

Don't call me Dolores, call me

LOLA

At first the fog was something hiding in the lowlands, swirling across the highway when it dipped, but once John Meadows passed the Point of the Mountain going south it swallowed him and his rented Ford with the suddenness of a reproach. Twenty-one miles to Provo, a sign jumped out of the mist to inform him. Twenty-one miles to his mother's house and a Christmas Eve that John anticipated with more boredom than dread. Of course he loved his mother, left lonely in that big old house at his father's death five years before. And it would be good to see his younger sister, Cathy, her husband and the children, up from Venezuela for the holidays. But after the hugs and greetings, what then? What could he possibly tell his mother about his job on the lower rung of a Wall Street legal firm or his life in the apartment on West Twelfth that she would want to know about? And what kind of conversation did he think he'd be able to have with Cathy and her lymphatic husband, Ron, beyond please pass the dressing and would you like dark meat or light?

HONORABLE MENTION IN THE D. K. BROWN
FICTION CONTEST

With a gesture of irritation John pushed in the cigarette lighter and fumbled for a Winston in the pocket of his parka. The fog clung to the car as it crept down the freeway as if by feel, and now and then the young man was startled by the winks of oncoming headlights as they popped out of the quiet whiteness.

BYU Next Exit, gleaming dots on a green background proclaimed, and John cut abruptly into the right lane, earning a muffled hoot from the pickup behind him. Of course, he reasoned, the monstrous metal forms of the steel mill were hidden by the fog; no wonder he didn't recognize the turnoff. And after all, it had been nearly five years.

Those were not fairy lights up ahead, but the Grand Central, and then the red disc of a traffic semaphore startled John into braking. He thought of Didi, halfway to her folks' place in Connecticut by that time, and swore softly.

"Bo and Lisa'll miss you out at the farm," Didi told him quietly as she folded levis into a suitcase.

"It's not that I don't want to go. . ." John leaned against the doorway, uncomfortable for the first time in the three years they had shared the small Village apartment. "You know I think your parents are great." He tossed her a pair of wool socks that had somehow rolled under the bed, and she caught them with one hand.

"They like you too." She held his glance for a moment, her calm gaze framed by dark curls that had their own way all over her head. Then she added, "and they understand. Why are you so sure your family wouldn't?"

"You don't know Mormons," John answered shortly.

"Maybe they'd surprise you if you gave them a chance to be understanding. Besides, a lot of people live together these days." It was a last attempt before closing the suitcase.

"Not in Provo, Utah," he replied.

Provo, Utah. John turned right up Stadium Avenue, barely able to glimpse the gothic gray of the stands on his right through the mist. He made his way up The Hill slowly, and then suddenly he was pulling into the steep driveway of his mother's house, feeling vaguely disoriented as if he were in the middle of a dream that had changed setting abruptly, without warning or logic.

As he made the steep climb to the front door, shrugging his bag higher onto his shoulder, he cursed his mother inwardly for her pretentious acceptance of the notion that the more steps you had to climb, the more elegant the house. Glancing up, John thought he caught a glimpse of a dark figure at the bay window on the second floor. His foot slipped, and he struggled to avoid falling. When he looked back up at the window there was nothing to be seen.

The doorbell sounded hollowly in the entrance-way and John shifted his weight from foot to foot, impatient, till at last the door flew open and

his mother gathered him into her arms.

"Cathy! Ron! Look who's here! It's John, home at last! We were beginning to be afraid you couldn't make it down from Salt Lake on account of the fog."

John kissed his mother on the cheek and shrugged off the fog along with his parka.

"It must've been smokey in the plane," his mother remarked as she hung his coat in the hall closet.

"Yep," he replied, unwilling to begin bickering so soon after his arrival, and then a soft tap on his shoulder made him turn to greet his little sister.

"Not so little," she insisted, smoothing her woollen jumper down over what looked to John to be eight months of belly if it was a day.

"Five," she corrected, smiling. "We think it might be twins, but we won't know for sure till I get back to Dr. Pérez in Caracas." John marvelled at her ability to make Caracas sound as commonplace as Ogden; by one simple statement equating the entire population of the bustling Venezuelan metropolis with her obstetrician.

