

Flora Dimopoulos' Shamus Fitzmorris mystery caper

Thursday's Child & The Queen of Swords

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Thursday

Thursday the *San Diego Weekender* comes out, and the phones get busy. Brenda had two listed numbers and two unlisted numbers and at times every line was lit.

Thanks to her ad. It was a masterpiece: *I'd like to have a nice conversation with you, really get to know you, and match you up with your perfect masseuse. Tall or petite, blonde or brunette, exotic or the girl-next-door, Champagne Massage has your perfect masseuse on call 24/7. You owe it to yourself.* The bitch of it was, some of these guys actually thought she had nothing better to do than sit and chat (*have a nice conversation with you, really get to know you*).

Brenda had a good phone voice: friendly, happy, calm, reasonable, sincere, sexy. A good phone voice was indispensable in this kind of business. Guys loved to talk about themselves with Brenda on the other end.

But the real bumner was, when she had only one girl on, Brenda had to pretend to listen to the guy, all ears and empathy, and then judiciously suggest Lola.

Lola was always on, except for Sundays when she went to church twice and spent quality time with her little girls. Lola was from P.I. and shaped like a Lego figure – flat-chested, wide in the waist, broad in the ankles, with large feet and facial features, including a big curving smile – but Brenda always booked her as “a luscious golden-skinned island girl

... from Tahiti or one of those spice islands ... *you* know.”
Brenda’s fulgent voice was as expressive as a wink.

Lola was a money-machine. She would smile and playfully shake her finger at the client and say sweetly in her hard-to-understand island accent: “Nothing in life is free, baby, what you have for me?” Lola spoke the truth: everything cost. It cost \$20 to hike her skirt for a tantalizing glimpse of her Victoria’s Secret fifty-dollar French thong; \$100 to step out of her clothes, her small breasts peeking demurely out of her long caramel-colored hair; another \$100 for a feel of her heavy, soft-skinned legs – like kneading oiled, brown bread dough; another \$100 for a naked hug, very friendly. After that, it got expensive.

Lola enjoyed her job and was very good at it, an excellent negotiator. Her first month with Brenda, she made enough to put her husband Jeff into a new Ford Explorer. Tall, gangly, doting Jeff, an E-5 with a big Adam’s apple, a receding chin, and vanishing hairline, couldn’t have been more pleased with his wife. Lola’s second month with Brenda, she’d bought herself a new red Mustang convertible. After less than a year into the business here in the Land of Opportunity, Lola had closed escrow and moved her two little girls, her mom, her dad, several aunties and cousins, and her adoring husband into a sparkling new ranch-house in Poway. Jeff’s VA loan helped, but still ... from Navy housing in Point Loma to Attorneys’ Enclave in Poway was quite a stunning example of upward mobility.

Brenda was very happy to have Lola. Lola didn’t mind at all doing three or four calls back-to-back, then jumping out of bed at three in the morning to zip downtown once more:

“When it is late, Brenda, the client very happy to see me, and show his appreciation.” Depending on his degree of intoxication, his appreciation would take the form of a five, six, seven-hundred dollar tip, and Lola would usually be back in bed with Jeff within the hour.

Lola was a perfect jewel: hard-working and ethical, a good girl. She never stole clients. “You are very good to me, Brenda,” Lola frequently said to her friend Brenda, “and I pray for you everyday. It would be very bad of me to steal from you and I know that God would punish me for such evil deed. I feel pity for those girls who steal from you because God is saddened by that bad behavior.” Lola was a good girl.

The downside was that, with some guys, Oriental was a hard sell, especially if they were locals. Those low-rent clip-joints in La Mesa – Jasmine Pavilion, China Doll House, Thai Time, Suki’s Place, there were dozens of those cheap rip-offs up and down University Avenue – very bad for legitimate business.

Those Oriental girls made a man feel like a piece of meat. Guys who had been to one of those quickie meat-grinders came out prejudiced against Oriental, and for good reason, Brenda thought. Those girls had no pride in their work: they were like unscrupulous mechanics, interested only in their inflated fee. They had no *finesse*, no spark of artistry. It made things hard for Lola. Sometimes Brenda could no way book Lola, even when she described her as “Eurasian ... part French, very exotic.” Guys would point out, reasonably enough: “If she’s Oriental, she’s not busty. Do you have anybody that’s busty? And blonde. Blonde and busty.”

Sometimes, when none of her surfer girls from Ocean Beach would answer their pagers, rather than lose the call entirely, Brenda would book a trade with Erika (Swedish Models Massage), but she would rather avoid doing that. Brenda didn't feel good about trading calls with other agencies, even Erika's; you never knew what the doctors were up to, whose agency they had infiltrated, who they'd made a deal with.

Brenda really needed a dozen girls just like Lola, good girls with the old-fashioned work ethic: busty blondes, spicy redheads, smoldering brunettes. *That's* how she would book those dream girls, with words like *sultry*, *voluptuous*, and *very friendly*. Instead, she had a shallow tide-pool of surfer girls, all tanned and toned, all named Jennifer or Heather or Tiffany, all born believing that sex was a matter of physical hygiene, like flossing or weight-training: no *finesse*, no spark of artistry.

Surfer girls and Kyra, all of whom stole clients. Brenda's overhead – phones, advertising – ran over a thousand a week, and those girls thought nothing of giving the guys their own pager numbers. Then, on the first when their rent was due, they'd call Brenda, sobbing on the phone and begging for work. Kyra never called up crying for work so she could cover her rent: Kyra didn't pay rent, and she had a full-time job in a law office. Plus all the regulars she could steal.

It was barely noon, Lola was booked solid until 7 p.m., the surf was up so the surfer girls were out, and why-oh-why wasn't Kyra answering her pages? Maybe her pager was off. Her cell was off. Kyra knew that Thursdays were always

busy and that Brenda could use her. Especially this Thursday. It was the middle of the month; the Navy boys had just gotten paid. It was April; tax refunds were arriving daily and the rank-and-file locals had money to burn. There was a doctors convention downtown. The phones were smoking.

Brenda dreaded it, but she might have to dredge up some numbers from the back of her rolodex. Gigi, Muffy, or – heaven forbid – Molly. Gigi had no head for business. Gigi would spend the whole night with a guy, actually kiss him and sleep in his bed like he was her boyfriend or something, then cry and feel rejected in the morning because he didn't give her a tip. "Get the money first, girlfriend!" How many times had Brenda attempted to impart basic common sense to Gigi?

Muffy was worse. Muffy was erratic: sometimes she went the whole nine yards, sometimes she acted like an outraged Victorian maiden when the client asked to see her breasts – a simple transaction usually worth an easy hundred dollars. Muffy was impossible to predict.

Molly ... Brenda winced. Try Kyra at home.

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It was lunchtime. In the faculty dining room of Benedict & Boniface Academy, Miss Dimopoulos sat facing jolly old Dr. Pepper. Dr. Pepper taught chemistry and biology.

"Sad to think we'll soon be losing our little Flora." Despite his hangdog pouchy jowls, Dr. Pepper never looked

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