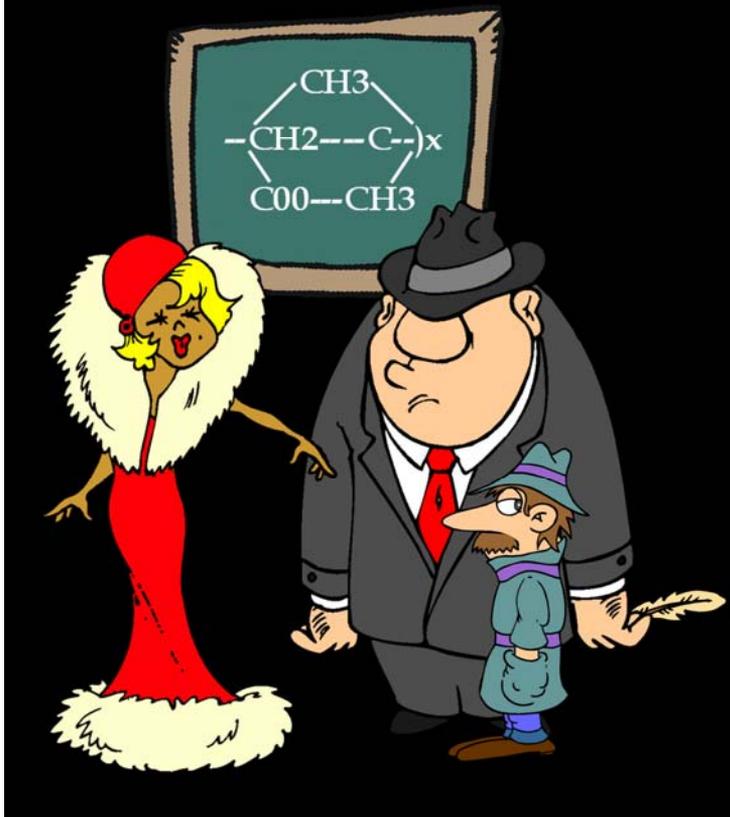


Suddenly,
a SHOT Rang OUT...



Peter Campbell

Norman Maine Publishing

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SuddenLy, a SHOT Rang Out...

SPOOF. Audiences will love this hilarious film noir spoof. Lola Dusseldorf, a mysterious femme fatale, arrives in Chinatown at the office of Jack Fargo, a bumbling private investigator on the verge of bankruptcy. Lola has invented a plastics formula that will revolutionize the patio furniture industry and is on the run from the evil Colonel Wilberton, a spy dispatched by the Pan-Eurasian Petrochemicals Company to steal the formula. Colonel Wilberton is prepared to do anything...even employ one of the most hideous forms of torture known to man involving castor oil and a feather to obtain the formula. But before Lola and Jack can even leave the office, Colonel Wilberton arrives with his hulking bodyguard, a feather, and a bottle of castor oil. It doesn't take long before Jack and Lola put two and two together and realize they are in a real slippery situation!

Performance Time: Approximately 30 minutes.

NOTE: For a family friendly version of this play in which profanity and adult content have been edited out, please refer to www.BigDogPlays.com.

Characters

(2 M, 2 F, 1 flexible)

JACK FARGO: Private detective on the brink of bankruptcy who tries to give the impression that he is cynical and worldly but only succeeds in emphasizing his good-natured innocence; wears a suit with a loosened tie.

PENNY ARCADE: Jack's loyal, devoted secretary, a middle-aged, frowsy, scrawny, ill-tempered semi-blonde with a face like a horse; wears a dress decorated with ridiculously large polka dots.

LOLA DUSSELDORF: Jack's only client, a femme fatale who claims to have invented a plastics process that will revolutionize the patio furniture industry; wears a red dress.

COLONEL WILBERTON: Evil, menacing representative of the Pan-Eurasian Petrochemicals Company; wears a black suit and bifocals and holds a cigarette pointing upward and clasped between his thumb and forefinger; short in stature (the shorter the better).

OTTO "THE ICEMAN" SKORZENY: Wilberton's silent, hulking bodyguard who was discovered working in a Polish circus as a prehistoric man who had been found frozen in the ice of a lost Siberian lake; very tall, large stature (the taller the better); wears a jacket with pockets; non-speaking; may be played by a female dressed as a male.

Setting

August 23, 1949. Manhattan's Chinatown.