A swarm of children buzzed down the stairs at the end of the hall, and John had the fleeting impression that they were all dolls with the same face but different wigs, some smaller and some larger. Then they were all around him, calling him Uncle John, and he could see that this one was Mandy, and he recognized Jennifer and Jeremy from the pictures. The little one must be Joshua, trailing behind, but there were other faces bobbing in and out which sparked no name in John's memory.

"And these are Dolores' children," Cathy explained, seeing her brother's confused look. "Chus, Fanny, and the little one is Benjamín. Dolores is the woman who helps us in the house. She really runs everything, actually."

God help us, John thought, if Ron and Cathy start talking politics and Latin America. They weren't even capable of pronouncing the word "maid," and yet they were so used to having one that they couldn't make a journey without her.

A television mumbled softly in the family room, and the tallest of the children, the boy John thought his sister had called Chus, cried out suddenly:

"*¡Los picapiedras!*" The rest of the children followed him into the other room, and John thought he saw Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble ambling across the screen. "*¡Pedro y Pancho!*" the baby, Benjamín, squealed and batted the screen with the heel of his hand.

"Come upstairs," John's mother insisted to the three still standing in the hallway, and then she started up herself, looking back at intervals to see if she was setting a good example. Ron was the last up the steps and John marvelled that his brother-in-law hadn't found it necessary to begin a discourse on the Dead Sea Scrolls yet, or to start dividing history up into two-thousand-year periods. Ten years with the bank in Caracas and four kids seemed to have slowed him down.

"So how's life down south?" John asked neutrally as they reached the living room.

A shadow passed across his brother-in-law's face, and John turned to see a tall, dark figure dressed in black standing in the doorway.

"Dolores!" Ron flipped the light switch with a jerkiness that John attributed to annoyance at having to introduce the maid when he was just getting ready to pontificate. Cathy took over for him swiftly:

"Dolores, this is my brother, John."

"Call me Lola," she said, holding out a slim, dark hand. John studied the face of the woman before him, a high, clever forehead set off by coal black hair pulled into a pony tail at the nape of her neck, an aquiline nose, prominent cheekbones, and an unexpectedly sensual mouth that contrasted sharply with the expressionlessness of the large brown eyes that inventoried John as he inventoried them.

"How do you do," John shook the hand that was held out to him, and as he did it struck him that the woman standing before him was very attractive in spite of the severe, black house-dress, stockings, and apron that covered her slender limbs.

"Dinner will be ready soon," she said shortly.

"Let me give you a hand in the kitchen," Cathy hurriedly offered, and John wondered if it were a gesture to impress him and his mother, or if that were her habitual American discomfort at having a servant. He supposed one had to acquire the habit of servants in the house as a child in order to accept them with naturalness.

Dolores, Mrs. Meadows, and Cathy set up TV trays in the basement for the children's dinner, and then arranged steaming dishes of turkey, gravy, yams, corn, and salad on the sideboard and told Ron and John to serve themselves. When the men hesitated, Dolores set down the basket of rolls she had just brought in from the kitchen, picked up a plate and filled it sparsely for herself, then announced that she would eat downstairs with the children.

There was a moment of silence as she left, and then the four remaining in the pale blue dining room burst into conversation as if by spontaneous combustion.

"You must have a huge place in Caracas if Dolores and her kids live with you," John remarked, helping himself generously to potatoes and gravy.

"Oh yes," Cathy chattered, spooning out stuffing. "It's enormous. Dolores and her children have the downstairs, and we're upstairs. Of course the kids are always together, either in the house or out in the garden."

"Her children seem quite nicely behaved," Mrs. Meadows remarked, seating herself at the head of the table. "And the baby, Benjamín, is a little doll with those big, blue eyes. Unusual, those eyes, when his mother's are so dark."

"Silly," John swiped a pinch at his mother's

cheek and she tittered and pulled away. "You're revealing a profound ignorance of the laws of genetics. A person with brown eyes may have a recessive gene for blue, since brown eyes are dominant. Maybe her husband has blue eyes. Or maybe he even has brown eyes too, but with another recessive blue gene."

