

LOLA

The front door slammed. Her old, gently driven Chevy Impala, roared to life, screeching as it scrubbed out of the driveway. Lola let out her breath with a sob.

She was squashed on top of the refrigerator, between it and the ceiling, her legs hanging down like a child's. She had been there for one hour and twelve minutes. She knew this because the black and white cat clock swung its eyes and tail back and forth, twitching off each second.

Daring herself to look down, she saw the floor littered with food, broken plates and glasses from the dinner. So much for that celebration. Twelve weeks sober and two weeks at a job; he'd never gone that long. Then bam! He went off. Her twenty-two-year-old son, all six feet of him, after punching her in the face, had simply picked her up and put her there.

On the floor, she saw a spot with less glass. Wriggling around she turned and let herself hang down facing the fridge, the FRIGIDAIRE logo grinding into her cheek. She was still a good two feet from the ground. She hung there for a while, trying to get the feeling back in her legs and then let herself fall.

Her feet landed in the empty spot, but she fell backwards, her butt grinding on a shard of glass, her left hand in another. She took off her blouse and used it to plow herself a path and crawled to the sink. She put her bleeding hand under the running water, then puked. She stood there, panting, tears streaming down her face watching the vomit and blood wash down the drain.

She splashed water on her face, dried it with a clean dishcloth, wrapped it around her hand and went to the phone. She dialed 911, panicked at the time she had wasted. She had to get out of the house. "I'll be in the back yard. Please don't use the sirens."

It was a glorious May day, dry and breezy, the scents from the lilac trees wafting through the air. She limped shakily across the grass to a bench. It was one of two that sat at corners of the yard, cozy and inviting places of refuge. The purple blooms on the lilac trees stood out against the blue sky making her weep.

“Oh, Lightening, honey. You’re OK.” The little grey cat came out from somewhere, rubbed up against her legs, mewed and hopped on her lap, causing more tears. She was a funny cat, skittery, but somehow always knew when her owner needed comforting.

She could see the police cars arrive. Two cars? Was that necessary? The sirens were off, but the lights were spinning—the whole neighborhood will know. Again. Any minute Joan would be over, partly out of nosiness, but mostly out of friendship. The three cops came through the gate, one man and two women, hands on their holsters, ready for anything. Lightening shot off her lap. The male cop smiled ruefully at her; he had been here before.

“He’s gone. But I don’t know for how long,” she said. Talking brought on the tears again.

Two went inside. One stayed with her and started taking her statement. It was just another version of the same old story, though the refrigerator was definitely a new twist. When the other two came out, one had a camera and asked if she could take her picture. The politeness of the question made her smile—it was just so social.

They all jumped at the rattling of the gate. It was Joan, bustling her way in, concern and curiosity over her face. “I just got home. What did he do to you this time, honey? Oh, jeez, Lola. He really did it. I hope you toss his ass out this time.”

“He’s my son. How can I do that to him?” Lola answered when the male cop asked if she wanted to press charges.

He sat down beside her, took her hand and looked at her. She started to look away, but he squeezed her hand gently, until she looked him in the eyes, his kindness making her cry again.

“Mrs. Clemente. I’ve been here before. More than once, and this is the worst. It will only go downhill from here. You must press charges and have him removed from your house. This is not something you’re doing *to* him. It’s something you’re doing to *save* yourself. That’s why you called us, because you need help to make this decision.”

“I know, but I’m so afraid.” She shuddered. “I am just so tired of being tired and afraid.”

“The ambulance will be here any minute. No, no argument Mrs. Clemente. You know you need to go to the Emergency Room. I told them to send you to Memorial. You work there, right? That’s a bad slash on your hand, and you’ve got a head wound. We’ll start the paperwork on getting a restraining order. Maybe your friend here can stay with you in the ER. She’ll help you stay brave.”

“Don’t worry about a thing, Sweetie. I’ll go with you. I’ll get Paul to change the locks and watch the house.” Joan said, looking up at the cop, grateful to have been included.

