

The Music Lover

by

Walt Nickell

Jimmy-Jay slowly raises his hand from the piano and gestures in my direction. “Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome Clarence ‘Crash’ Evans on Saxophone.”

I nod my head toward the crowd, dampen the sax reed with my tongue and begin to blow. The notes are quiet, slow and smoky, flirting with the brushes on Strother’s drums. Hanging on the wall behind me, a flashing sign winks on and off, proclaiming us: “The Lonesome Drifters.”

I want to make love to that sax, feel it like a woman in my arms. Not like any woman, though. I want to feel it like Lola. In my arms. Against my body.

My fingers move patiently as I work to raise the sensations higher. I’m home. At last. On stage. Where I’m meant to be.

Hell has been described as “Separation From God.”

Distance.

Cold, dark despair.

For me, that hell is being away from the stage. The stage where I can release my hurt, release my strength, let go of my pain and spread my pleasure, blend it into one, reach into the depths of my soul and free emotions I have no words to express.

I’ve hit my knees beside my bed, trying to find a path to God. I’ve sat in the confessional, walked the long red-clay roads of the Deep South with the sun beating on my neck. I’ve been baptized in the water and in the blood.

And still, I hurt.

Even after making my peace with God, I can't make peace with myself. I feel like someone carved the heart from my chest with a rusty, ragged blade and I can't find the courage to roll over and die.

A man is not supposed to feel like this.

Life is not supposed to feel like this.

I want to hand it off. Drop it from my shoulders. Walk away.

The anonymity of life – of *my* life – is killing me.

The tears are hot in my eyes and my throat constricts. I fight to pull in a thin whistle of air. I know my weaknesses. And there are many. I try to rid myself of them, somehow ease my burdens, turn them into a thin veil of music. My hands move over the sax like a lover, the mother-of-pearl keys cool and slick under my fingertips.

On the dance-floor, the crowd moves as one body. Hips and legs and arms and feet, rocking in slow motion, eyes gently closed, the sweet sounds spiriting them away.

The music. It feeds my hurt. It looses my bonds.

The great wail of the saxophone against my lips. The soft rolling thunder of the drums behind me. The doghouse bass boom-boom-booming out the tempo. The piano so soft and melodic beneath the rest, almost not there.

But, I don't worry about the others. I close my eyes and blow hard on the saxophone, making love to it with my mouth, my hands.

I've found my path to God, my own means of prayer.

Through the sax.

The sax understands.

The sax gives me voice.

Her name was Eleanor, but we all called her Lola.

If she'd been born in New York, she'd have been a model. If she'd been born in L.A., she'd have been an actress. But Lola was born in Kentucky, in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. By Grace or By Curse, the city had not had its chance at her. She didn't make her mark on the city, and the city didn't leave its mark on her. Instead of the cover of some glossy magazine or 40 feet tall on a movie screen, Lola was merely the most beautiful woman any of us had ever seen.

So beautiful that sometimes it hurt my heart just to look at her.

I play on, receding slightly into the background as the spotlight focuses again on the piano and Jimmy-Jay.

I remember the feel of her, the smell of her skin, the shine of her silken hair, the softness of her rose-petal lips. I remember the feel of her hips in motion with mine when we danced under a moonlit sky. She belonged to me for a little while. Just long enough to give me something I would always miss. Something I would hunger after forever.

I blow the sax softly, letting my music tell the world about her. Telling everyone about the one-sided love we shared. Sounds wrong, doesn't it? A one-sided love we shared? But that's how it was. She was mine as long as I needed her, until the music carried her away.

I continue my prayer, giving voice to my hurt with my soul and my sax, almost speaking in tongues.

Lola worked her way through each member of The Lonesome Drifters. Me, Frankie, Strother, Jimmy-Jay, even Lil' Tommy. Shared our beds, rattled our heads, broke our hearts. One by one, two by two. We were the musicians, but she was the maestro. She played us all with the finesse of a master, her need for any one of us fleeting, a melody written on the wind.

The sax gives me comfort against the memories and I pull it closer to my chest, drawing from its strength. It is a living thing in my hands and I am only truly alive when I hold it. Touch it. Feel it close.

We used to be a quintet. Jimmy-Jay on the piano. Strother on the drums. Lil' Tommy on the doghouse bass. Frankie so sweet on the guitar. Me, doing my best Lester "Prez" Young and John Coltrane impressions on the tenor sax, my abilities unfit to mention in the same breath with either of them. But, I try to make up for it in sweat and blood and love of the music.

