

Lola by Night

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*paperplates
books*

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My father kept in the lower drawer of his large desk an
old and beautiful map of our city.

— Bruno Schulz

BARCELONA

WHEN SHE WAS A GIRL, Lola didn't believe in black magic. She didn't believe in the evil eye or the power of amulets. Her mother, however, in every other way a typical citified Barcelona woman, wore a gold ring in the form of a curled snake with a tiny ruby at the head for an eye, which she rubbed when she felt danger lurking. This was supposed to ward off bad weather, or a headache, or alter some unavoidable and grim event. Had she rubbed it the day her husband died?

Had she felt that coming? Lola asked. Instead of answering this question, her mother took the ring off her finger, put it in the palm of her right hand, and stroked it. Lola's mother was scared of dark powers she believed lurked around her – she imagined devils peering from the balustrades of Barcelona balconies – but she would not talk about these things. Talking about them was another way of drawing them out. Her mother's behaviour always struck

Lola, even when she was young, as a childish game. Things that couldn't be seen would be seen if you looked, so you didn't look. An air-tight alibi for not seeking but hiding. And what, Lola wondered, was there to hide from?

But lately she wasn't so sure she could count black magic completely out of the picture. Recent events had led her to believe that she had an unusual power of her own. She had faith in it now, though she wasn't sure if it qualified as white magic or black. It was this: if she wrote something down, it happened. Not just some of the time but every time. She saw it now, with hindsight, just past her twenty-seventh birthday. A chain of events reaching back to her childhood had, all of a sudden, slipped into focus. In the first case, when she was six, shy, spending her time watching the adult world pass below her window in one of Barcelona's fantastical downtown apartment blocks, she wrote in her diary that a certain boy would kiss her. Which he did the following day, before running off, laughing. Kissers who laughed, she thought. You need many many of these. And then when she was thirteen, she wrote a story on a sheet of drafting paper she'd taken from her father's studio. The story was framed in sixteen squares, which she folded and cut to make a hand-sized book. She kept the book rolled up in the left shoe of her favourite pair, only pulling it out when she wore the shoes; then the book travelled in the deep pocket of her dress. It told the story of a girl who was given away to nuns, and lived with them in a stone castle while the girl's parents stayed in their apartment full of tapestries and wood, tile, copper, and cats. One day a servant came for the girl, arriving at the nunnery's stone gates with a cat in her arms. She handed the animal to the girl as they walked toward a waiting car that took her back to her parents' rooms full of carpets and wood.

The day Lola completed the story, carefully folding its puzzle of pages, her father came into her room to tell her that he had convinced her mother not to send her to the Catholic school for girls at Majorca. She remembered how he looked as he stood there, worn out from the arguing this change of plans had required, his hair and his eyes so dark in the shadows of her room that they disappeared, his face an olive mask above a grey jacket. There were many many more events like this in her life that had to do with weather, with her desire to become someone's friend, with her wishes for her parents' happiness.

The most bizarre of these took place shortly before Lola began to plan her departure from Spain. She had taken up writing – under a pseudonym – a certain kind of melodramatic romance, soft-core porn, really, for the educated reader. These books were published in a series by one of Spain's richest publishers, who paid a substantial amount for each manuscript. She'd written the first one as a lark, and since then there had been four more. For the first time, Lola had a substantial income of her own that wasn't a monthly cheque from her father, or a gift from a rich admirer who was trying to bribe her into sleeping with him. She would hole herself up in her apartment for two or three weeks and do nothing but write. She stopped answering the phone and told no one what she was doing. When a manuscript was finished, written in longhand and then typed out on a newish electric typewriter that had been abandoned by one of her father's secretaries, she would send it by regular post to the offices of Editions Verne, care of Octavio Il Gaudi, general editor, with best wishes from Frida Bellavista, which was her pen name. Her wicked side. Or so she came to think of Frida when she realized the effect her books were having all over the country. Since Lola didn't pay much attention to the way her books were received – she never read reviews or

watched the chaotic television shows that offered recaps of the plots of racy bestsellers – it was some time before she recognized that her contributions to the series of romances had attracted a kind of cult following, setting them apart from the hundreds of titles written by other hacks. Frida Bellavista's books were the most eagerly awaited. Their plots were discussed over restaurant meals and their characters had become favourite stereotypes that Spaniards, especially in her home town, referred to when they discussed family life. The name of a cuckold and a notorious sexpot in two of Frida's books had entered the language the way Hamlet, standing for indecision, has in English. Parents were naming their children after characters in her books, and once in a while the newspapers reported a crime of passion that had been enacted – to the last detail – in imitation of some overwrought scene Lola had concocted while sitting on the toilet or in fits of writing as she prepared dinner.