In the ER, Lola kept her eyes closed, drifting off. Joan was mercifully silent. *Whatever Lola wants, Lola gets.* When she was little, her mother sang those lyrics to her, while she held her in her arms and danced her through the house. But she didn’t get what she wanted. Not a son that’s a drunk. Not a life alone after a bad marriage. What did she do to cause this? Why her? She could have had anything, done anything.

“Come on Lola. Just a little,” Joey said. *That was it. The exact moment when my life changed...*

She saw him right away of course, when he walked into the party. He was with a bunch of older guys. The last time she had seen Joey was four years ago with her older brother Danny. Joey had been a hot shot athlete in high school and the Red Sox had signed him for their minor team. He'd played a couple of seasons, then left under a cloud of rumors. Now he worked for his father, who had his own larger and darker clouds over his head.

She'd had a crush on Joey since she was little. He knew, and flirted with her, the way older boys do with their friends' baby sisters. She'd blush and stammer, then go off and play with her Barbies, turning Ken into Joey and posing the two dolls doing long kisses.

The party was in the Shannon's garage. Every milestone in school had been celebrated there—prom parties, homecomings, football parties and now, graduation. She was off to college in the fall with a full scholarship to Boston University in their nursing program.

“Brown Sugar” blasted from the stereo. She and Peter Martin were dancing. They always danced the fast, rocker dances. They were great together, always ending up in the middle of a circle with everyone clapping and yelling. It was a turn on for them both, but that was it. There was nothing between them but the dancing. And Sandy. Peter had been going with Sandy, her best friend since ninth grade. They were getting married in December.

After the dance Joey came up to her. “Wow, Lola. You've sure grown up, even if you are still tiny. Do you always dance like that?” He bent over her and gave her a kiss on the cheek, the scent of English Leather floating from him. “You could work at one of my dad's clubs you look so great.”

“That's probably the worst line I've ever heard in my life,” she said, taking a sip of her soda, trying to cool the flutter in her chest. She could have stood with him forever, but one of his buddies called him over.

“Oh, my God, Sandy. Can you believe how cute he is?” They were in the bathroom. “I can’t believe he came up to me. When he kissed me, I thought I was going to faint.”

“Lola. For God’s sake listen to you. He’s a loser. He works in a garage. His dad’s garage, to be exact. His dad? Big Tony Clemente? Remember? Mafia guy?”

“Oh, Sandy, don’t be such a stick in the mud. I’ve heard all that, everyone has. They’re probably just rumors. What do we know?”

“I know enough to hear alarms going off in my head. You should too. You’re getting out of here. Remember? BU? Nursing? Scholarship? I mean, come on, Lola. You’re the smart one here.”

“Ok. Ok. But you’ve gotta admit he’s cute. Did you see those biceps and that chest? And what about those jeans?”

Sandy just looked at her. “So, he’s cute. So what. He’s a bum.”

“Easy for you to say. You’ve got perfect Peter. But don’t worry. I’ve just always thought he was cute. That’s all. He’ll probably never talk to me again.”

The rest of the night was spent in a blur. She found herself talking, laughing, dancing for him, sneaking glances at him. He stayed with his friends, but she’d catch him looking at her. He didn’t try and hide it, in fact, he smiled at her. She’d had boyfriends, just boys they seemed now. But Joey was so sure of himself. And when he smiled, the flutter started again, sometimes in her chest, sometimes in her stomach, sometimes lower.

She was pulling a soda out of the cooler, when he came up behind her. A slow song had come on and he slipped his arm around her waist. “Want to dance?”

He led her lazily onto the dance floor and wrapped his arms around her, neither of them saying a word. She was acutely aware of the different lengths of their bodies, he so tall, she so

short, but on her tiptoes they meshed. Her face was against his chest, his heart beats distinct in her ear, his breath moving her hair. He held her hand between them, over his chest, touching the side of her face, his other arm holding her close. Oh, God so close. They moved, barely.

When the song ended, he led her outside. She felt weightless with no free will, as if she had left the earth into another orbit.