And desire. I never had the talent a lot of men possess, but I've never been second to anyone when it comes to feeling the fire inside, that all-consuming passion.

I simply cannot live without this stage, without these men, without the big-eyed girl in the front row who sways to our music. That girl is different in every state, every city, and every club we play. Different, and yet the same. Sometimes blonde, sometimes brunette. Some thick, others thin. This one tall, that one short. None of that matters.

What matters is:

She gets it. She feels it.

Down to the bottoms of her feet and vibrating in her soul.

She's riding the wave.

Ten feet away from the stage and making love to each note we play.

Moving with the music.

And for the time it takes us to play our set, she is the most perfect woman in the world.

That's how we met Lola.

She was that girl. *That woman.* The one who got it.

The boys and I had a one night gig at a hole-in-the-wall outside of a nowhere town called Blackwater, Kentucky. The owners didn't let live bands come in often. When they did, they usually had Country and Bluegrass, or sometimes a bit of Rockabilly. Once in a while, the local fellas would try to play some Blues.

I'm not sure the good people of Blackwater had ever heard Jazz before. But they heard it that night. They heard it on one of those rare nights when everything is clicking. When each note is perfect. When even a missed beat sounds like it was dropped on purpose. And the people...the people responded.

But nobody responded quite like Lola.

Even now, whenever I say her name, I think of that song. You know, the one that says, "Whatever Lola Wants, Lola Gets...." We always teased her about that song, and she took it well.

She took a lot of things well.

My Lola – *our* Lola – was tall, tan, and long-legged. Her hips said she was a woman, not a young girl, and that was fine with me. Fine with all of us, I suppose. Her hair was thick and long and the color of liquid-coal. Her eyes – my God, her eyes – they were big and green and riveting. She had a look that would set a man’s skin to smoldering, make him ache deep down just to touch her hand. She knew what she was doing with that fiery look. And she enjoyed doing it. That night, even before I met her, I felt starved for her. One look and a hunger flared inside me, low in my gut and up in my teeth, an ache without agony.

She claimed to be 30. I figured her for closer to 40. She could pass for 25 without question.

On stage, Jimmy-Jay points in my direction again and I work my way into an amber spot. I blow hard and slow, working each note until sweat beads my forehead and slicks my hands. I keep my eyes closed, feeling the music pour out of me and then fill me up again. I play a slightly slowed version of Boots Randolph’s “Yakety Sax” and then meld it into a piece of my own. The crowd seems to like it, and that’s nice. But I’m playing it for me. And the rest of the boys in the band. And, of course, for Lola.

Like I said, she worked her way through all of us. She started with Strother that very first night in Blackwater. They were hot and sweaty in the backseat of our old piece of shit Cadillac, all over one another while the rest of us packed up the gear. We waited until they finished before piling into the seats ourselves. I don’t know who covered up who, but there wasn’t any skin showing on either of them by the time I climbed behind the wheel. Settling in, I asked Strother where I should drop her. “Ain’t droppin’ her nowhere, Crash,” he said in a raspy, spent voice. “She’s going with us.”

I looked at her, raised my eyebrows, left the question unspoken. She smiled sleepily, nodded, then nestled in halfway on top of Strother and halfway on top of Lil' Tommy. Tommy looked at her wide-eyed, feeling her legs and hips on top of his. He tried to speak or breathe or something. The only thing working was his Adam's apple.

I grinned at Tommy, then looked over at Jimmy-Jay in the shotgun seat. "What do you think?"

"You reckon we got a choice?"

I thought about it, then gave Jimmy-Jay an "Oh, well hell" shrug and dropped the Caddy into Drive.

Looking back, I guess we should've dumped her off somewhere – anywhere – that night. Things would've been a lot easier and there probably wouldn't have been nearly as much hurt. But, what could we do?

Strother was in love.

I didn't bother to tell him we were *all* in love.

As it turned out, he didn't need to be told. He figured it out for himself pretty quick.

Lola and Strother lasted about a month or so. Until the night in Memphis when Strother went back to our motel to pick up some extra sticks and brushes. He found Lola in the shower with Jimmy-Jay. I know it hurt him, even though he didn't say a word about it. I could tell from the way he looked at Lola from then on. And I could tell from the way he played.

