



# PRISM 2012

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PROVOST PRIZE WINNER  
PATIENT 152  
TRACI PORTER  
SHORT STORY

It was Wednesday, nearly 1 p.m. and I splurged on a limo to take me to Safe Haven Mental Health Clinic. The sky was showing off with its blue vastness, and the nip of the winter air chilled the tip of my nose. My rhinestone studded jeans and black boots made me feel like a movie star, and I couldn't wait to tell George that I was better. Well, he wasn't really George, he was Dr. Frank Clancy, but I thought of him as Curious George.

I stepped out of the limo and walked to the front double doors. An elderly homeless man sat by the entrance. "Nice ride," he said. "Sometimes, you gotta just say what the hell and go for it. Right?" He smiled showing a crowded row of yellow teeth.

"Exactly." I nodded and pulled out a twenty for him.

The potted palm by the front desk was exceptionally healthy, its shoots an emerald green. George met me up front and led me past the almond-eyed receptionist.

"You know," I said to George, "The Japanese think Americans have dog eyes, and I think that's an accurate perception."

He ignored me and pushed open the metal door to his room. When I sat down, the brown leather chair soothed my back, and through his fake Venetian blinds, slits of sunshine cast white rays onto the office floor. George was wearing black loafers, the kind with tassels, and he looked crisp and neat in a long-sleeved navy blue shirt; if a mere man could gather up order and command it to attention, George would lead the way.

"So, how goes it this morning?" he asked walking to his desk.

"I'm fine. No. Better than fine. I'm absolutely alive."

"Are you on your meds?" George frowned, his

bushy eyebrows needing a good plucking. Greek Gods like him, men like soap opera hunks, should not be held back by such unruly eyebrows.

I refused to lie to George because he could always tell. "Why is it that I must be oppressed with pills to make me feel alive?"

"Lola, you know where this leads." He shook his head and pulled his chair closer to his metal desk. "If you'd read your journal recently it should remind you of all those days you didn't feel fine."

"Not just fine. Alive." I said. "I could seduce even Lord Byron on a day like this."

"You promised to read the journal and trust it." He leaned to the side and opened a filing cabinet, lifting a bulky folder. After flipping through pages he paused. "Yes, May through January. You had several months of reprieve when you were faithfully taking it. Depakote has few side effects and you tolerate it nicely."

"Tolerate is what you do when you have a bratty child sitting next to you on a plane. And you," I laughed, "sometimes simply tolerate me. Of course I pay you to, but still, it's the principle."

George sat back in his chair and took measured breaths. "To be honest, I think it's unproductive to try and work like this. I've been very patient."

"Yes, you have George."

"Lola, today there is no George. There's Dr. Clancy and he's tired of the ups and downs because you won't take responsibility for your own mental health."

"So we're talking in third person about ourselves today. Well, Lola wanted to share that she has finished her painting, signed up for Tai Chi and made six meals for her sick neighbor."

"But will you actually stick to the Tai Chi? And will you burn your painting once this manic phase wears off?"

"I don't regret burning it. It was smug, especially the red patches on the right top corner."

"I can't anymore," he said.

"Alright, alright. Dr. Clancy it is."

"I mean it. We've been at this for almost three years now and we're making no progress."

My gut tightened and I folded my arms across my chest.

"You've said I've made remarkable progress."

"I said that a year ago, when you were stable and we actually did some real work."

"Maybe I should just reschedule for next Wednesday, and you can see for yourself that this isn't just a phase. I'll even promise to read my journal."

"No." His eyes wouldn't meet mine. "Lola, I think you need a new therapist."

We sat in silence. He'd never said that. He'd said I was gifted and funny. He'd written page after page about my thoughts, my fears. And he knew my birthday and Ollie's name. He knew that I was allergic to penicillin, that ticking clocks drove me batty. My fear of snakes, my miscarriage, my Uncle Lester. God, how could he even think-how could he just expect me to start over with some stranger. A person doesn't just leave you like that, raw and naked.

"I'll take my meds." My voice sounded soft and shaky.

"I just think it would be better for you if you found a new—"

"You mean better for you. It would be better for George if he could leave me."

"I'm not leaving you. Lola, you know that I want the best for you. I just feel we've gotten too—I don't know, perhaps too familiar."

"Do you want to sleep with me?" I asked.

"No. No." He opened his mouth and his pupils widened.

"Well I don't want to sleep with you," I said truthfully. "We're two adults in a professional relationship. I can't understand how you can be so irresponsible with one of your patients to just cast her aside because she's not progressing fast enough. Sorry that my mind is ugly at times."