When she realized what her writing was doing, Lola pledged to stop. She cancelled her postal box, the answering service, the separate bank account, all of which had helped her maintain the fiction of Frida Bellavista. Her publisher issued pleas in the newspapers and on tv. There was even a carnival of a demonstration downtown, whose organizers called for Frida to return to work, even though Lola knew – for she'd walked about in the crowd – that it was more an excuse for a summer street party than anything. After listening to the crowds chant her pen name, she returned to her apartment, where she wrote on the note pad that sat by her phone: *Frida Bellavista is dead, long live Frida Bellavista!* But she crossed the words out, crumpled the notepaper, then flushed it down the toilet, afraid of the result that might follow this errant thought.

In the weeks after she swore herself to silence, she recognized,

to her surprise, that without the writing, her life was quite empty. It was as if she'd forced all her interests and passions – no matter how caricatured – into Frida's books, and so, into Frida's imaginary presence in Barcelona. In the meantime, Lola had come to be a kind of invisible person, merely the shadow of her gaudy alter ego. She saw her parents. She dated men with whom she had no interest in building a future. And now that she walked, anonymous, on Barcelona's lovely boulevards, with no story to pen, she felt oddly untethered; as though a stiff wind might pick her up and carry her away, higher and higher like a lost kite, to disappear into the sky.

Then Octavio Il Gaudi did something absolutely out of character. He showed up on the evening cultural news, calling her name. He looked perfect, just as he did in newspaper photos she'd seen of him in his office, by a tall window, in the light he seemed to think made him look younger. Octavio Il Gaudi was one of those impeccably dressed men who, in the old days, might have been called a ladies' man. Lola didn't exactly think of him as a predator. In her mind there was something inhuman about him – his sleekness, his way of ducking out of a telephone conversation when some new marketing idea crossed his mind. But when she stood close to the TV screen, she saw the make-up: he was dolled up like a starlet to address his plea to Frida Bellavista. Lola, sitting on the wood floor, took it all in.

He held up an envelope, which he shook lightly as if it were a little flag. Lola was able to make out its outline in detail as the camera focused in – the tear along one end, a big colourful stamp on the upper corner.

“I have received, Mira,” Il Gaudi said to the newscaster, “by mail, from Canada” – he waved the envelope about – “and this may answer the question we've all wanted answered. Where has Frida Bellavista gone? And why does she insist on her silence?”

Lola felt the tiniest bit flattered by this plea. There were to have been more books. At the prospect of more, however, she became sad. Maybe the pseudonym had been the mistake – as if too much of herself had disappeared into this fictitious personality, and now too little remained to keep her real life going. If she could simply come out as this fake woman ... but that would mean more masquerade, and all of it in real life, instead of a secret life hidden behind a post box address. She knew the prospect of more books had been ruined finally for her by what Octavio Il Gaudi called “The Deal Magnifico”: her next book was to appear not in print but in serial chapters on the Web. Readers would pay five dollars a chapter – five times, Il Gaudi exulted, what Stephen King had gotten for his ridiculous story of a plant that turns into a monster – with what the publisher called a finish fee, still to be determined, to receive the final chapters. Ultimately, the whole thing would be sold as an e-book, but this was something Lola didn’t understand at all. For Il Gaudi, the earnings would be phenomenal, and Lola’s project would usher in a new chapter in publishing history, what Il Gaudi called the “nothing for something” era. “We give them nothing,” he had written to Lola, “bits and bytes over their phone lines, magically coded to prevent downloading, and they give us more money than they ever considered paying for 250 pages of pulp fiction.”

Well. Lola had signed on. But her signature at the tail end of the twenty-five pages of unreadable legal fine print had proved to be another of her magical pennings, a spell cast with an irreversible outcome. She couldn’t help feeling that she’d disappeared along with the prospect of print and paper. One of the few pleasures she had from her books was seeing them in public: tired transit riders resting them in their lap; dog-eared on reserve at the library; or set aside on a café table, with

a finished drink and a half-empty box of Gauloises. The book in the world reminded her of the relay baton, hanging between the hand that passed and the hand that received it.

She'd taken her published works down from the shelves above the television and sat with them by the open window. What was inside – the story, the tripping rhythm of the words – was plainly crap. But the paper, with its ripe scent, and the covers, with their insane mix of colour and block letters, when piled atop one another, reminded her of a totem. A family doorpost or an idol to pray to. Once the book itself was gone, all that remained was the trick of having turned her talent for baroque romance into a career. And a national obsession.

