

**Lola**

**I was a younger man then, but still not young. Let's just say middle-aged. It was a hot summer weekend on a lake in southeast Wisconsin. I was there with a bunch of friends and some of their wives as well as my very much *ex*-wife Laura. When we had split, most of our friends had remained *both* of our friends, so we sometimes ended up at the same social events. We still had some ragged feelings for each other so it was a bit touchy, but never strayed into anything nasty and I wanted to keep it that way.**

**This gathering on the lake was trying to evolve into "an annual thing". A couple of my buddies were really trying to push it in that direction. I had yielded to strong peer pressure and showed up even though I was not totally in the mood for drunken revelry with my ex, and mother of our son Austin. He was spending the night with her folks. But show up I did and after a half dozen Coronas I was getting in the mood. So much so that I assented to a few guys and their gals and Laura taking my twelve-foot motorized raft out on the lake even though they were on their ass drunk.**

**The sun was setting and the lake was still crowded in the water and around the sandy edges. I was feeling alright just**

sitting in my camp chair on the beach, people watching. I took a slow individual inventory of my crew that were still there on the sand. Since I didn't see a lot of them, except for occasional events like this, I wondered how they were doing. As I looked at each of the men, I thought about things we had done together and whether I would have been drawn to hang out with them if not for us both being part of this group. Wondered how their work was going, how their relationship was going, if they were even in a relationship. I also conducted a similar survey of the women. With them I added the question about if they and I would have, could have, ever "hooked up". That part was getting me a little turned on.

About that time, I noticed a person that I had never laid eyes on before. She stood out in the weekend crowd as she was one of the few persons of color (African-American) in the overwhelmingly white bread demographic. She was also very young looking, very thin, and very gorgeous. She was moving hesitantly, looked lost, and had a tiny toddler in tow. I instinctively stood up and slowly made my way towards her trajectory. When I got about eight feet away and right in front of her, I said "Is that your little boy?" She said that he was and that she was trying to find something for him to eat and did I know of any food stands nearby. I replied "Does he like hamburgers and hot dogs". She stated "Aaron *loves* hot dogs". I invited her to step over to where my group had a

**couple of picnic tables grouped around a couple of charcoal grills with freshly cooked burgers and dogs. I asked her if I could make one for him and she gave me a shy smile saying “That would be great”.**

**We had tiki torches going around our set-up so I could see her better by the flickering light. As I made Aaron his dog (ketchup only), I took quick, close, surreptitious looks at her face. She was still tremendously beautiful but up close I could see, in her eyes, that she had had a rough life in her few years. She also looked very wan and peaked. I offered to make her something too and she opted for a hamburger with mustard, tomato, and greens. I also invited her and Aaron to sit at the table and got them some drinks and chips. She told me her name was Lola and I said that I was Gene. We were starting to draw some stares from my group. The men in obvious prurient curiosity and the women in thinly veiled displeasure. I was glad that my ex was out on the raft.**

**I don't know too much about drug abuse beyond my own over-indulgence with pot and alcohol but she looked like she might have been suffering from the ill effects of harder substances. Not high at the moment, but maybe suffering from mild withdrawal symptoms. She was very quiet and soft spoken but Aaron was an absolute sphinx. Partly because he had a hot dog lodged in his face most of the time, but even**

after he was full, he said not a word. Just looked longingly and lovingly at his mom. I told her about how our friends came to this spot most every year for a party. She said that she had never been to this lake or even this state before. I tried to gently elicit more information about her situation but she quietly re-directed me with questions about myself.

It was about this time that my attention was drawn to a kerfuffle on the lake. I heard yelling and splashing and quickly noted that a watercraft seemed to be slowly sinking about fifty yards offshore. And just as quickly I realized that it was my motorized raft. For a second, I was worried about my friend's safety but I soon realized that they had plenty of floatation devices including recently drained coolers and that everyone seemed to be floating toward shore. I, on the other hand, was not fine. I started to do a slow boil. I beat my fists on my thighs and swore a bit too loudly until I realized that Lola and Aaron were watching me with large eyes and that I was scaring them. I bit my tongue and shut up.