Set

Jack Fargo's small second-floor office in Manhattan's Chinatown. On the back wall are three windows. Painted on the large center window, in reverse, are the words "Jack Fargo" in a semi-circle, under which in a straight line is the word "Investigations." The smaller side windows are open. A desk is in front of the center window. Behind it is a wooden swivel chair. In front of the desk are two straight back chairs. At SR, two large filing cabinets jut out from the wall, forming a small niche to the upstage side. Between the cabinets and the desk is an easel with a small blackboard on which is written in chalk, "Motive + Opportunity." Downstage against the SR wall is an old leather sofa with a small coffee table in front of it. A water cooler stands SL next to a calendar on the wall which advertises life insurance. Next to the cooler is the door to the outer office. The top half of the door is frosted glass. The room is bleakly lit by an overhead fluorescent fixture. Additional light comes from a large neon fixture outside the upper left side window. A garish red glow advertises "Ah Cheu's," the Chinese restaurant on the first floor.

PROPS

Recorder

Bottle of whiskey

Paper cups

Pencil

Wastebasket

Pen

Pad of paper

Chalkboard on an easel

Chalk

Newspaper

Cigarette

Large red enema

Small toy automatic gun

Toy revolver

SOUND EFFECTS

Saxophone playing "Blue
Moon"

Breaking wind

Harp music

Sound of a violent scuffle

Crashes

Gunshot

High-pitched scream

Suddenly, a Shot Rang Out...

7

***"Mocka
gLocka
bocka
boodLeedoo"***

—Lola

SuddenLy, a SHOT Rang Out...

(AT RISE: August 23, 1949. Jack Fargo's small second-floor office in Manhattan's Chinatown, late evening. With his coat on the back of his chair and his tie loosened, Jack Fargo sits with his feet on the desk dictating into a wire recorder. He tries to give the impression that he is cynical and worldly but only succeeds in emphasizing his good-natured innocence. He has no clients and is on the brink of bankruptcy, but he is absurdly optimistic. A bottle of whiskey and a paper cup are on the desk. Outside in the sweltering night, a saxophone plays "Blue Moon, you saw me standing alone.")

JACK: *(Dictating.)* August 23, 1949. Memoirs of a Private Investigator. Volume one. Chapter one. My name is Jack Fargo. This is my story. It's the story of a life spent in the pursuit of justice on behalf of the meek and the humble, the oppressed, who have turned to me in their hour of need. My office is on Mott Street over a Chinese restaurant called "Ah Cheu's Cantonese Delight." Actually, there is no Ah Cheu. The restaurant is owned by Kim Kim, a North Korean who is posing as a Hungarian, for obvious reasons. But I digress. My agency is trim and efficient. My only employee is my loyal and devoted secretary, Miss Penny Arcade, who joined me early this year from the Yale Club, where she informed me she had worked for 36 years as recording secretary. *(Takes a sip of whiskey.)* I grew up on Pitkin Avenue in Brownsville. It was a neighborhood filled with hard-working men and women who were an inspiration to us all. We had Black Hand enforcers, Irish assassins, Gypsy scam artists, Mafioso musclemen, and Camorra extortionists. There used to be a place called Midnight Rose's on the corner of Livonia and Saratoga. In the front it was a candy store. In the back was where the Murder, Inc.

hit men used to wait for their assignments. Rose's got so famous it was named an historical landmark.

(Jack's reverie is interrupted by Miss Penny, who opens the door to the outer office and stumbles into the room.)

PENNY: You're going to be an historical landfill if you don't get off your rear end and get some business. In case you hadn't noticed, you're down to \$247 in the bank and a '41 Plymouth that doesn't run too good anymore.

JACK: Ah, Miss Penny, it's good to see you up and about. Did you have a good nap?

PENNY: Don't gimme that soft soap. You private ears are all alike. You think us girls will fall for you because you're Broadway hotshots. Well, you got another thing coming. I'm saving myself for Tyrone Power.

JACK: Rest assured, Miss Penny, amorous intentions are the furthest thing from my thoughts.

PENNY: Yeah? Then why'd you slip me that ten bucks this afternoon?

JACK: I said that was to get a money order to pay the electric bill before they turn off the power. We do have to pay things like that from time to time, you know.

PENNY: You also have to pay things like me from time to time. You owe me since June.

JACK: Surely, it hasn't been that long. You're an excellent secretary, but as a record keeper, you seem to be a little inept.

PENNY: Don't hand me that. I'm as ept as you are. I ain't had a dime out of you for eight weeks. *(Recalling the Artie Shaw tune "It Ain't Right," Penny begins to sing in a raucous, gull-like voice. Sings.)*

"It ain't right

To do what you do to me,

I'd go on, what's the use?