Absolute gloom fell when she imagined her readers, inert before their computer screens, reading the latest Frida Bellavista as a web of light on glass. So she'd allowed Frida to vanish for real. And so, the campaign to recover her. And so, she walked the Barcelona streets, ghostly and empty of her usual imaginings. The new world of bits and bytes, she believed, had conjured her end, replacing her with line after line of interconnected lines of data, sweeping out across the Spanish landscape like the fall wind.

The tv station switched to a commercial. Mad-seeming mice teetered on the lip of an open washing machine and chattered about its contents. Then it was back to Il Gaudi and his interviewer. The letter inside the envelope, he claimed, made a grave revelation about Frida's past. The implication, it seemed to Lola, was that the publishers would out her, reveal her true identity, if she didn't reappear as the pseudonymous Frida to continue making them a fortune. Of course Il Gaudi didn't say this, but what else could be his motive for coming out of his splendid moneyed seclusion?

“A fascinating story about her past,” he was saying over the interviewer’s shoulder to the entire country.

At this point Lola stopped listening. It was clear what was expected of her. Whatever he had in his envelope was merely bait.

In the same week that Octavio II Gaudi appeared on national television calling for Frida Bellavista’s return to her typewriter, Lola’s father was killed. Down the shaft of an unfinished elevator he went, in a building he was designing on the outskirts of the city. Unbelievable. A man of such impeccable care and businesslike sensibility. A man who signalled a turn when driving at exactly the same distance from each corner he approached. A man whose money was always neatly organized by denomination and folded in his right-hand pocket so he could take it out with a gunslinger’s grace. A man who could remember how many rooms, bathrooms, front windows, there were in a building he’d seen ten years before, and then redesign the building from memory, in a way that was always structurally sound and elegant. This was a man who forgot he’d taken the stairs to the fifth floor to check on a craftsman’s work and then stepped absentmindedly through the opening in the elevator shaft? Impossible.

Lola said it over and over to herself at the funeral and then at her mother’s side as they welcomed the family’s friends afterward. *Impossible. Impossible. Impossible.* It couldn’t be. But then everyone says something like this when their father dies, don’t they? It couldn’t be. He couldn’t be dead. He was my father.

And after the visitors and the worst of her mother’s shock was over, Lola woke in the middle of the night, asking herself, *Did I ever write this? Did I write him into an ending this absurd?* She

sat up for two whole days and nights reading her diaries – from age six on, her little home-made books, cards she'd written but not sent, scribblings in the margins of returned school examination booklets.

Nothing. But still, she felt she must have done something to bring it on. She who'd been celebrated – her hidden half, anyway – for writing stupid names and ridiculous sex murders into people's lives. When her father was alive, he had been the most important person in her life. Now that he was dead, he was always with her. The two of them had been happiest when her mother was away, or busy enough that they could go out alone, to see a movie or sit in a café, where Lola fantasized that passersby mistook them for a pair of mismatched lovers – he the keeper, she the kept. And in fact, there was something to that. Even in the wasted days after her pledge to kill off Frida, her father's company was the only kind that made her forget her newly recognized redundancy.

Could she have forgotten about some teenage curse? Some rebellion scribbled to a friend in a letter.

But these thoughts went nowhere.

One day, a few weeks after her father's funeral – it was near the end of summer and hot, the city yearning for the relief of an autumn breeze – she went to her parents' apartment at an hour when she knew her mother would be out. In the kitchen, on the back of the pantry door, she found a set of keys she recognized as her father's. She went with them to his office, which her mother had not yet had the courage to clean out, and began searching. She went through the piles of building plans, the accountants' reports and tax returns. She looked at magazines and postcards and newspaper photos he kept for inspiration on future projects. He had stapled hundreds of visa slips to the sheets of a fat scrap book. In his desk she found

beautiful pens, one of which she slipped into her bag, and she chose from among the array of coloured ink cartridges a box of brilliant blue. She found photographs of herself, of her mother, of buildings she recognized and many she didn't. His drawers were a kind of atlas of architecture: Prague, Aden, St. Petersburg, Anchorage.

In the proverbial way of these things, the most telling object sat in the most obvious place, where she did not look until she had searched all the hidden places.

There were two desks in the room. One that looked like the workplace of the man who owned the office, by its placement, its size, the presence on it of a phone, a stack of bills, a lamp. But the second smaller desk by the window was the one piled with work in progress, notepaper reminders of things to do, and an oddly neat stack of objects that Lola felt, quite uncanonically, had been left for her to find.