“Come on, Lola. Just a little.” He was pouring rum into her soda. “You just graduated. Have a drink and celebrate.”

“I don’t drink,” she said. But she took it anyway, still feeling weightless.

The CAT scan made whirring noises over her head. She’d stayed weightless for twenty-five years. She wondered if these machines picked up her stray thoughts.

“Come on Lola. Just...”

Those words rang chant-like through the pages of her life. She took the drink, and many more over the years. She went to nursing school at the Community College—*Come on Lola, I can’t live with you that far away.* She had sex before she got on the pill—*Come on Lola. Please? I’ve never gotten anyone pregnant before.* She got pregnant—*Jeez, Lola. You should have done something.* She married him, against her family’s wishes—*Come on, Lola. What the hell do they know? Now we’ll be together all the time.* She lost the baby, and three more—*Lola. There’s something wrong with you.*

She quit her job to stay home—*No other wife works in my family and look how they pop out babies.* He hit her—*Come on, Lola. You know I love you. I can’t live without you. It’s just that you piss me off sometimes. I’ll never do it again.* She saw her family and friends,

sporadically and without him— *What do want me to do? They don't like me. I'm not gonna sit around their stinking house and listen to them insult me.* She stopped seeing Sandy— *She's too stuck up, her and that WASP husband and their uptown house. Besides, she hates me.*

She got pregnant again, had an easy pregnancy and delivered a perfect baby boy— *Didn't I tell you if you stayed home, you could carry a baby and it would live?* She wanted to name him Daniel after her brother— *Come on, Lola. That's a wuss name. He doesn't even see me any more. Just go with me on this one. We'll call him Anthony. Little Tony. We Italians always name our boys after their grandfathers.*

When Little Tony was six, and in front of him, Joey hit her so hard she had to go to the hospital. This time even the cop told Joey he'd have to book him next time— *Come on Lola. Just what the Hell am I supposed to do when I see you, the mother of my son, at his birthday party for Christ's sake, falling down drunk, draped all over my best friend. In front of my whole family. Just what the hell do you think I should do? You're nothing but a stinkin' whore.*

She never drank again. She took Little Tony and went to her parents, who had the grace to not say I told you so. Two weeks later, Big Tony, with Joey standing beside him, smirking, came to the house and gave her an ultimatum.

“You can leave Joey. I understand if you can't live with him anymore. He's a jerk, but he's my son and my blood. He gets that from his mother's side; they're Sicilian. What can I say? I told him to never lay a hand on you again, or I'll personally beat the shit out of him myself.

“But you can't divorce him. We're a good Catholic family. You can't move away from town and take Little Tony with you. He'll spend weekends and every holiday with us, because we're the family who's been there for him.” This was said in a perfectly normal voice, while thinly smiling to her parents behind her.

“You can’t work. You can’t date. It wouldn’t look good, the wife of my son, even if he is useless. You will stay home and take care of your son, just like all the wives in my family do. You can continue living in the duplex, rent free. I’ll get someone to clean it up. I know you didn’t leave it the mess it is now.”

She took the offer, right then and there in her parents’ living room, with her father puffed up and ready to fight and her mother silently weeping beside him. It was the only way. She kissed Big Tony on both cheeks and walked him out, closing the door behind her. She told Joey to get in the car. When he moved aggressively towards her, Big Tony glared at him. Joey slunk back to the black Lincoln Town Car, leaning against it with his arms crossed, glowering at her.

“I’ll do everything you said, Big Tony, and don’t think I don’t appreciate what you’re doing. But I will work. Tony will be starting first grade. If I don’t work, I’ll go crazy. I can’t be beholden to either you or my parents. And,” she said moving closer, “If I want to date, I’ll be discrete.” Not like your pig of a son, she kept herself from saying.

Big Tony stared coldly at her, then nodded yes.

“Lola. We’re going to keep you here overnight. You have an orbital fracture. The CT is negative and everything else checks out all right. But, as you know, with any kind of a head injury we need to observe you for at least twenty-four hours.” The doctor, who knew her (everyone knew her) smiled kindly. “Considering what you went through, it’s best anyway. Maybe three days? You’ll be safe and get the rest you need.”

