



Lola, Truman Capote

LOLA

Yes, it seemed in every respect a curious gift. An appalling one, really. For I had already a sufficiency of pets: two dogs, an English bulldog and a Kerry blue terrier. Moreover, I have never been partial to birds; indeed, I've had always rather an aversion to them: when, on a beach, sea gulls swoop and dive, I am (for example) very liable to panic and run. Once when I was five or six, a sparrow, having flown through the window of my room, became trapped there: flew about till I was almost faint from an emotion in which pity figured but fear predominated. And so it was with some dismay that I received Graziella's Christmas present: an ugly young raven with wings cruelly clipped.

Now more than twelve years have gone by, for that was Christmas morning, 1952. I was living then in Sicily on a mountainside; the house, placed amid a silvery olive orchard, was made of pale pink stone; it had many rooms, and a terrace with a view of Etna's snowcapped summit. Far below one saw, on sunlit days, a sea blue as a peacock's eye. It was a beautiful house, though not very comfortable, especially in winter when north winds sang, shouted, when one drank wine for warmth and even so the touch of the stone floors was cold as a dead man's kiss.

Whatever the weather, winter-withered or sun-scorched, the house would not have been quite habitable without Graziella, a servant girl from the village who appeared early each morning and stayed until after supper. She was seventeen, a stocky young lady too sturdily built: she had the legs of a Japanese wrestler—slightly bowed, with bulging calves.

Her face, however, was pretty as could be: eyes brown and gold as the local home-brewed brandy; rosy cheeks; rosier lips; a fine dark brow; and black hair brushed smooth to the skull, then secured in that austere position by a little pair of Spanish combs. She had a hard life, and in an amused, uncomplaining fashion, complained of it constantly: a father who was the village drunk, at any rate one of them; her mother, a religious hysteric; and Paolo, her elder brother—she adored him, though he every week beat her and robbed her of her wages.

We were good friends, Graziella and I, and it was natural that at Christmas we should exchange gifts. I gave her a sweater, a scarf and a necklace of green beads. And she, to repeat, presented me with a raven.

I have said it was ugly. It was. An object both dreadful and pathetic. No matter the risk of outraging Graziella, I would have set it free at once had it been capable of fending for itself. But the wings had been very closely cut and it could not fly; it could only wobble about, its black beak agape like the jaws of an idiot, its eyes flat and bleak. Graziella, having climbed high into the dour volcanic slopes above Bronte, had captured it in a ravine where ravens thrive, a valley of stones and thorns and deformed trees.

She said, "I caught it with a fishing net. I ran among the birds. When I threw the net in the air two of them tangled. One I let go. The other, this one, I put in a shoebox. I took it home and cut its wings. Ravens are very clever. Smarter than parrots. Or horses. If we split its tongue, we can teach it to talk." It was not that Graziella was unkind; she simply shared the indifference of Mediterraneans to the sufferings of animals. She grew quite cross when I refused to let her mutilate the bird's tongue; in fact, she lost all interest in the poor creature, the well-being of which now became my own unhappy burden.

I kept it shut away in a spare, unfurnished room; kept it locked there like a mad relative. I thought, Well, its wings will soon grow out, then it can go away. But the New Year came and went, weeks passed, and presently Graziella confessed it would be six months before my Christmas gift could once again ascend the skies.

I loathed it. I loathed visiting it; the room was the coldest in the cold house, and the bird so forlorn, so impeccably sad a sight. Yet awareness of its loneliness forced me there—though at the start it seemed to enjoy my visits rather less than I did: it would stalk into a corner and turn its back on me, a silent prisoner hunched between a bowl of water and a bowl of food.

In time, however, I came to feel my presence was not unwelcome; it ceased to avoid me, it stared me in the eye and, in a rough, unmusical voice, produced friendly-seeming noises: muted cawings. We began to make discoveries concerning one another: I found it liked to have its head scratched, it realized how much its playful peckings amused me. Soon it learned to balance on the rim of my hand, then to sit upon my shoulder. It grew fond of kissing me—that is, gently, with its beak nipping at my chin, cheeks, an earlobe. Nevertheless, I remained, or imagined I did, somewhat repelled by it: the funereal coloring, the bird-feel of its feathers—distasteful (to me) as fish skin, snake hide.

One morning—it was late January, but spring comes early to Sicily, and the almond trees were in flower: a mist of scent and bloom drifting across the landscape—one morning I arrived to find the raven had absconded. The room in which it lived contained French doors leading into a garden; during the night the doors had somehow come undone; perhaps the sirocco, which was blowing then (bringing with it gritty bits of African desert), had pushed them open.