Rolling the trap set had never been a problem for Strother. He could work the sticks and keep the beat with the best of them. Sometimes, though, it seemed he was simply going through the motions. Like he wasn't playing from the heart or because he loved the music, but because

that's what his hands could do. Instead of letting loose, he played the fastest, most demanding solo with the same enthusiasm he had while warming up. He couldn't let the energy – the love of the music – come through. I wasn't sure he could even feel it.

But that was before Lola.

After Lola, he was bursting with love and hate and pain and relief and so many things he could never explain. And since he couldn't put any of it into words, he let his hands and his drums tell the story. He played with more strength, more passion, more heart, more soul, more pain than I'd ever heard from him before. The sticks and brushes confessed his sins, moaned his anguish, freed him from the loneliness, even if it was only for a little while.

After a few weeks with Jimmy-Jay, Lola needed a new fix and set her sights on Lil' Tommy. Being young, Tommy had even less resistance than the rest of us. Not that any of us had much resistance to Lola's charms. None of us were that strong. To be honest, I don't know a man alive who'd be strong enough to resist if Lola made up her mind and turned that smoldering sexuality up full-flame. But Tommy – shit – he was gone from the very beginning, right from the first when she put her legs across his lap in the back of the Caddy. By the time she was ready for him, all she had to do was smile and Tommy was shuckin' out of his jeans.

I didn't blame him. None of us did. At his age, any of us would do the same thing. Hell, at my age, I *wanted* to do the same thing.

Trust me, I know how all this sounds. About Lola, I mean. It sounds like she was easy. Loose. A slut. Maybe something even worse. But it wasn't that way at all. That isn't how we thought of it. And that's certainly not how it felt.

She loved us. Each of us. I still believe that now, even after everything that's happened. And she loved the music we played. More importantly, she loved the music hidden inside us.

The music moved her, spoke to her soul, made her feel romantic and dewy and hungry all at the same time. Besides, any of us could've said, "No."

We didn't though. Didn't even try.

Lola stayed with Tommy the shortest time, but the impact was strong. Like they'd been together for years. When they were over, he still loved her and she still loved him, but she was sitting and showering and sleeping with me. Lil' Tommy had always been bashful, maybe even backward, especially around women. After Lola, he had a new poise about him. It didn't take him long to find other girls as we passed from town to town.

Tommy tried to act like everything was just the same as before. I knew better. I could see the difference in the way he carried himself. I could hear the difference in the way he played. His hands more confident on the strings, his playing was heartier, richer, full of deeper despair. He'd crossed some kind of bridge.

I was proud of him. And I felt guilty as hell whenever he looked me in the eye.

It isn't my turn for the spotlight yet, but Strother doesn't come in on time. The faraway look on his face tells me he's gone, lost to us for now, searching for his own path. I step up and take the weight of the lights, saving Jimmy-Jay from trying to cover Strother's absence. I need the release anyway, need to purge some of the emotion. I imagine my arms around her as I play. The crowd locks right in on the three of us: Me, The Sax, Lola's Ghost. They can feel it. The purity of it. The energy. *The Love*.

I let it all out, wringing myself dry. I carry the crowd along with me, lifting them up on a prayerful mix of hurt and hate, reverence and rapture. They float along willingly, savoring the

ride, yearning for it as much as I do. When I finally set them down, I do it gently. They stand in stunned silence as I slide back out of the spot. Slowly, they begin to applaud. Their hands come together rhythmically, respectfully, and yet with a love and a passion I'm quite certain they don't truly understand. I let the sax play out its final few notes and tilt my head in a slight bow as Jimmy-Jay reclaims the limelight.

Lola and I stayed together for eight months and twelve days. Long enough to learn each other, the natural rhythms of our bodies, our hearts, and how to put it all to music.

She came to know what I wanted, what I needed, and when I was too spent to go any more. I knew her body like my own. What she liked. What she loved. What she professed not to enjoy but truly hungered for most.

The Lonesome Drifters worked the road for about six months out of the year, hitting every bar, nightclub, motel, hotel, roadhouse, or community hall that would have us. We set up our equipment anywhere that had a stage – and a lot of places that didn't – year after year after year. We wrote new songs and new arrangements of old songs as we moved from town to town, planning for our next album. I wrote most of the new songs. Jimmy-Jay did most of the arrangements. We never worked on the same piece at the same time, though. We didn't need to. The music united us. Made us one. Body and Soul. Words and Music. Rhythm and Rhyme.