"Lola, that's not it. I don't seem to have any sway or authority with you. I don't seem to make a difference anymore."

"You can't control me?"

"Stop that. You're being completely unreasonable." George took in a deep breath and formed his fingers into a tent. He started sifting through his rolodex and scribbled on a pad from time to time.

"Alright, I admit that the darkness sucks me in like a whirlwinds sometimes. But it also picks me up and drops me in Oz. And yes, sometimes I end up at the feet of the wicked witch, but other times it blows me to the yellow brick road and Glenda." I leaned toward him. "The munchkins, the flying monkeys—why should I give all that up? Am I God to control such fate?"

He rubbed the paper between his fingers.

"You want your Oz, and I understand that. I just can't anymore." He put his hand to my shoulder and I pulled back.

"You're having a bad day," I said. "You and the wife are fighting. It's bad timing. It's just a bad day. Everyone can have one."

"Christ, it's not a bad day. Lola, please try and understand." George handed me a note with doctors' names and telephone numbers on it. He looked straight at me, his eyes calm, even kind, and he said, "I'm sorry, but I do think this is the best road."

"Those pills lie. Can't you see that? They trick me into barrenness, where I feel no pain, no love. Is that living?"

He cupped his face and drug his hands down his cheeks. "Lola, please. I need you to trust that this is the best."

"Trust you? That's really a good one George. I'll remember that."

George looked at the clock and then back to me. He took me in, all of me, from head to foot and then back to my eyes.

"Is my mind that repulsive?" I asked. "All grey and slick and coiled."

"No." He started to speak and then stopped. He stood up and walked to me. After crouching down, he placed his hands on each of my legs. "Lola, do you want to know what I really see?"

I nodded, my throat tender, and the warmth of his hands steadying my shaky legs.

"I see a beautiful woman, an amazing artist." His eyes glinted. "Wise beyond her years and so-innocent-resilient." He reached up to my face and his fingertips brushed my cheek. "I don't want to hurt you. I don't. I wish you could just understand that I don't have any other choice."

"My mind?" I clasped his hands. "What is so bad, so wrong with my thoughts that you don't want them anymore?"

"I do. I mean, it's not your thoughts. Lola, it's just the distance. It's all too close. Can't you see that?"

"No."

George inhaled slowly with his eyes shut. He breathed out carefully. Finally, he patted my leg and then stood up. He returned to his desk.

"You won't take your meds. You rely on me too much. You can't even see that it's not objective anymore." He folded his hands on his desk.

I grabbed my file and threw it at him. The papers landed on his desk and in his lap and the rest landed on the tiled floor.

"This is all I am to you." I stood above him. "Let's be honest, George always says. Must have honesty. Well, you're a fucking liar."

My breathing came too fast, and the room started to close in.

"Beautiful woman," I mimicked George's voice. "Amazing artist." I shook my head. "No. I'm a folder." I slapped him, and his whole face raged red, but he simply sat back in his chair and formed his fingers into a tent again.

"You think you can take all my hopes, take my fears and just stop. You promised you'd go into the darkness. You said that, and now you think you can

put a label on me and tuck me away? No. It won't end like this. I pay you. I come here and let you pull, question, yank out whatever you want, and all I ask for is a little human decency."

I picked up one of my papers and took out a black pen from George's silver utensil holder. At the top I wrote, Lola.

"Let's see. Quit drinking. Check." I made a checkmark by my name. "You were so proud." I patted his head. His eyes narrowed, but he kept his fingers pressed together.

"Volunteer at the library. Check." I made another fast mark. "Adopt cat and remember to feed it. Check. Leave Ezra. Check. Finish painting. Check." I added three more marks. "I've done my job, and now I expect you to be a grownup and do yours, because that's what grownups do, George. They get up and go to work and do their jobs."

"You've forgotten a few big minuses there," he said, his jaw sliding back and forth.

"So I don't always take me meds. Check minus." I sat back down.

"Funny how the mind is so selective about what it wants to remember." He stared at me.

I felt my throat crowd out the air, but I kept my eyes locked to his. "We both know you're the only one who knows how to fix it all. When it's all broken and tangled, you find some magical way to fix it. Check plus for you. Great work George. A+."

"Are you finished with your fit?" He began gathering the papers, keeping his eyes narrowed in on mine.

"So arrogant," I said. "My God, you're at you're finest today."

George looked at the clock again.

"*Honestly* George, what I think is that you've got a fascinating narcoleptic schizophrenic bisexual that needs my slot. One that promises to go down on you and—"

"That's enough. We're done." George stormed to the door and flung it open.



