out of her brownstone, leaning on an EMT guy like she could hardly walk, and sobbing, her hair a mess, lipstick smeared across her face, blouse torn, her black-red fingertips fluttering at her neck like it hurt really bad.

We locked eyes for a moment, my mind going, *Lola, Lola, Lola, how could you?*

Then another cop car arrived and the first cops gave them my address and told them to go to my place and I pictured all the portraits I’d made of Lola on the walls and the storage room all clean and neat and smelling of Febreze, and the wind picked up and blew that fishy smell off the river as a cop shoved me into the backseat of the cruiser and slammed the door.