One day, when we were stopped for gas and everybody else was inside the station, I pulled Jimmy-Jay aside. "I've got this little bluesy thing going on in my head," I told him. "I keep thinking of it as 'Lola's Song.' It starts out kind of slow and then moves up-tempo by the mid-point. It's got some Rag in it, too. And I'm hearing one part in my head where it's just

Frankie's guitar and Lil' Tommy on that old doghouse of his. I can't really put it into words. It's like...."

He shushed me with a single raised finger, his eyes unfocused, looking off somewhere in the distance. After a minute, he nodded and said, "I think I hear it. Get me the words when you can."

By the time I gave him my sweat-and-coffee-stained pages a day or two later, he had the biggest share of it arranged and mapped out for each of us. He and I worked that way a lot.

We generally played road shows from late April to the end of October or early November. None of us wanted to be on the highway when it was too cold or the weather was threatening to get bad. As tired as we were all the time, and with the liquor flowing like it did, we had a hard enough time keeping that big old Cadillac on its wheels without throwing a bunch of snow and ice and God-Knew-What-Else into the mix.

At the end of the season, we'd split up and take care of what little we had in the way of personal lives from Thanksgiving until after New Years. Then, like clockwork, we'd start migrating toward one another somewhere, all of us coming together unannounced. We'd find a place to stay and rent out the local Lions Club or Knights Of Columbus Hall. For a month or so after that, we'd get together every day and work out the final touches on the songs for our next album. When we had it all down cold, we'd head toward Chicago and our regular recording studio. Once there, we'd bust our asses to get it all down on tape as fast as we could.

When the band split up for the holidays that year, Lola and I took the Caddy and headed south, aiming for Atlanta. Our route took us within an hour of Lola's home back in Blackwater. I asked her if she wanted to stop in and say "Hey" to her folks or anything. She just laughed and kissed me on the cheek. That was the only answer I got. We kept on driving.

When we hit Atlanta, some friends put us up for a few nights until I could find us a place to stay. When it was just me, I didn't much care where I made my bed. Having Lola with me changed that. I wanted her to have the best, but did what I could with the money I had. I found a three-room house just on the outskirts of town that was cheap, clean, and secluded. It was so small we couldn't get away from each other if we tried. That made it perfect.

The stage lights darken and I begin the slow ride down "Cry Me A River," feeling every note deep in my gut. My eyes are hot and moist again.

My God, how I want her in my arms.

In my bed.

Lola and I went out every night, out to find the music. We'd go somewhere, eat something. It didn't much matter where or what. Sometimes steak at a nice restaurant. Sometimes a hunk of bologna from the butcher's shop down the street. Neither of us cared. It was just part of the process, a process focused mainly on finding the music and making love. Those were our two main goals for any given day and night. Spend as much time in bed as possible. Then, when we had nothing left, go find the music.

The rest of the fellas started showing up about midway through January. They could tell that Lola and I had a cozy arrangement, so they found their own places to stay. Pretty soon we were all there in Atlanta: Jimmy-Jay, Strother, Lil' Tommy, Frankie, Lola and me. We started working out the new stuff for the album, getting ready to head up to Chicago, getting ready to get it all down. Jimmy-Jay had outdone himself on the arrangements, and his piano never sounded

better. Strother and Lil' Tommy were both tight, each of them on top of his game. Feeling it. Working it out.

Lola sat on a barstool beside me while we rehearsed, her hand tapping time on my thigh. I was holding up my end with the saxophone just fine. Better than ever. They all said so.

Frankie was a different story. Unlike the rest of us, he couldn't seem to find himself, couldn't seem to get his chords to work, couldn't get the runs down, couldn't keep the flow. He wasn't feeling it. All he was feeling was down and not even the music could pick him up. I saw him stealing embarrassed glances at Lola. He knew, just like we all did, that she lived for the music. It was as much a part of life as her heartbeat or her next breath of air. He was spoiling it for us – for her – and was feeling awful bad about the whole thing. And the worse he felt, the worse he played.

He had always been the most reliable member of our group. Nothing fazed him. If he had ten cents in his pocket or ten grand, he could play. If he had a woman or had been alone for months, he could play. If he was sick, if he was hurt, if he was drunk or high, it didn't matter. He could play that guitar. But now, suddenly, his fingers had all the finesse of railroad spikes.

He was pushing 50 years old and the one thing that sustained him was suddenly gone. He felt the abandonment completely, down in his heart, eating away at his guts. He grew wan and whiskered and emaciated over the next few days. We all tried to convince him he was just going through a rough patch. That he'd be fine in a day or two. He didn't believe us. Didn't believe in himself, I guess. He started bringing a bottle of Jack Daniels to rehearsal with him.