The bird, anyway, was gone. I combed the garden; Graziella climbed the mountainside. The morning ended, and the afternoon. By nightfall we had searched “everywhere”: the prickly interior of a wild cactus grove, among the graves of a cemetery close by, inside a cave reeking of bat urine. Gradually, in the course of our pursuit, a certain fact at last penetrated: I very much liked—Lola. Lola! The name emerged like the new moon overhead, unbidden but inevitable; until then I’d not wanted to give her a name: to do so, I felt, would be to admit she was a permanent belonging.

“Lola?”

I called to her from my window. Finally I went to bed. Of course I could not sleep. Visions intervened: Lola, her neck clasped between cat teeth; a red tom racing with her toward the feasting hall of some bloodstained, feather-strewn lair. Or Lola, earthbound and helpless, somewhere hiding until hunger and thirst felled her forever.

“Lo-o-o-la-a-a?”

We had not looked through the house. Possibly she had never left it, or departed by one door and reentered by another. I lighted a candle (our electricity seldom functioned); I traveled from room to room; and in one, an unused parlor, the candlelight illuminated a familiar pair of eyes.

“Ah, Lola.”

She stepped aboard my hand; back in the bedroom I transferred her to the foot-railing of a brass bed. She clutched it with her claws and tucked a tired head under one of her disfigured wings. Soon she was asleep, so was I, so were the dogs (curled together in front of a fireplace vaguely aglow with the aromatic flames of a eucalyptus fire).

The dogs had never met Lola, and it was with some anxiety that I next morning introduced them, for they both, and particularly the Kerry blue, were capable of cranky behavior. But if she meant to make her home with us, it must be done. I put her on the floor. The bulldog sniffed at her with his squashed, trufflelike nose, then yawned, not from boredom but embarrassment; all dogs yawn when they are embarrassed. Clearly he did not know what she was. Food? A plaything? The Kerry decided Lola was the latter. He tapped her with his paw. He chased her into a corner. She fought back, pecked his snout; her cawings were coarse and violent as the harshest curse

words. It frightened the bulldog; he ran from the room. Even the Kerry retreated—sat down and gazed at her, marveling.

From then on, the dogs had great respect for Lola. They showed her every consideration; she showed them very few. She used their water bowl as a splash bath; at mealtimes, never content with her own dish, she always raided theirs, taking what she pleased. The bulldog she turned into a private mount; perched on his broad rump, she trotted around the garden like a bareback circus rider. At night, camping by the hearth, she huddled between the dogs, and if they threatened to stir, or otherwise disturb her comfort, she stabbed them with her beak.

Lola must have been very young when Graziella caught her—hardly more than a fledgling. By June she had tripled in size, grown big as a chicken. Her wings had come back, or almost. But still she did not fly. Indeed, she refused to. She preferred to walk. When the dogs went for a hike she hopped along beside them. One day it occurred to me that Lola did not know she was a bird. She thought she was a dog. Graziella agreed with me, and we both laughed; we considered it a delightful quirk, neither one foreseeing that Lola's misconception was certain to end in tragedy: the doom that awaits all of us who reject our own natures and insist on being something else than ourselves.

Lola was a thief; otherwise she might never have used her wings at all. However, the sort of articles she was fond of stealing—shiny things, grapes and fountain pens, cigarettes—were situated usually in elevated areas; so, to reach a tabletop, she occasionally took a (quite literally) flying jump. Once she stole a set of false teeth. The teeth belonged to a guest, a difficult and elderly friend, a lady.

She said she thought it not the least funny and burst into tears. Alas, we did not know where Lola hid her loot (according to Graziella, all ravens are robbers and invariably keep a secret storage den for stolen treasure). The only sensible course was to try to trick Lola into revealing where she had taken the teeth. She admired gold: a gold ring I sometimes wore constantly excited her greedy gaze. We (Graziella and I) therefore baited our trap with the ring: left it on the luncheon table, where Lola was cleaning up crumbs, and hid behind a door.

The instant she imagined herself unobserved, she snatched the ring and rushed out of the dining room and along a hall to the “library”—a small, gloomy room stuffed with cheap paperback editions of the classics, the property of a former tenant. She leaped from floor to chair to bookshelf; then, as though it were a cleft in a mountainside leading to an Ali Baba’s cavern, she squeezed between two books and disappeared behind them: evaporated, rather like Alice through the looking glass.