You have killed your golden goose;

From now on I'm on the loose,
Count the revenues and call me.
It ain't right,
So, baby, farewell."

JACK: (*Applauds.*) You would've been a terrific singer, Miss Penny.

PENNY: Damn right. I could have been one of the best canaries in town, but I let myself get dazzled by the glamour of the private ear business.

(Penny bends over to retrieve a pencil from the floor. Sound of breaking wind.)

JACK: You only started here six months ago.

PENNY: That's what I mean. Look at all the time I've wasted.

(Penny scratches her armpit and then goes to the water cooler for a paper cup. She crosses to Fargo's desk and pours herself a drink from the whiskey bottle.)

JACK: Help yourself.

PENNY: I don't mind if I do. It's dusty in that outer office. I don't have windows like you.

JACK: Well, at least it's nice and warm.

PENNY: Warm? It must be a hundred and ten out there. You've got me working in a sweatshop. I'm gonna notify the city.

JACK: I meant, in the winter it's nice and warm.

PENNY: I wasn't here in the winter, and neither were you. In case it slipped your mind, you were in the slammer last winter.

JACK: That was unfortunate.

PENNY: Two years for wiretapping. Hah!

JACK: I know. I know.

PENNY: Nobody in his right mind would bug a sheriff's house.

JACK: I wasn't aware he was a sheriff at the time.

PENNY: His car in the driveway had red and blue lights on top. What did you think that was? An ambulance?

JACK: I thought the police were there answering a call about a domestic dispute.

PENNY: Oh, brother.

JACK: He and his wife disputed frequently. His wife thought he was fooling around on her. They had this lake house. His wife thought he went there to meet the other woman.

PENNY: So you couldn't just hide in the bushes with a camera like everybody else?

JACK: I fully intended to do that when I had established beyond a doubt that there was another woman involved.

PENNY: What was she supposed to do? Call you on the telephone?

JACK: The surveillance never reached the final stage. It turned out he went to the house at the lake every Friday night to play poker with some of his cronies.

PENNY: Some cronies. They were all cops. They found the tap the first night. You bugged a houseful of cops. Bugging people is their racket. You're lucky they didn't plug you.

JACK: You're right. It's a blemish on my otherwise exemplary record.

PENNY: Some record. I happen to know even P.S. Eighty-Five was glad to get rid of you.

JACK: It could have happened to anyone. It's not easy to plant a bug on another professional. They're very sophisticated about such things.

PENNY: That sheriff was even dumber than you.

JACK: I wouldn't say that. I mean, he had to have credentials and experience to hold a job like that.

PENNY: Experience, my foot! I heard he got a wanted poster on some crook with three photos on it—a full face and two profiles. He wired the F.B.I. that he'd caught one of the guys and had a good idea where the other two were hiding out. He was an idiot.

JACK: Well, I won't be doing any phone surveillance for awhile since they confiscated my bug and I don't have another one.

PENNY: There are plenty of extra bugs in this dump. (*Stomps on a passing roach, then another, then a third. She then continues the stomping as a brief tap dance. Proudly.*) Didn't know I could dance, too, did ya? Any other employer would pay a bonus for this kind of talent. That reminds me...I need a pension for when I retire from your employ, which will be soon, I hope. So set it up and throw in some Blue Cross while you're at it.

JACK: I'll work on it.

PENNY: Like you're working on those memoirs of yours? You leave out all the good stuff.

JACK: It will be a comprehensive look at the unheralded work of a private investigator.

PENNY: Oh, yeah? Did you put in that your real name is Johan Pflug?

JACK: (*Wincing.*) The "P" is silent, Miss Penny.

PENNY: That's even worse.

JACK: I omitted it because it wasn't relevant.

PENNY: Uh-huh. How about Staten Island Susie? Is she relevant?

JACK: (*Squirming.*) Not exactly.

PENNY: Floozy comes in here looking like she's been hung over for a week. Tells you she thinks her neighbor is a vampire. Wants you to check it out. And you, you luftmensch, you take the case with no retainer.

JACK: I felt sorry for her. She had nowhere else to turn. She might have been in real danger.

PENNY: Will you listen to yourself? (*Shouts.*) There's no such thing as a vampire, you putz! Unless you count my late husband who is just mean enough to climb out of the grave some night.

JACK: I thought you and Mr. Arcade were agreeably married.