"This sounds more like a discussion of levis than genetics," his mother teased. "But seriously, Ron, Cathy, tell us what color eyes Dolores' husband has."

Ron swallowed a mouthful of turkey and took a sip from the crystal water glass in front of him before answering, "he's dead."

"I can't remember," Cathy said at practically the same time.

"Is that why she wears black?" Mrs. Meadows wanted to know. "Mourning? I've always thought that was a barbaric custom—tragic for such a young woman."

And the conversation turned to differences in customs between Venezuela and the United States, or at least Utah.

After dinner John excused himself saying he was going for a short walk, but once he was down the front steps and hidden by the bushes from the eyes of the house, he sat down on the stone wall that surrounded his mother's property and lit a cigarette. A quiet snow was beginning to fall, and in the whiteness John reflected he had done right in not bringing Didi—in not bringing Didi *up* to his family. His mother and sister were sweethearts, but they kept their Mormonness tight around them like winter coats against the chill of reality.

The snow was falling more heavily now, and John extinguished his cigarette behind the wall and made his way through the white swirls back up to the house for the traditional Christmas Eve unwrapping of one gift before going to bed.

In the living room his mother had turned off all the lights except the ones on the tree—pale blue bulbs meant to look French Provincial with the flocking, and pools of cool illumination overlapped on the ceiling and bathed the faces of the seven children, strangely quiet in anticipation of their gifts. The scratch of a match being struck made John turn his head, and he saw Dolores in the darkened corner behind him, head bent over the cigarette she was lighting. Near the tree his mother pursed her lips but said nothing.

"I think you children should each open the packages wrapped in blue paper this evening," Cathy came out of the shadows toward the tree to fill the silence. She bent down awkwardly and then distributed the foil-wrapped packages one to a child, according to the dangling icicle name tags, and there was a quiet rustle of seven packages being undone.

"Here," John emptied the remaining bonbon from a cut glass candy dish and passed it to the dark figure in the corner. "You're about to make an ash of yourself, Dolores."

"Call me Lola," she replied, accepting the dish with a flick of her cigarette but completely rejecting the attempted humor. From the shadowy blue sofa his mother looked on disconsolately.

"Clay!" squealed Mandy, the first to succeed in peeling back the royal blue foil of her gift to reveal the contents.

"Clay," Jennifer agreed happily.

"Clay," chirped Jason.

"Kay," Joshua echoed.

"*Si es arcilla!*" Chus stated contentedly, and his brother and sister nodded their heads in agreement.

"You will play with it in the morning," Dolores put out her cigarette and then clapped her hands, drawing immediate silence from the children. "Now it is time to go to the bed." And with that the pajama-clad children disappeared as if by magic, bigger pulling smaller behind.

"Go right to sleep so that Santa can come," Cathy called after the troupe, but they seemed not to hear her.

"I will go and make certain they all wash their teeth," Dolores said quietly, and as if by pre-arranged signal when she crossed the threshold the lights from the Christmas tree went out, plunging the living room into darkness.

"It must be the storm!" Mrs. Meadows cried in distress seeing that the nearby floor lamp didn't respond to her touch. "Don't step on anything," she cautioned Ron.

"Here," John flicked his cigarette lighter, a pinpoint of light in the blackened room. "I thought I saw a holiday candle on the mantle. All right if I light it, Mom?"

"Of course. Your father bought it for me in San Francisco one Christmas, and I've kept it for years, but you have to be practical at a time like this." John lit the candle and handed it to his mother. In a minute she was back with tapers from the dining room sideboard, one for each of them, and aluminum saucers to keep the wax from dripping.

"What a night for this to happen," Mrs. Meadows was flustered. "I'm surprised Dolores hasn't been up to get a candle."

"Maybe she can see in the dark like a cat," John joked, but he could see that in the haloes of their respective candles neither Cathy nor Ron smiled. Such patronizing seriousness, John thought.