There was a book. On top of it was a stack of yellowing envelopes bound with an elastic band, and upon them a single crisp white envelope.

First the envelope. She took a folded sheet from inside it, which bore a Canadian stamp and a return address on Georgia Street in Vancouver, British Columbia. These names made Lola think of magic places, non-places, imagined worlds between the covers of Jules Verne's fantasies. The letter was addressed to her father, though it referred to him by a short version of his real name, Bernard, that she'd never known him to use. Its tone was upbeat:

Dear Bernie,

I write with fine memories of the old days, and a hope you're the kind of guy who doesn't bear a grudge. I know things have gone well for you, as I found you via your firm's website.

You wouldn't happen to know the whereabouts of Herman Rossman? I've got a proposition for him I hope he won't refuse.

Well. Let me hear from you some time soon.

Yours,

John Miller

An address followed, and then a signature, which resembled the mark made when a bug is squashed against a wall.

The book beneath the bundle of yellowing letters looked like an old hymnal, or a well-thumbed scrapbook. Its cover was made of the flat black leatherette of Gideon bibles. Bits of paste-ins and photos, movie tickets, and newsprint cut-outs peeked from between the pages. It was not clear to Lola what this had to do with the letter, until she'd flipped through the beginning of the diary and found that it belonged to someone named Herman Rossman.

Lola sat back in her father's chair and watched the afternoon light bounce off the building across the road and into the office, suggesting the presence of some suntanned ghost her mother might fear. She went to the window and looked down at the street, a butterscotch ribbon curling toward the harbour. Then she put things back in order, shutting the drawers she'd pulled open and straightening the plans she'd flipped through. She took the letter from Vancouver as well as the diary and the bundle of letters and dropped them into her bag beside her father's pen and ink.

One day her mother was talking about places she'd like to visit – Buenos Aires. Venice. Tijuana. Then she added Vancouver as an afterthought.

Lola looked up from the section of the paper she'd been reading.

“What?”

Her mother dropped her own newspaper low enough for Lola to see her eyes.

“Why Vancouver? What’s there?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ve always been curious. You know your father lived there for a year. A few years after the war.”

“No. I knew he’d gone there because of work. Once, when I was little.”

Lola’s mother raised the paper again and spoke from behind its cover. “You could have been a Canadian girl,” she laughed. “Imagine that.”

Soon after this, Lola began studying guide books. Reading the odd Canadian newspaper in the public library. She had time on her hands, her bank account full of the dirty money Frida Bellavista had earned. Upwards of half a million American dollars – the currency of choice at Editions Verne, for accounting reasons.

Well, she could go. Why not? Look for this Miller. Write him into a mystery as she’d begun to imagine him: a sort of spider; a person with pretensions of power, or maybe possessing the real thing.

Lola sat in a café with her guide books spread out on the table before her. A bird sat on the chair opposite, chirping for a crumb of her croissant. In her mind’s eye she saw the sparkle of the place. Vancouver’s newness. The buildings of green glass. Mountains covered with houses and a bay full of boats. Errol Flynn, of all people, had died in a hotel overlooking the bay. There you had it. A place she’d get to know. She carried the things she’d taken from her father’s office. She doodled with the pen. She had yet to look carefully at the diary. Something about it turned her stomach. Since it belonged to someone she didn’t know, she felt embarrassed opening it.

But she had not been able to resist the letters bound with an ancient elastic band.

Her father had received most of them from Manhattan, though they all included stray references to Vancouver. The writer was Herman Rossman; he and her father, it seemed, had known each other in Canada. There was the odd reminiscence in the letters of a dinner one had bought the other, or some tavern they'd gone to. Rossman had sought out her father after many years, rather than the other way round. But without her father's replies Rossman's letters were difficult to decipher. They were all about events that seemed to be unnameable, better left to the past. Though he complained about the chaos and crime in New York City, Herman Rossman said he could never live in Canada again.

Lola didn't like the idea of subletting her apartment. The thought of hands being slipped between the pages of her books, fingers opening and closing her cupboards, someone's hips resting on the edge of her bed, turned her stomach. The money she would lose on rent was of no concern to her. It was a fair price for peace of mind. Her mother would look in, feed the cat, even water the plants. Lola would be able to sit – wherever she went – and imagine the cat on the sill looking at the business down on the street, stretching to scrape its paw along the glass when a bird went by, just as Lola did now – not to trail a bird, but to run her finger along the lines of rain that streaked the outside of the airplane's window. Lines of rain running across one another like streets on a city map.