I walked down to the now mostly dark shoreline and helped my friends come out of the water while a menacing rattle, as in rattlesnake, emanated from the back of my throat. In a few minutes they were all out of the water and past me heading back to our site. No one wanted to linger by the angry bear. I stood there with my blood pounding in my head watching my

**four-thousand-dollar motorized raft sink into the lake along with many fairly pricey accessories and accouterments.**

**I didn't realize that Lola and Aaron had joined me until she spoke. "This has turned into a bad night for you." I turned and looked at this sickly beauty and her sweet tiny son. In an instant I was out of my own self-pity and embarrassed about the way I had behaved in front of them. "Oh well, it could be worse", said I. "Yes, it could be a lot worse", said she. I realized then that we were no longer talking about my privileged problems.**

**We sat down on the sand, Aaron on her lap, and me close but not touching. Seemingly in order to keep my mind off the raft, she slowly revealed some facts about her situation. She was a working girl. Had started out on the streets but was moved in-doors when she got pregnant. Her minder had wanted her to abort the baby but she had been adamant that she would not. She did not go into detail but the minder had been very pissed she had absorbed a lot of pain before that person gave up.**

**The other women in the house created slivers of time in their busy schedules and worked together to take care of little Aaron who was born healthy right there in the "house".**

**A home birth. But not the kind in a bright sparkly environment with a handful of doulas and an energetic midwife directing the choir. Hers was in her room alone, while business continued to be conducted in adjoining rooms and throughout the building. That is how she got sick.**

**It was a raging infection in the birth canal that almost killed her before the boss relented and brought in the gyno they had on retainer. Massive doses of anti-biotics saved her life but left her sick and damaged. She could barely move around let alone work and the boss wanted to put her out. But the other women stood in solidarity and she was allowed to stay on. She did not offer the details of how she was able to eventually keep “working” at all and I did not want to know.**

**I have always over romanticized every feeling of excitement that I ever had with a woman. Like picturing me and her walking off into the sunset half way through our first date. I also have that “white knight” syndrome that makes me want to rescue every wounded soul I come in contact with. These two characteristics were working in conjunction and I was getting way ahead of myself, at least in my mind.**

**I asked her how she had come to be at the lake. She said that she and three other women from the house had been**

contracted out to attend a bachelor party at one of the upscale lodges that looked down on the lake. She described how unhappy the men had been when they saw that she was dressed somewhat modestly and had brought her son. Those feelings had quickly escalated when she refused to get drunk or do drugs with them. After a short while she and Aaron had slipped out of the lodge and no one seemed to pay them any attention or careered where they went.

“How are you going to get back to the city?” I inquired.

“I haven’t figured that out as yet” she replied.

“One of my buddies is our designated driver. He and I will take you and Aaron back.”

“No, that would be way too far out of your way.”

“I’m not leaving you two out here. Let me go talk to Ron.”

Ron was amenable but his wife Gail, not so much. She was voraciously objecting to her hubby while shooting eye daggers at me. I noticed that Laura looked none too happy herself.

**But we finally said stilted good-byes to the rest of the group with Ron promising to be back in two or three hours. Ron, Gail, and inexplicably Laura, sat in the front of his four door truck, while Lola and I sat in the back with Aaron in between. He kept looking at me with curious but trusting eyes. I finally took his hand and squeezed it. He squeezed mine back.**

**I could tell that Lola was anxious at the prospect of returning to the house early with no money to give to her handler. But she looked at me with the same eyes as her son and I tried to reassure her with mine.**

**We wove our way deep into the tough part of the city until we pulled up in front of the building where they lived and Lola worked. It was an ancient house, badly in need of upkeep. The large front room had been turned into a hair salon while the upstairs and the back of the downstairs was where the real money was made. Lola picked Aaron up, gave him a squeeze and a kiss and said she would be right back. She then handed him to me and went inside. I figured that if she was going to have to endure a beating, she did not want her son to witness it. He settled comfortably into my arms without a peep. I was moved by his trust in me.**



Thru the large plate glass window in the front of the house I could see a huge human being whose gender was not obvious. The way that person handled themselves and the way Lola approached them made it obvious that they were the handler or more accurately, "the boss".

The boss yelled and slammed the walls and furniture but did not hit Lola. I don't know what I would have done if they did, but I would have had to do something. Lola had her head bowed in supplication. Finally, the boss ran out of steam. Lola came out to get Aaron and thank me for helping her out. I hastily wrote my name and phone number on a scrap of paper and pressed it into her palm. She hugged me and thanked me again then walked back into the house.