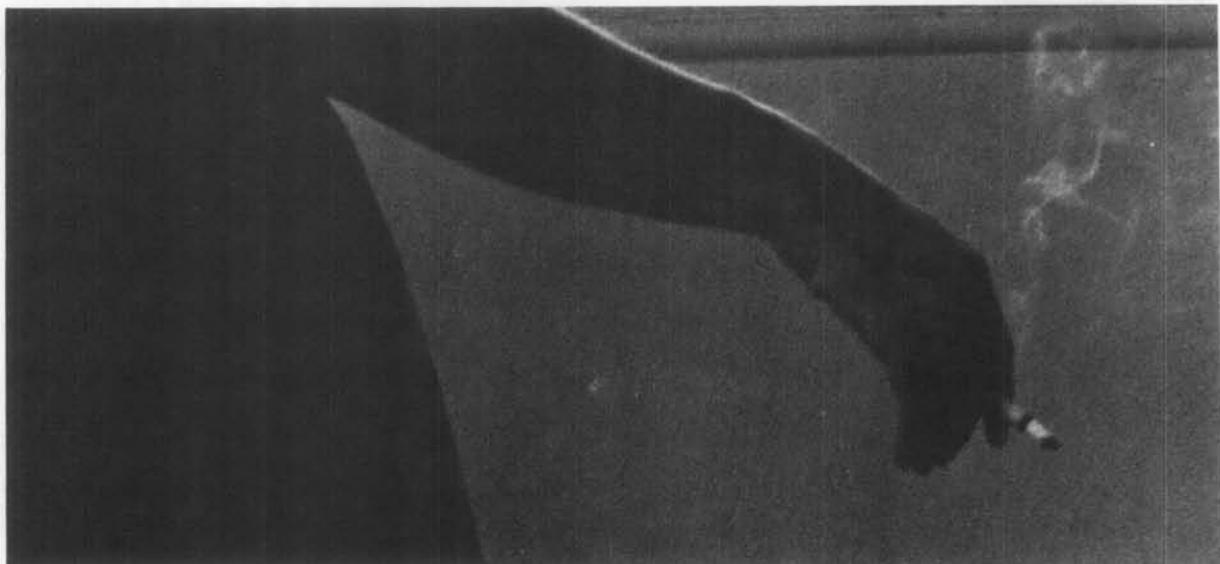
"I think the best thing we can do under the circumstances is all go to bed," Ron headed for the stairway shielding his candle before him. "After all, it's after ten."

Cathy followed behind quietly, casting the distorted shadow of a mother superior on the wall beside her.

John kissed his mother good night and she slipped down the hall to the master bedroom, the only sleeping quarters on the main floor. The children were sacked out below in seven matching sleeping bags on the floor of the family room, and the married couple, Dolores, and John would each occupy one of the three remaining bedrooms in the hall that ran from the front door to the inside access to the garage.

Once in bed in his old room, John turned this way and that trying to make peace with a somnolence that obstinately turned its back on him. It came to him that it had been months—seven at least—since he'd slept without Didi. They hadn't been apart since she went to that conference on seismic activity in Baltimore last May. It was ridiculous, he thought as he flopped on his back, spending Christmas Eve apart. Next year they would both go to her parents' or they would stay home, but they'd do it together. John glanced at the glowing numerals of the alarm clock on the nightstand. Eleven forty-five. That meant it was a quarter to two in Connecticut. Too late to telephone and risk waking the rest of the family. But too early to go to sleep with nothing but the sugar from dessert and a handful of cherry chocolates racing through his veins.

At last he could stand his hypocritical horizontal position no longer, grabbed his cigarettes and



candle, threw his parka over his pajamas, and headed down the hall for the garage and a smoke. Perched on the hood of his mother's Caddy he inhaled deeply and shook his head, thinking back to Cathy and Ron's bland willingness to let the maid do all the work, and their lack of tact in not warning her about smoking in the house. Poor guys, John reflected, they're so transparent. He wondered how his sister's Utah accent had somehow managed to grow stronger in Venezuela. Probably the other American church members down there, he supposed. Poor Cathy. But poor Dolores too. On the other hand, it must've been expensive to pay the airfare for her and all of her children. Still, she didn't seem to be having much of a vacation with seven kids to look after. Well, John sighed, maybe Ronnie believed bringing her along was a sign of prosperity or something. Didi, he thought longingly.