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I waited until I got home to exhale. At first it came out in sobs, and then just quiet, fat tears.

Ollie meowed for his tuna, but I couldn't risk bones. George said tuna in cans has no bones, but days like that I knew there was a high probability of bones, regardless of all George's degrees squeezed into frames and trapped behind creamy mats. I fed Ollie warm milk with bits of black licorice to soothe his belly.

A shadow landed on my white wicker rocker, and I plopped down on it. I knew not to trust George. Even with Ezra, as I lie in his arms after making love, I never let myself truly trust him or tell him who I really was. How I'd been so stupid concerning George was beyond me.

The tub was almost full when I'd collected myself. I eased into the hot water and traced my finger around the stained ring near the water line. Surely I was strong enough to endure this; yet, this wasn't a lover's breakup or the death of my sister. This had to do with George's insight. Could my mind really be that bad, that lacking? I felt the warm droplets drip down my cheeks again, and I didn't bother to wipe them away.

The water grew tepid, and I refused to get out. Somehow, my dreams and fears, the most base of my desires looked unworthy to him. I stared at my fingers. Shriveled. And when I pushed the wrinkles, they didn't go away. They moved and shifted, and they were still there. And it was cold. The water stole from the heat of my blood. It surrounded me, and I felt tired. So tired. George knows that I'm cold. He knows I'm dark and my mind is coiled too tightly. He searched me and found it all twisted and black. And George won't lie. No, he wouldn't think to ever do that.

After I toweled off, I opened the rusty medicine cabinet and got the bottle of Depakote out. I smoothed Calvin Klein's Eternity lotion on my legs and arms and dotted my neck with the cream.

I lit an incense stick and let the spicy smoke circle my body. After zipping my little black dress, its silk caressed me, and I ran my hand through my pixie cut, its cropped edges feeling like a soft frame around my face. I chose "coy ruby" for my lipstick, a clear lacquer for my nails, and a small pearl necklace to complete the final look. My bare feet skimmed the wood floor as I made my way to my bedroom. I lay in the middle of the bed, my arms at my side, my face toward the ceiling and my eyes shut. The Eternity lotion competed with the incense, but I concentrated on what it would be like to be confined in the dark, and it seemed so lonely, and I was tired. I felt the dark and its bony fingertips touched my eyelids, so I kept my eyes shut. My body felt heavy and tired, and my head hurt, but I willed myself to get up.

In the kitchen, I heated the tea kettle. After watching the jasmine pearls uncurl and free themselves in the water, I couldn't bear drinking the tea.

I fumbled through my junk drawer and found a black permanent marker. Prying the frame apart, I released my painting and sat down with it. It was so beautiful it hurt. It was the best work I'd ever done or would ever do. An Archbishop and a professor of philosophy were still in a bidding war for something that didn't and shouldn't belong to them. It was born out of my suffering, and no amount of money could buy that. It's funny how people are thieves and never feel any guilt.

The phone stared at me. I tried to dial George's emergency number but couldn't punch in the last two numbers. It was nearly four and he would be finishing with another client. My painting and the marker beckoned me, but I ignored them and left them on the coffee table.

Ollie rubbed against me purring, his hind end arching with the end of each stroke. I tried again to call and managed to finish dialing George's number.

After four rings the recording started. "This is

Dr. Frank Clancy. Please leave a message or call 911 if this is an emergency.”

“George please. I just need one conversation. Just please pick up.”

The amber bottle of Depakote sat on the kitchen counter, its white label closing around it, choking it. I turned off all the lights except my Japanese lantern and curled up in the wicker rocker. My fingers and toes felt cold. Virginia Woolfe’s Mrs. Dalloway sat on the coffee table, a pink breast awareness bookmark slid between pages 168 and 169. At exactly five o clock I tried his number again.

It rang only once and then his voice. “Lola, I know this must be hard.”

“George, we could try. I’d really try. Just once more. Just once.”

“I can’t.”

“You mean you won’t. My mind isn’t right. It’s bad somehow.”

“No. It’s not you. It’s the distance. I haven’t maintained the proper distance.” He sighed. “We should’ve done this months ago.”

“But you’re wrong. We make a great team, and only you understand me, only you—”

“Lola, Dr. Shettler is concerned.”

“You told him about me? For God’s sake you broke our confidentiality. You and all your professionalism. What did you say, that I’m hopeless? I’m a throwaway?”

