

LOLA, UNMASKED
by Macha Lopez

In a lifeless city, two women's fates collide, kindling a connection beyond solitude and isolation.

Short story written for the 2023 NYC Midnight Flash Fiction Challenge #2 (less than 1000 words)
Prompts: Thriller / a moving truck / cash register

Behind the small window, the young drive-in employee stares at me. She must be new. She doesn't bother trying to hide her expression - a mix of revulsion and bewilderment. Even her surgical mask can't conceal it. I know what she's thinking. "*He was here just yesterday,*" she's telling herself, "*picking up the same cigarettes and that same box of condoms*".

I know baby, I know.

She's thinking "he" because, let's face it, even if I did pass as a woman, that kid would never look further than my hoarse voice and the bump on my throat. The masks aren't helping, of course... I smile at her, although she can't see it. Her wide, bruise-blue eyes avoid mine.

I'm wearing lipstick, too - something else she can't see.

"Lola, dear," I ask softly, reading the name on her tag while handing her some cash, "can I tell you a secret?"

Hidden behind the cash register, her eyelashes flutter nervously. I lower my mask, take one Winston out of the pack, tuck it between my lips. Now that she sees my face, the girl looks uneasy. She's fiddling with my receipt.

"There's your change, Sir," she whispers.

There. That dreaded, ugly word, grating against my bones, making dust out of me. Been a while since I last heard it. One thing I can thank the lockdown for.

"Listen," I try to untangle my mask's ear loop, stuck in my earring.

"We're both out here working in the nude, literally and figuratively, while the rest of them get take-out meals and sanitized groceries delivered to their doors."

I make a mental note not to wear these with a mask ever again, and throw the damn thing on the dashboard, along with my receipt and the box of condoms.

"But what *they* don't know," I tell her, locking eyes and refusing to let go, "is that these days, *we* are making the world go round. You. And me."

"Okay." the teenager answers.

"Keep the change, honey," I tell her as I drive away.

I drive my van under the night sky. Along the city's lifeless roads, traffic lights are eerie memories of a recent past, echoes from a time when cars and people had places to go. At a crossroads, I drive past a police car. I know I won't get arrested for breaking curfew. Half of these guys are regulars. Hell, one of them even broke his quarantine order to be with me yesterday. That same one called me "Brainy Tranny" once. Since then, I've been gagging him so I don't hear him talk. He loves that. I do too, just not for the same reasons.

I park in my usual spot and light up a second smoke. My phone is silent, but I'm not worried. In this new business model, it pays to be flexible. Clients can't come to me, so I come to them. I've Uberized. Sure enough, halfway through my cigarette, I get my first text of the evening. "*Hi Andi, wanna come by?*". I take a deep breath and touch up my lipstick in the rearview mirror. I spot the missing earring. Right. I recover it from the dashboard.

That's when I find the note.

Just one word, scribbled hastily on the back of my receipt:

"HELP"

I picture Lola's eyes, shifty, panicked. Her troubled expression, buried deep behind her mask. My blood runs cold. I turn the key and take off at full speed, heart pounding in my chest.

What did I miss?

What did I miss?

I replay the scene in my head.

Behind the window, somewhere past the cash register, had something, *someone*, been threatening that kid? And me, condescendingly lecturing her while she was in danger...

I have never hated myself more than now. Please let me make it in time.

On the way to the store, I run every red light. They are all red.

"Why are they all red?!" I cry out, for myself and the moon, as I slam my foot down the gas pedal.

When I reach the crossroads, the police car from before is gone. Obviously.

"I fucking hate cops."

And I hate that, on this dark night, there is only me, rushing to her rescue.

And I hate everyone, the whole world, sheltering in place, comfortably, behind closed doors.

And I hate how I have never felt more naked than in this instant.

I have no action plan.

Only me.

My home, body and mind, flying into space through the desolate city at 80 miles per hour.

At the store, I rush out, leaving the engine running. I pause. Realize I didn't even grab the switchblade from my purse. I consider turning back. I don't. Only me.

The drive-in window is empty. Without thinking, I jump through it and land on my elbows.

Under the desk, I see Lola - lying on the tile.

Her lips, almost blue, try to form words. A sad smile. She's even younger than I thought.

Not far from her lies a pill bottle, with scattered white tabs all over the ground.

"No, no, no, no..."

How many pills are missing? *Too many.*

They're here, I see them - floating behind Lola's blue gaze and lips.

I lift her off the ground and kick the store's door open. Gently, I sit her in the passenger's seat, buckle her in.

"Stay with me, Lola."

"Yes..." she mumbles.

"You're doing great, keep talking to me" I encourage her as I slide behind the wheel and floor it, heading for the nearest hospital.

"Okay..."

Her breath smells like Red 40. Skittles, stolen from the store's candy stall, I'll bet.

"Nice..." she starts.

"Nice what, Lola?" I cry.

"... earrings."

I shake my head, and my cheap earrings make a jangling sound. I find it soothing.
We rush into the night, towards uncertainty. I thank the stars for these deserted lanes.

Under my seat, my phone keeps ringing. This keeps Lola awake. I hope it rings long enough.