We didn't say anything. Hell, maybe it would help.

It didn't.

He only got more down on himself. And the further down he got, the worse he played.
And the worse he played, the more down he got.

Play worse, feel worse. Feel worse, play worse.

Forever and ever.

World without end.

Amen.

He couldn't break the circle and wouldn't let us help him. I'm not sure we could've done anything anyway. Two days before we were scheduled to leave for Chicago, things still hadn't gotten any better for Frankie. The guitar was his enemy.

At one point, as afternoon was fading into evening, it took Strother and me together to keep Frankie from smashing the guitar into a thousand pieces in a blind, drunken rage. We wrestled his treasured Fender with the gold pick-ups away from him and tucked it safely home inside its velvet-lined case. He watched us snap the case shut, then slumped against the wall, put his face into his hands and began to sob.

We tried to talk with him, tried to bring him out of it. We couldn't do or say anything right. The guys and I went for a walk finally, leaving Frankie to his tears. We figured it was better not to be there, better for him to get it out and not worry about us. Guys are kind of funny that way. No matter how deep the hurt, tears tend to dry up quick when other men are around.

Lola stayed behind with Frankie. The rest of us meandered outside, walking around the block, talking without saying anything, smoking cigarettes, drinking too much cheap beer. After nearly three hours had passed, we decided to call it a night. Chicago was beckoning and the studio wouldn't wait. We all hoped Frankie could pull himself together. Real quick.

I don't know what time Lola came in that night. I fell asleep waiting for her. When I woke up the next morning, it was almost as if she'd never been there. Almost as if she'd never been a part of my life at all. Everything of hers was gone. Everything of mine was still there, exactly as I'd left it.

The only thing she'd left behind was the smell of her hair on my pillow. I buried my face in it, drawing in great breaths, hoping to lock the smell of her – the essence of her – in my head.

At last, I managed to get up. It felt like a climb just to get to my feet. I remembered what I'd been taught as a boy, and I tried to walk off the pain by pacing circles around the room. It didn't work. Rivulets of cold sweat raced down my back and chest.

I stumbled into the bathroom, went to my knees and threw up. My insides tried to rip free. The dry-heaves set in, along with hot wet tears. Sometime later, when I could remain upright, I made my way over to the sink, rinsed the bile from my mouth and splashed cold water on my face. I thought maybe I'd be able to pull myself together. I thought maybe I'd be alright. Then I spotted the folded note on top of my shaving kit and knew I would never be alright again.

I picked up the small piece of paper, knowing already what was written inside, afraid to read it and remove any doubt. My goddamn hands wouldn't stop shaking. I willed them to relax, to quit, but they shook just the same.

I opened the note. It wasn't from Lola.

Dear Crash,

I'm sorry about all of this. I really am. I know how much she means to you. I can see it in your eyes. I didn't mean for this to happen. I love you like a brother, but I just can't live without the music.

And I can't have the music without Lola. Without her, it's just...gone. I know you can't ever forgive and forget, but maybe someday you'll understand.

I Love You, Crash. And Lola Says She Loves You Too.

Frankie

I stumbled back to the bed, half-sat and half-fell onto it. I drifted away, came back to myself, drifted away again. I don't know how long I stayed there. It felt like a long time. When I could walk again, I went to the phone and called the package store a couple blocks over. Two half-gallon jugs of Jim Beam showed up at my door a little while later.

I locked the door and didn't open it again for nearly three days.

I haven't heard from Frankie or Lola since then. None of the guys have. Not directly anyway. I mean, we've *heard* him. Hell, how could we help it? Frankie's been all over the radio since he and Lola took off. But, we haven't heard *from* them.

I wonder if we ever will.

The blue spotlight heads back my way and Jimmy-Jay gives me a wink from the piano. He can tell how needful I am and he's helping me the only way he can. He's my brother. My brother in music. And music is thicker than blood or water.

I move forward, lift my face into the blue spot, a child turning his face to the sun. The breath I draw in is ragged from uncried tears. But when it leaves my body and becomes one with the sax, something happens. Something powerful. Something beautiful. My tattered, tangled breath becomes velvet smooth.

Smooth like fine bourbon. Smooth like Lola's skin.

If I let myself go completely, if I reach up, higher than ever before, I'll be able to feel her.

I believe that. I have faith.

I pull the sax closer, feeling it like a woman.

Feeling it like Lola.

I close my eyes; let the sax become my voice.

And I begin to pray.

THE END