The Complete Jane Austen concealed her cache, which, when we found it, consisted, in addition to the purloined dentures, of the long-lost keys to my car (I’d not blamed Lola: I thought I’d lost them myself), a mass of paper money—thousands of lire torn into tiny scraps, as though intended for some future nest, old letters, my best cuff links, rubber bands, yards of string, the first page of a short story I’d stopped writing because I couldn’t find the first page, an American penny, a dry rose, a crystal button—

Early that summer Graziella announced her engagement to a young man named Luchino, a slim-waisted waiter with oily, curly hair and a film-star profile. He spoke a little English, a little German; he wore green suede shoes and drove his own Vespa. Graziella had reason to think him a formidable catch; still, I was not happy about it. I felt she

was too plain and healthy, simply too nice, for a sharp fellow like Luchino (who had a reputation as a semiprofessional gigolo catering to solitary tourists: Swedish spinsters, German widows and widowers), though, to be fair, such activities were far from uncommon among the village youth.

But Graziella's joy was difficult to resist. She pinned photographs of Luchino all over the kitchen, above the stove, above the sink, inside the icebox door and even on the trunk of a tree that grew outside the kitchen window. Romance, of course, interfered with her care of me: now, in the Sicilian fashion, she had her fiancé's socks to mend, laundry to do (and such a lot of it!), not to mention the hours she spent preparing a trousseau, embroidering underwear, fitting a wedding veil. Often at lunch I was handed a plate of ice-hard spaghetti, then given cold fried eggs for supper. Or perhaps nothing at all; she was forever hurrying off to meet her lover in the piazza for a twilight promenade. Yet in retrospect I do not begrudge her that happiness: it was but the prelude to the bitterest bad luck.

One August night her father (much beloved despite his drunkenness) was offered (by an American tourist) a tall glass of straight gin, told to drink it at one go, did so and underwent a stroke that left him paralyzed. And the very next day even starker misfortune struck; Luchino, streaking along a country road aboard his Vespa, rounded a corner, ran into and instantly killed a three-year-old girl. I drove Luchino and Graziella to the child's funeral; afterward, on the way home, Luchino was dry-eyed but Graziella moaned and wept as though her heart had been halved: I assumed she was grieving for the dead baby. No, it was for herself, the dark prospect before her: Luchino faced possible imprisonment and certainly a huge indemnity payment—there would be no marriage now, not for years (if ever).

The poor girl was prostrated. A doctor confined her to bed. One day I went to see how she was getting on. I took Lola with me, meaning to cheer the invalid. Instead, the sight of the bird horrified her; she screamed. She said Lola was a witch, she said Lola had the malocchio, the evil eye, and that the double tragedy, her father's stroke and Luchino's accident, was Lola's work, a punishment inflicted for having caught her and clipped her wings. She said, Yes, yes, it's true: every child knows ravens are the embodiment of black and wicked spirits. And, "I will never come to your house again."

Nor did she. Nor did any other servant girl. For out of Graziella's accusations, a myth grew that mine was a house of the evil eye: that not merely Lola, but I myself, possessed a potent malocchio. Nothing worse can be said of one in Sicily. Moreover, it is a charge against which there is no defense. In the beginning I joked about it, though it was not in the least a humorous adventure. Persons meeting me in the street crossed themselves; or, as soon as I had passed, arranged one hand in the shape of a bull's head with horns—a dark-magic gesture meant to dispel the power of my malevolent, spell-casting, tortoise-shell-rimmed eye.

I woke one night around midnight and decided (snap!) to clear out. Leave before dawn. Rather a decision, for I'd lived there two years, and did not altogether relish being suddenly homeless. Homeless with two large dogs and an uncaged, peculiar bird. Nevertheless, I stuffed the car: it looked like a rolling cornucopia: shoes and books and fishing gear spilling out the windows; with a few rough shoves I contrived to fit the dogs inside. But there was no room left for Lola. She had to sit on my shoulder, which was not ideal, for she was a nervous passenger, and any abrupt twist or turn made her either squawk or relieve herself.

Across the Straits of Messina, across Calabria, on to Naples and Rome. It is a journey pleasant to look back upon: sometimes, when balanced on the edge of sleep, I see pictures of it slide past. A picnic in the Calabrian mountains: a hard blue sky, a herd of goats below, the thin sweet pipings of the goatherder on a bamboo whistle—and Lola gobbling bread crumbs soaked in red wine.

Or Cape Palinuro, a remote, forest-fringed Calabrian beach where we all were sunning ourselves under a still-warm October sun when a wild pig charged out of the woods and raced toward us, as though to attack. I was the only one intimidated: I ran into the sea. The dogs stood their ground and Lola stood with them, flapped about, shouting encouragements in her rusty voice; together, in concert, they chased the pig back into the forest. The evening of the same day we traveled as far as the ruins at Paestum: a brilliant evening, the sky like another sea, the half-moon like an anchored ship rocking in a surf of stars, and all around us the moon-brightened marble, the broken temples of a distant time. We slept on the beach that borders the ruins; or they did—Lola and the dogs: I was tormented by mosquitoes and thoughts of mortality.