His sympathy brought tears to her eyes, again. He was only a little older than Little Tony. Her Tony, her boy, her baby...

Their life wasn't bad. One of Joey's aunts took care of Tony (she dropped the "Little" the afternoon Big Tony had given his ultimatum) in the afternoons until she got home from work. The duplex was large and well maintained with a nice yard she shared with Joan and Paul. Even though Paul was Joey's cousin, he had nothing to do with the family's dealings.

She saw her friends and family again, good times without the tension of Joey beside her. She adapted to the early Christmases that she made special for Tony and herself. Sandy and Peter tried fixing her up with men they knew, but she declined. She found dating depressingly awkward. She went out with her friends from work, some from high school. What she would have paid in rent, she invested.

Tony appeared fine with the arrangements, though after a weekend, she always had to re-orient him to her ways, Joey's bullying and arrogance having rubbed off on him. Like Joey, Tony was a mediocre student who enjoyed the social life and the sports, lettering in them all.

Those events were the only times his two families were together, at opposite ends of the bleachers. Joey came, sometimes. He was losing his looks and his hair, his once taut abs and pecs were soft, his stomach a small roll over his belt. Rumors persisted about drugs. Sometimes he'd show up with a woman. Depending on how slutty she was, Big Tony might motion for them to leave.

Big Tony was an owner of the Westboro Speedway, one of Joey's favorite hangouts. Lola's disapproval of the place was known and ignored. Growing up, Tony usually spent his weekends there, becoming an adept mechanic and a decent driver. Drag racing was his favorite, on the track and off, his many tickets fixed by a cop his grandfather had helped one time. It was a given he would work there when he graduated from high school. The speedway was known for

betting, drugs and other illicit activities. Tony was unable to ignore the temptations and had been in rehab twice by the time he was twenty-two.

In the hospital, a social worker, Nancy, had been assigned to her. They had worked together in the past, and Lola respected her judgement. After the usual intake work-up, Nancy got up to leave, then sat back down again.

“You know, Lola. What’s happened to you is not uncommon. And I know it’s a singularly personal event for you. As it is for each one of us who have family that abuse alcohol and us. Sometimes we find each other through serendipity, like this. More often by joining a group.”

“Please, Nancy. I like you; I respect you and I had no idea you went through what I’m going through, but I don’t like those groups. I tried one and it was awful. They whined and cried so much I never went back. It was embarrassing for me to see people act like that. So needy. I’m not like that. I do just fine by myself,” said Lola, pulling her blankets up to her chin. “Please, I just want to go to sleep.”

“It’s okay, Lola. I’m not going to force you into anything. I just wanted you to know I understand how you feel. I’ll be in to see you tomorrow,” Nancy said, gently touching her shoulder. “Sleep now. You deserve it. I’m going to tell them to put up a no visitors sign. I know your co-workers will understand. You need to rest.”

The next three days she did just that, waking only for meals and care from her doctor and her nurses. Nancy sat with her in the mornings or the evenings, usually bringing a coffee and a donut from the Dunkin’ Donuts downstairs. It was a companionable time during which they

began to open up about their lives. Except for the differences, their histories were nearly identical.

When she was discharged, she felt rested and cleansed, a feeling of hope rising ever so slowly. She took a month off from work. Her manager suggested it. “Jesus, Lola. What else are you going to use all that time for?”

Joan helped Lola clean out Tony’s room. Most was tossed, some given to Goodwill, the rest put in boxes. Paul took them to Joey’s house, glad it was only him, when Joey’s current trash girlfriend cursed at him.

Lola brought her car, dented and lurching after its screeching exit from her house to Big Tony. “I don’t care what you do with it. Use it for the Demo Derby. Just give me the money it was worth when Tony stole it from me.” She took the nearly new, sturdy, boxy Volvo he offered her instead.