PENNY: We agreed just long enough for that rat to seduce me in Massachusetts. You could say I fell in Fall River. That was the last time we agreed on anything. Don't try and change the subject. How about the Dibbles? Are you gonna put them in the story?

JACK: That was a simple domestic dispute. It doesn't seem appropriate.

PENNY: A simple domestic dispute? She plugs her husband and then wants you to back her up on a self-defense plea.

JACK: The right of self-defense is a well-established legal tradition.

PENNY: (*Shouts.*) She shot the son of a bitch 48 times with a machine gun!

JACK: That's true. But she was afraid he was going to attack her.

PENNY: (*Shouts.*) He was asleep at the time!

JACK: Yes, but she said he had a menacing scowl on his face. She could hardly wait for him to wake up and strangle her.

PENNY: I give up. You're hopeless, you schmuck. (*Drinks the whiskey, crushes the paper cup, and tosses it in the general direction of the wastebasket by the desk. It misses.*) There's a dame outside to see you. I'll send her in. You might want to zip up your fly first. (*Jack hastily sits up straight, zips his fly, and adjusts his tie. Penny opens the door to the outer office.*) Mr. Fargo will see you now, Miss Dufflebag.

(Penny exits. Harp music fills the room as Lola Dusseldorf, a voluptuous woman, enters and stands framed in the doorway. She is tall and ravishing and clad in a red dress that reveals every millimeter of her astonishing anatomy. Jack leaps to his feet, pulls on his jacket, and steps out from behind the desk to greet her.)

JACK: Please have a seat, Miss...uh...

LOLA: Lola...Lola Dusseldorf.

JACK: (*Flustered.*) May I offer you a drink, Lola, Lola Dusseldorf?

LOLA: It's just one "Lola." I have no middle name.

JACK: Ah.

LOLA: Perhaps some other time. I wasn't sure you would be open for business this late at night.

JACK: I'm available to my clients 24 hours a day.

LOLA: That's very reassuring. Do you have many clients?

JACK: I really can't discuss them. Ethical considerations, you know. But as you can see, it's after nine, and I'm still in the office.

LOLA: I understand, of course. Forgive me for asking.

JACK: I imagine you're here because of difficulty of some kind. How may I be of help?

LOLA: That's very perceptive of you.

JACK: Yes. That is my business, you see. By the way, how did you come to hear of me? Was it the district attorney's office? I get so many referrals from them.

LOLA: As a matter of fact, it was the ladies' room at the bus station.

JACK: I beg your pardon?

LOLA: Your name and phone number were written on the wall.

JACK: On the wall?

LOLA: Next to a little sticker advertising the Fille de Joie Escort Service.

JACK: (*Chokes on his drink.*) Fille de Joie?

LOLA: Isn't that a rather odd place for you to advertise? It doesn't seem very dignified.

JACK: You're absolutely right. I'll speak to my agency about it in the morning. I'll just make a note of it. (*Fakes scribbling on a pad.*) The bus station, you said?

LOLA: Forty-second Street. The ladies' room. Ground floor.

JACK: Thank you for bringing it to my attention. It's hard to get good help nowadays. (*Desperately changing the subject.*) You have an interesting accent, Miss Dusseldorf. I've been trying to place it. Is it Germanic?

LOLA: Call me "Lola." You might say I'm a woman of the world. You see, I speak eight languages fluently, including Sino-Tibetan and colloquial Bantu.

JACK: That's very impressive. Would you say something in Bantu for me?

(Lola smiles and flirtatiously slides up to Fargo, stopping with her face six inches from his and the rest of her body even closer.)

LOLA: *(Whispering huskily.)* Mocka glocka bocka boodledeedoo...

JACK: That's remarkable. *(Flustered because she is so close.)* I don't think I've ever heard Bantu before.

LOLA: Actually, I'm better at Sino-Tibetan. But I don't get much practice these days. You wouldn't happen to know the Dalai Lama by any chance, would you?

JACK: I'm afraid not. Most of my clients aren't what you'd call *religious*.

LOLA: The people who are after me aren't religious, either. They're really quite ruthless.

JACK: Maybe you'd better tell me about it. Start from the beginning.

LOLA: I was born in Omaha, Nebraska—

JACK: Uh...not quite that far back, Lola.

LOLA: *(Ignoring him.)* In fact, that was my name before I changed it. My mother had a one-night stand with a fertilizer salesman from there, and—

JACK: You're being pursued by a ruthless fertilizer salesman from Nebraska?

LOLA: I am being pursued by an international cartel.

JACK: Can they do that?