We settled for the winter in Rome, first at a hotel (the management of which expelled us after five days, and it was not even a first-class establishment), then in an apartment at 33 Via Margutta, a narrow street often painted by bad painters and renowned for the number of cats who dwell there, unowned cats sheltering in the overgrown patios and existing on the charity of half-mad elderly women, crones who every day tour the cat jungles with sacks of scrap food.

Our apartment was a penthouse: to reach it one climbed six flights of steep dark stairs. We had three rooms and a balcony. It was because of the balcony that I rented it; after the vastness of the view from the

Sicilian terrace, the balcony offered, in contrast, a miniature scene tranquil and perfect as firelight: several Roman rooftops, faded orange, faded ocher, and a few across-the-way windows (behind which episodes of family life could be observed).

Lola loved the balcony. She was scarcely ever off it. She liked to sit perched on the edge of the stone balustrade and study the traffic on the cobbled street below: the old ladies feeding the Margutta cats; a street musician who came each afternoon and played bagpipes, until, feeling thoroughly blackmailed, one tossed him a coin; a handsome knife-grinder advertising his services with a song sung in the most bull-like of baritones (housewives hurried!).

When the sun was out Lola always took her bath on the balcony balustrade. Her tub was a silver soup dish; after a moment of sprightly immersion in the shallow water, she would spring up and out, and as though casting off a crystal cloak, shake herself, swell her feathers; later, for long, bliss-saturated hours, she drowsed in the sun, her head tilted back, her beak ajar, her eyes shut. To watch her was a soothing experience.

Signor Fioli seemed to think so. He sat at his window, which was exactly opposite the balcony, and played attentive audience to Lola as long as she was visible. Signor Fioli interested me. I had taken the trouble to learn his name and something of his story. He was ninety-three years old, and in his ninetieth year he had lost the ability to speak: whenever he wished to attract the attention of his family (a widowed granddaughter and five grown great-grandsons), he rang a small supper bell. Otherwise, and even though he never left his bedroom, he appeared to be in complete command of himself.

His eyesight was excellent: he saw everything Lola did, and if she did anything especially foolish or lovely, a smile sweetened his sour, very virile old face. He had been a cabinetmaker, and the business he had founded still operated on the ground floor of the building in which he lived; three of his great-grandchildren worked there.

One morning—it was the week before Christmas, almost a year to the day that Lola had entered my life—I filled Lola’s soup bowl with mineral water (she preferred to bathe in mineral water, the bubblier the better), carried it out to her on the balcony, waved at Signor Fioli (who, as usual, was settled at his window waiting to attend Lola’s toilette), then went inside, sat down at my desk and started to write letters.

Presently I heard the summoning tinkle of Signor Fioli’s supper bell: a well-known noise, one heard it twenty times a day; but it had never sounded just like this: a ringing rapid as the beat of an excited heart. I wondered why, and went to see, and saw: Lola, a stupefied sun worshiper squatting on the balustrade—and behind her an immense ginger cat, a cat that had crept across the rooftops and was now crawling on its belly along the balustrade, green eyes aglitter.

Signor Fioli shook his bell. I shouted. The cat leaped, claws unfurled. But it was as if at the last moment Lola sensed her peril. She jumped off the balustrade, fell outward into space. The disgruntled cat, Signor Fioli and I watched her extraordinary descent.

“Lola! Fly, Lola, fly!”

Her wings, though spread, remained motionless. Slowly, gravely, as though attached to a parachute, she drifted downward; down and down.

A small pickup truck was passing in the street below. At first I thought Lola would fall in front of it: that seemed dangerous enough. But what happened was worse, was eerie and awful: she landed on top of some sacks stacked on the back of the truck. And stayed there. And the truck kept going: turned the corner and drove out of the Via Margutta.

“Come back, Lola! Lola!”

I ran after her; skidded down the six flights of slippery stone stairs; fell; skinned my knees; lost my glasses (they flew off and smashed against a wall). Outside, I ran to the corner where the truck had turned. Far off, through a haze compounded of myopia plus tears of pain, I saw the little truck stopped at a traffic light. But before I could reach it, long before, the light changed and the truck, bearing Lola away, taking her forever from me, blurred into the traffic swirling about the Piazza di Spagna.

Not many minutes had elapsed since the cat had lunged, only four or five. Yet it took an hour to retrace my route, climb the stairs, pick up and pocket the broken glasses. And all the while Signor Fioli had been sitting at his window, waiting there with an expression of grieved astonishment. When he saw that I had returned he rang his bell, calling me to the balcony.

I told him, “She thought she was something else.”

He frowned.

“A dog.”

The frown thickened. "She's gone."

That he understood. He bowed his head. We both did.

1964

The End