Lola decided to try going to Nancy’s Al-Anon group. It was difficult to be around such raw emotion, especially as it so mirrored hers, but she kept going to meetings. She knew if she was to ever move on, she had to learn about herself. Nancy suggested she go to different groups; get a different perspective she said. Lola sat in the back of the rooms and listened, wondering how could there be so many groups in this one city? How many others are out there in the world?

Every group was different, each with their own personalities, some good, some bad, but all offered at least one nugget of advice that stayed with her. One group and its leader resonated with her, and Lola asked the woman to be her sponsor.

Enough time had passed that when she went back to work, it was almost just another day. She was welcomed back, and the normal routine quickly took over. A few people though, seemed more attuned to her. They gave her a hug, or a touch on the arm, a look that conveyed a

special understanding. Have these people gone through the same thing? Had she joined a secret club?

A friend from her group, a realtor, told her about a house she might be interested in at the other end of town. “It’s perfect for you and the couple is practically giving it away.” The money she had invested had turned her into a woman of some means and she was able to buy it. Joan and Paul were in tears when she left her duplex for the last time, the Volvo filled to overflowing.

“It’s all right,” she croaked past her own tears. “It’s not another country. It’s only five miles. You’ll be my first guests for dinner.”

Her first dinner party—how could it be possible she’d never had one before? – filled her with pride. From buying the flowers, to buying the food, to setting the table, to cooking. She danced around the house, with the stereo blaring the Stones, Boz Scaggs, Al Jarreau... She delighted in each little thing she did that day in preparation.

She hired a divorce attorney, another recommendation from a group member. All she wanted was the divorce and her maiden name back. The attorney, recognizing her last name, sensed a big pay day. With a hint dropped to Big Tony about the possible domestic violence lawsuit being considered, the lawyer was able to negotiate a fine settlement for Lola and a fine fee for himself, all funded by a galled Big Tony. Lola momentarily set aside her lofty altruism.

Well, why the hell not?

When she had left the hospital, her Tony had called apologizing profusely, swearing he would never do it again. She answered, but they ended up arguing over the same old ground. After that, she let his calls to voicemail which she erased, and deleted his texts.

A year after he had stuffed her onto the refrigerator, she felt ready to meet with him, at a restaurant in public. She discussed her plans with her sponsor and Nancy, who both insisted they

be there. Not at the same table but at another nearby, just in case. They met at Denny's, Tony's favorite restaurant when he was a kid.

Lola nearly wept when she saw him. He was such a handsome boy; man, she reminded herself. His childhood, the good parts, passed before her. She knew him so well, knew his moods, his likes and dislikes, his fears. She could tell he was nervous, but he covered it up with bravado. It was how he went through life. That was his only strength—fake bravado.

He acted as if nothing had ever happened. They hugged, a good tight hug, and chatted about family and jobs over lunch. Eventually the subject moved to the night they'd last seen each other.

Tony apologized, but soon slipped into his defensive persona, blaming it on a bad day at work, on stress, on her...

"Tony," interrupted Lola. "You apologized. That's all that's necessary. There's nothing else you need to do. I don't expect anything from you, nor from anyone else."

"Yeah, sure," he said. He was ratcheting up, his voice getting louder, his face flushed. "You say that, but you'll start nagging me..."

"Tony. Stop. I am not getting drawn into an argument with you. Those days are over." She called over the waitress for the bill.

"Listen carefully to me," she said leaning close. "I love you. I won't tolerate your insults or accusations. I'm taking care of myself, now. I go to meetings, and I have a sponsor, just like you did when you came out of re-hab. I dearly hope one day you'll decide you've had enough of the addict life and go back. But it's your choice. I only ask that we be kind to each other."

She left money on the table, stood up and kissed him goodbye. He followed her outside. "Will I still see you, Ma?" he asked. He looked so forlorn... It could be so easy to slip back.

“Tony, I told you. Of course, we can see each other, but only if you’re sober and if you’re kind. If you can’t be, it’s ok. Call me when you are. I will always love you and you will always be my son, and I treasure our good times.”

End