I thought about Lola and Aaron most of every day. Wondered how they were doing and even entertained the idea of going back there and finding out. But I realized that would probably cause more problems for her than it would solve. After about two weeks I received a call from one of her co-workers. The woman explained that Lola was sick again and probably had another infection in her "female parts". She further stated that the boss was fed up and was not going to spend any more money on a doctor and pills for someone who brought in such little income. In fact, she had to be out of the house by the end of the day no matter what her co-workers said. Lola had

not wanted to ask my help but her friend had intervened and called me. I called Ron and asked him to come with. When he picked me up Gail and Laura were in the car too. Oh boy, just what was needed to add to the already volatile mix. Not many words were said on the trip down to the city and no smiles were offered. When we pulled up in front of the building I got out and said that I would be right back. But first I had to get past the boss. The boss was super intimidating up close. Guess that was part of the job description. After a couple of minutes of thinking that I was going to get an ass whipping right then and there, I was finally allowed to go upstairs and was pointed to Lola's room. It was early afternoon so most of the women were not otherwise occupied and had gathered in Lola's room to say good-bye to her and Aaron. It was a gut-wrenching scene. These women who had every reason to have lost their humanity and empathy, clearly loved Lola and Aaron and were going to miss them badly. Lola was even thinner than before and when I touched her forehead she was burning up. It took me and one of her friends to get her down to the car while another friend carried little Aaron while his big eyes took it all in. He didn't understand what was happening but as long as he had his mom near-by he would endure.

I had Ron drive us right to the emergency room at a hospital that I knew gave quality care. I thanked Ron and Gail and

Laura. They grudgingly offered their best wishes for Lola and “the boy” before they drove away. It wasn’t much, but I was glad for what they gave. The medics had come out to the car and got Lola right onto a gurney and into a cubicle in the ER to start evaluating her. I filled out the forms with a little creative bullshit to lubricate the wheels of hospital bureaucracy and laid down my VISA card with the twenty thousand credit limit. I told them that Lola’s last name was the same as mine, that we were married, and that Aaron was my adopted son (to explain the discrepancy in skin tone). It was enough for us to be allowed to stay in the room with her and to keep Aaron out of the Child Protective Services system. Aaron never fussed once while watching his mom get swarmed over by medical personnel. I have still never seen him fuss or cry. And when I took him away from his mom at the end of visiting hours to go find a motel, he just wrapped his tiny arms tight around my neck and kept his eyes right on mine. Until he fell asleep.

Lola was in the hospital for four days getting pumped full of anti-biotics and enduring a couple of “procedures”. But the doc said the prognosis was good. When she was released, I moved them into my one-bedroom bachelor pad while I looked for a two or three bedroom place so Aaron and Austin could share a room and Lola could have her own too, if that was what she wanted. For the time being, I was crashing on

**the couch like I did every other weekend when Austin came, and they were in my bed.**

**I had no idea what the future would bring or how Lola could ever possibly want a relationship with a man after all of the abuse she had suffered at the hands and other “parts” of the male gender. I just knew that my heart felt wonderfully full having those two, quiet, gentle, dignified souls added to my life.**

**I was right. Even though she loved me dearly any feelings of romantic attraction that she might have had toward men had died long ago. We got the three-bedroom place. Austin and Aaron bonded at first sight. Austin had long expressed a desire to have a younger brother and Aaron followed him around all day every day. They became best friends a few years later and Aaron has recently been accepted at the same college that Austin will be a junior at next fall.**

**As soon as she was physically able, Lola scored a part time job at Walmart thanks to some more creative bullshit on my part. At my urging, she put down that she had worked as a live-in nanny for me for three years prior. And I backed it up. She quickly worked her way up to department manager. She was eventually offered her own store, but that would have**

required her and Aaron to move to another city and she was not willing to leave Austin and I. She also met a wonderful young woman named Annie who was a high school biology teacher. A couple of years later I got to walk Lola down the aisle when her and Annie were married. It was one of the best days of my life. Right up there with when Austin was born.

All of us pitched in to remodel a big old five-bedroom house that us three adults purchased. When Austin is home from school it feels completely full. He and Aaron have their own rooms now but are still besties. I am still single but Annie keeps trying to set me up with her friends or co-workers. I'm OK with that, as long as they aren't too young. We aren't a conventional family but we are damn well a family.