LOLA: They can do anything. And they will do anything to get what they want.

JACK: And they want you?

LOLA: They want the knowledge I possess. You see, Mr. Fargo, I have invented a new plastics process. It will completely revolutionize the patio furniture industry.

JACK: An international cartel is interested in patio furniture?

LOLA: It transcends all geopolitical boundaries.

JACK: And you say you invented this new plastics process?

Excuse me for saying so, Miss Dusseldorf—Lola—but you don't seem like the inventor type.

LOLA: You would prefer that I looked like Einstein?

JACK: Not exactly, but—

LOLA: Did I mention that I have a degree in chemical engineering from Cornell?

JACK: No. I don't believe you did.

LOLA: The process is really quite simple. One merely introduces long-chain alcohols to polymethyl methacrylate—in the proper proportion, of course.

JACK: (*Uncertainly.*) Of course.

LOLA: This lowers the softening point of certain plastics.

JACK: Of course.

LOLA: A more malleable plastic makes new applications possible.

JACK: Like patio furniture?

LOLA: Patio shelters, office partitions, windshields, and reflectors. But I'm really proudest of its potential for large colorful highway displays.

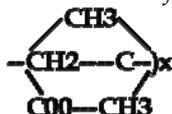
JACK: Billboards?

LOLA: It's always been my dream to create beautiful highway displays to brighten the drab greens and browns of the American landscape.

JACK: (*Bewildered.*) Everyone should have a dream. That's what America's all about.

(Lola goes to the chalkboard, erases what's on it, picks up a piece of chalk, and begins to write.)

LOLA: This is what they're after. This is the formula. I need someone to guard it—someone like you. If they torture me, my mind may play tricks on me, and I may not be able to remember it. You must guard it with your life. *(Steps aside and we see the formula on written on the chalkboard.)*



JACK: That's it?

LOLA: It's deceptively simple. But make no mistake...this has the power to revolutionize even the motorcycle windshield industry.

JACK: Who are these people who are after you?

LOLA: They have agents everywhere, in every country. Their tentacles reach into large cities and small towns like a giant, evil octopus. And, like the octopus, the cartel is a gatherer, a collector. It will stop at nothing to gain control of the formula.

JACK: Does this cartel have a name?

LOLA: They have many names. But the one by which they are best known to the world is Pan-Eurasian Petrochemicals.

JACK: I've never heard of them.

LOLA: That's because they are insidiously clever. They hide behind a screen of dummy corporations and holding companies, and they move their sinister headquarters several times each year. They are now located in a small village in Finland.

JACK: How can you be positive they're after the formula?

LOLA: Because their agents kidnapped me last week.

JACK: What?

LOLA: They took me to a house in the country. It was there that they tortured me...day after day.

JACK: The swine!

LOLA: (*Proudly.*) But I told them nothing...nothing. Not even when they... (*Shudders*) ...used the surgical glove...and the feather.

JACK: It must have been terrible for you.

LOLA: Oh, it was, it was. I'm not a brave woman, Mr. Fargo.

JACK: Call me "Jack."

LOLA: If they had kept it up much longer, I would have told them what they wanted to know. But I willed myself to hold on. I could not let myself break. I could not let them destroy my dream.

JACK: I admire your...fortitude.

LOLA: Thank you. But it wasn't really fortitude. I was able to protect the secret formula only because of a medical condition known as anterograde amnesia.

JACK: I don't understand.

LOLA: This condition is characterized by an obliteration of previous events or thoughts from the memory. It usually occurs after a severe shock or trauma.

JACK: You have this condition?

LOLA: The trauma brought about by the torture the beasts subjected me to brought on a severe spell of anterograde.

JACK: You mean that when they tortured you, your brain blacked out the formula from your memory?

LOLA: Exactly. The fiends defeated their own purpose. However, in this case, the condition was aggravated by a deeply rooted memory problem I've had for years. So even if they had administered truth serum, I could not have remembered the formula.

JACK: (*Befuddled.*) You would not have remembered having no memory?

LOLA: Most times it causes me no difficulty, but sometimes I forget things.

JACK: Like what?

LOLA: Mundane things, usually. Like glue or umbrellas or asparagus.

JACK: You mean you forget where things are?

LOLA: No. I forget *what* they are. Last month, I forgot what broccoli was. I thought it was some kind of paint brush.

JACK: That could've been messy.

LOLA: Fortunately, I had forgotten what paint was at the same time.

JACK: How can you possibly forget things like that?