After a second cigarette John took hold of his candle once more and made his way back down the hall, tiptoeing so as not to wake up any of the seven dwarves sleeping quietly beyond the family room's open door. A few steps from his own door he was startled by the sudden appearance of Ron from across the hall, taper in hand and face a strange, pasty color in the candle light.

"On my way to the bathroom," Ron explained in an embarrassed whisper, and John marvelled at his brother-in-law's capacity for adolescent discomfort over something so ordinary.

This time the warmth of the bed seemed to welcome John after his chilly smoke in the garage, and it seemed seconds only before he drifted off.

Christmas Day dawned sunny and warm, and already the snow was melting off the roads. John whistled on his way up to breakfast, relieved that from all appearances he would be able to make the afternoon flight back to New York with no problems.

Around the kitchen table in seven booster chairs the children were eating toast and alternately drinking and drooling orange juice in anticipation of their triumphal entry into the living room at the meal's end.

"Now we'll line you up from youngest to oldest," Mrs. Meadows told the children. "First Joshua, then Benjamin, then Jeremy, now Fanny, now Jennifer, now Chus, and now Mandy. And now Cathy, then Ron, and John, you're last." John allowed himself to be shuffled into position and then his mother opened the louvred doors and the children ran squealing into the living room to find stockings and gaily wrapped packages stacked around the room. Dolores entered the room silently, moved to the mantle, lit a cigarette, and stood as if ready to ash into the fireplace.

"This is for you," Cathy held a small, rectangular package out shyly to John. "I hope you like it, but then you don't seem to wear a lot of ties." She clapped a hand over her mouth, and John laughed,

secretly sure that his younger sister's inability to keep a secret stemmed from her incapacity to have an interesting one.

"Thanks," he held the tie out admiringly. "I wear ties to work every day, and I'm sure I'll use this one a lot." John asked himself if there were a Sears in Caracas.

It was cold turkey sandwiches and Jello washed down by Seven-up after the present-opening, and when the lunch had been cleared away, John glanced at his watch and announced it was time for him to head back to Salt Lake and the airport.

"I wish you didn't have to leave so soon," his mother sighed. "Maybe next year . . ." But she seemed to catch herself, and the sentence trailed off.

Cathy had sunk into the blue velvet sofa, her stocking feet—somewhat swollen at the ankles—propped up on the glass coffee table. "I'm going to spend the rest of the afternoon right here," she announced. "Ron," she called into the other room, "where's that book Mom gave me, the *Murder among the Magnolias* one?"

"Sorry, hon," his voice floated around the corner. "I took all the gifts downstairs and put them in our room so the kids wouldn't get into them. Do you want it right now?"

"I'll get it," John offered. "I have to go down for my bag anyway." And he took the stairs two at a time, anxious to get underway.

Downstairs he moved quickly to the door across the hall from his own and flung it open.

"Excuse me!" he exclaimed, and Dolores started to her feet, casting a string of rough beads with a cross at the bottom onto the bed.

"I thought this was . . ." John began, "I mean . . . forgive me, Dolores."

"Call me Lola," she said, and John backed out of the room and shut the door behind him.

In the room next to his own, John found his sister's book and hurried up the stairs with it. Then it seemed he was kissing his mother on the cheek, hugging Cathy, shaking hands with Ron, and looking maybe for the first time into his brother-in-law's clear blue eyes.

"John, sweetheart," his mother clung to him at the door. "Why don't you come back next Christmas, or even before? You could bring a friend, you know. Anyone you wanted."

John saw with a kind of shock that his mother was crying. "It wouldn't matter if she wanted to smoke in the house." The woman stepped back, and John nodded stupidly. Then he was hurrying toward the rented car, a chill in the pit of his stomach, a chill of fear that maybe if he didn't get to the airport soon enough, if he didn't get on his plane soon enough, if he didn't get back home soon enough that possibly nothing—Didi included—would still be where he left it.