“I told him my ulcer keeps flaring up, and I couldn’t sleep for three nights after you’d slit your wrists, okay? Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“I’m sorry.” I hugged the phone closer to my ear, my chest tightening. “I won’t do that again. I promise. I don’t know what else to do or say. If I could make it right. Just give me that chance. I’ll bring you antacids,” I forced a laugh.

“It’s not you,” he said. “I haven’t been objective.”

“George please. I’ll get shock therapy. I’ll try a hypnotist.” I picked up the painting and clenched the black marker in my hand.

“Lola, you’re strong. You can do this.

You need to do this without me. You’ve become too dependant.”

“But I can’t.” I removed the marker’s cap and its sharp scent scared me. “I can’t. Please. I need you. Of all nights George, please.”

“I don’t know how else to make this clear,” he said.

“For God’s sake, I’m begging you. Everything feels all tangled and black, and I can’t make it stop.”

Then I heard clicking on the other end, like typing.

“George?”

“Yes, I’m listening.” The clicking stopped.

“It’s all dark and twisted.” I scribbled black ink on the center of the painting. “I wish you could see it George, before it’s gone. It hurts it’s so beautiful.”

“Lola, stop that. I can’t do this anymore. There is no progress. The professional distance is gone.”

The edge to George’s voice softened. “Now, I want you to be sure you do your breathing exercises after we hang up. And get the happy DVD we made, and watch your favorite I Love Lucy episode –that one where she’s crushing grapes. O.K?”

“Don’t go. George, please. Make it right. Only you know how to fix it.” I slashed at the painting, huge streaks of black crisscrossing, and then I heard the clicking again.

“Are your typing?”

“I’m just pulling up the mental health emergency number for you. You will call it? I mean, your not going to do anything?”

“No.” I was so tired of fighting, of being left alone in the darkness. It was all too heavy without George to lift it up and help me escape. But he was done. He’d made his decision. “No. I’m fine. Really. I just need a good cry. A hot bath maybe.”

“Because, well, you’re sure?”

“I’m sure. I think you’re right, about all of it. I’ll make an appointment and just start fresh with someone new.”

“Elaina Mason is really good. Do you have her number?”

"Yes."

"I still want you to call the emergency number and talk with someone. Dr. Shettler said they are very professional. Alright, do you have a pen handy?"

"Yep." I laughed. Sometimes he was just too much.

"It's 1-800-"

"Don't bother George; I've already got it. It's 1-800 Fuck You."

I threw the phone to the floor and the back side cracked. I worked at the painting until it was all black, and then placed it back in its frame.

I leafed through the yellow pages and picked up the cracked phone.

"Lillies and Lovelies, may I help you?"

The woman's voice on the other end of the line sounded pleasant.

"Yes. I'd like to order a bouquet of yellow roses," I said plainly.

"And would you like a note with that?"

"No. Just the roses and I want them delivered at exactly 1 p.m. next Wednesday."

Ollie's black coat rubbed up against the rocker, clashing with the whiteness.

"Wait," I said. "Oh, Ollie. I'm sorry." I reached down and stroked him.

"Miss?" The woman asked.

"I do want a note. Have it read: 'I'm hungry and she's starting to smell. Please come get me. Oh, and P.S. My litter-box is full. Sincerely, Ollie.'"

"That long of a note will cost extra," the woman said.

"What?"

"It's just that I'll need one of the deluxe-sized cards to write all that."

"That's fine. Just make sure you get it all."

"I'm hungry and she's starting to smell?" The woman paused.

"Yes." I said.

"And then you wanted it to say please come and get me, and then a P.S. that says my litter-box is full?"

"Right. And then the part of sincerely, Ollie. That's O-L-L-I-E."

"Alright then," the woman said. She took the address of Safe Haven, punched in my credit card number, and then I hung up, taking care that the receiver only clicked slightly.

If it was all yellow to him, then let it end that way.

But I couldn't keep it all yellow. I just couldn't let him get away with it that easily. I called the flower shop again. Sure, he could tuck my manila patient folder away in some drawer, throw the roses out with the trash, but his mind wouldn't let this one go.

"Hello, I just called with the order for yellow roses."

"Yes?"

"I need to have one red rose be at the center of the bouquet."

"Miss, may I suggest that you alternate the white and yellow, have the whole bouquet like that? It would be much more elegant."

"You know, I'm sure you're right, but Ollie's very particular. Please just make sure the whole bouquet is yellow and stick a red rose right in the middle."

"Alrighty then," she said, and I could feel her condescending grin on the other end.

I put two large mixing bowls on the kitchen floor and filled one with water and the other with dry cat food. Then I settled into the rocker and the night eased gently upon me.