LOLA: My mind has so much to deal with that it sometimes ignores the trivial. Last Wednesday, there was something I couldn't remember but it started to come back to me the next day. What is that called again?

JACK: Thursday.

LOLA: Yes. Well, I had this feeling that what I couldn't recall was either related to the number 12 or it was something to spread on bread. For a minute, I thought it might be coming back, but then it went away again. I still don't remember what it was. I probably never will unless something reminds me of it.

JACK: How did you get away from the people who kidnapped you?

LOLA: I was tied to a table and tortured, but I used my knowledge of medical science to feign death. Did I mention that I have a degree in medicine from the University of Pennsylvania?

JACK: (*Feebly.*) I don't think so. I believe I would have remembered. How did you make believe you were dead?

LOLA: It was an anatomical inversion. The Hindus have used the technique for centuries. I merely improved upon it slightly.

JACK: That's incredible. They actually thought you were dead? Didn't they check your breathing or pulse?

LOLA: The technique involves very subtle changes in the body's metabolism. They were very confused. And then when I began imitating the onset of rigor mortis, they became convinced. And it alarmed them.

JACK: What happened?

LOLA: They began arguing furiously among themselves about who was to blame for killing me. They accused each other of incompetence. Then they left the basement and went upstairs, still shouting at each other. That gave me time to escape.

JACK: But you said you were tied to a table.

LOLA: They used ropes. That was their mistake.

JACK: Doesn't everyone use ropes? I mean, it seems logical. Ropes are secure.

LOLA: A childish misconception. I simply alternately contracted and expanded my deltoid muscles while they tied the knots. Just a parlor trick really. Houdini was working on it when he died. He never did quite master it.

JACK: And then you got away?

LOLA: Not really. First, I had to get out of the basement I was held in.

JACK: I take it the basement was locked.

LOLA: Tight as a drum. No windows and a steel door two-inches thick. The lock was an industrial-quality deadbolt.

JACK: What did you do?

LOLA: I smashed the crystal on my watch and picked the lock with the minute hand.

JACK: How is that possible?

LOLA: Conceptually, picking a pin and cylinder lock is quite simple. One simply moves each pin pair to the correct position until the upper pins are in the housing and the lower pins are inside the plug. At this point, the plug rotates freely and one can open the lock. It's a matter of knowing the right pressure to apply and the right sounds emanating from the lock.

JACK: That's amazing.

LOLA: Then I ran through the woods until I came to a highway. A bus came along and I hailed it. The driver let me stay on until the last stop, which was the bus station.

JACK: Unbelievable.

LOLA: It was just a coincidence that a bus happened to come along.

JACK: No, I mean that the driver didn't charge you for the ride. Then what did you do?

LOLA: Well, as I explained, I saw your name and number on the wall in the ladies' room. I called and your secretary gave me the address. (*Goes to the window and peers into the dark street.*) The agents may have realized that I reached the highway and caught a ride into the city. They can be clever that way. And now they're desperate. They know what will happen to them if they let me escape.

JACK: They would know which busses used the highway near the house. They probably called ahead to have men stake out the bus station. They would have spotted you and followed you, waiting for a chance to kidnap you again.

LOLA: I thought so, too. So I didn't take a taxi. After all, one of their men could be posing as a cabbie. Instead, I came by subway, always doubling back and covering my tracks in order to confuse them.

JACK: How?

LOLA: I took the shuttle to Grand Central. Then I made believe I was going to get on the uptown Lexington Avenue local. When the door was closing, I slipped out and ran across the platform and took a number five train to Grand Concourse, where I doubled back down the West Side on a Seventh Avenue Express. Then I changed at Columbus Circle to the A Train, which I rode downtown to Nassau Street. Here I made believe I was going to leave the subway station, but at the last instant, I jumped aboard a northbound local to Canal Street. I walked the last few blocks.

JACK: That's remarkable. Where did you learn how to navigate the subway system like that? It's very complicated.

LOLA: That wasn't difficult. When I was running into the subway station at the bus terminal, I saw a map of the system on the wall. I made a mental note of which routes to

use. It was a little more difficult getting in without paying the fare. The kidnappers had taken my purse from me.

JACK: You jumped the turnstile?

LOLA: No. There was a guard nearby. So I walked backward through the turnstile and he assumed I was coming out.

JACK: (*Incredulously.*) Was he blind?

LOLA: You see, I studied mime in Paris with Marceau, so I simply imitated his "Walking Against the Wind" exercise and the guard was convinced.

JACK: Incredible.

[END OF FREEVIEW]