

**POLA**  
**Novel**  
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Pola entered David O. Selznick's office on Gower Street and hurled the contract with the Radio-Keith-Orpheum label across the table.

'You want me to play this? The owner of a beauty parlour? *A sup-por-ting role?*'

Every syllable she fired into the air was punctuated by a threatening stab skywards with her index finger.

'So,' Selznick began, 'how was the tour?'

'Don't change the subject. What do you think I am? A gypsy who plans to spend the rest of her life touring small-town nightclubs?'

Selznick stroked his mouth with the cap of his sapphire-studded fountain pen. Thick lips above a fleshy chin. He bore a striking resemblance to a toad. Selznick replaced the cap on the glittering pen and set it aside. He stood up and walked over to the window. People in search of work had gathered at the crossroads outside. They were carrying banners and waving their empty wage packets. Now a number of fans began to mingle with the crowd, eagerly awaiting the arrival of some RKO stars like Fred Astaire or Joan Crawford. Every automobile that approached the gate was quickly surrounded by a gaggle of people.

'They just don't like it when you speak,' said Selznick, after two seemingly interminable seconds.

'These damn talkies,' Pola burst out. 'Garbo's English is no better. We're in America here!'

Her 'R's resounded like rolls of thunder. Since the advent of talkies all the foreign stars had desperately been trying to iron out their accents. Pola had refused to do this, partly because she dreaded the tedious lessons, and partly because she was determined not to let them mould her. Pola Negri spoke the way she spoke. Selznick gave her a searching look. His voice was unusually calm.

'Talkies are the future, Pola. And they're expensive.'

‘But Garbo – even she’s still better when she keeps her mouth shut.’

‘Garbo, Garbo! You’re not Garbo,’ barked Selznick. ‘And anyway – Garbo isn’t what she used to be, either.’

Pola gasped for breath.

‘You don’t fit anywhere any more. Comedy, musicals, screwball, spy movies. That’s what people want.’

She leapt to her feet and paced up and down in front of the desk.

‘And horror films, of course,’ added Selznick, undeterred.

Pola’s eyes fell on the billboard that loomed over Selznick’s shoulder. A huge ape gazed down, full of longing, at a blonde woman. At the foot of the poster, enshrined in a glass cabinet, was a small, stuffed, admirably lifelike gorilla. All Hollywood was laughing over the model with the gaping mouth that the latest technological trickery had transformed into a giant. Pola pointed to the billboard. Her voice cracked as she continued.

‘There’s supposed to be a sequel to that, isn’t there? I have experience with animals... Come on! No one had ever performed with a snake around their neck before me.’

Selznick groaned audibly.

‘The part calls for a young, blonde American. None of which you are.’

Pola touched her black curls. Unfortunately, that morning she had fluffed them up into a wild mane.

Selznick turned back to the street with a baleful expression.

‘For heaven’s sake, Pola, why are you making me say it?’ he cried. He paused dramatically, relishing the moment. ‘Your time is over.’

The five syllables rang in Pola’s ears like breaking glass. Isadora Duncan must have felt something like this in the seconds before her death, when her silk scarf caught in the wheel of her Bugatti and broke her neck.

‘Is it the money?’ Her voice was husky. She could only hope that Selznick would misread this as arrogance. ‘I’ll do it for less.’

For a moment the air was thick with imaginary green dollar bills. She watched the six-figure sum she had envisaged as her salary plummet. Pola looked Selznick straight in the eyes. She could hardly breathe in her close-fitting dress, yet at this very moment, with everything threatening to fall apart, it was as if all restrictions were suddenly dropping away.

‘David,’ she said, in a confidential tone, ‘all I want is to get up in the morning and drive to the studio, so that when I fall asleep at night I know who I am.’

‘Who you are? Well, that’s simple. You’re an actress. Also known in the business as “A”. You are A, who portrays B, while C watches and pays money for it. A, B, C. That’s the whole business.’

‘An A?’ cried Pola, outraged. ‘I made this studio for your father, honey, back when you were still taking blurry black-and-white pictures in your mother’s belly! You should thank your lucky stars I don’t tan your backside.’

Selznick took a deep breath. For as long as he could remember he had lived in the shadow of his father, the movie pioneer Lewis J. Selznick. Even the ‘O.’ in the younger Selznick’s name was an affectation.

For a moment it looked as if the producer was about to start yelling, but after a brief internal struggle he recovered his self-control and made do with returning to his seat and rummaging through a pile of manuscripts. He extracted one, opened it, lit a cigar and leaned back in his chair, his legs stretched out across the desk.

Immediately Pola too sat down and plonked her feet on the table. The producer only turned his head briefly. Her legs, floury white and encased in fishnet tights, resembled a pair of plump, well-fed vipers. Selznick peered contemptuously over the top of his page.

Pola yanked her feet off the table. Selznick yawned expansively. It was the gesture of a man who could afford to sit at his desk and throw paper planes whenever he felt like it. Pola frowned. Selznick’s composure unnerved her. The success of *King Kong* had saved RKO from ruin after the crash, but the company was still very far from being in the black.

One after another her gaze fell first on the cigar, smoking in Selznick’s ashtray, then on the sapphire-encrusted fountain pen, and finally on a framed portrait on the sideboard. It was a photograph of the daughter of Louis B. Mayer, the head of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. She and Selznick had married about two years earlier. Everyone had mocked Selznick for bedding down with such an ugly duckling just to further his career.

Pola’s gaze lingered on the photograph, until finally Selznick blushed to the roots of his hair. There could only be one explanation as to why the producer wasn’t simply shouting her down, as he usually did with disagreeable actors. David O. Selznick was preparing himself for his future role as head of production at MGM. Irving Thalberg,

who currently occupied this position, was the second most powerful person in the company after Mayer. His trademark characteristic was patience, which was also seen as a guarantee that MGM would keep the temperamental Greta Garbo in line. But this was precisely why he was threatening to become too powerful for Mayer.

Furthermore, Thalberg was in a 'lavender marriage' – a marriage that was really just a camouflage for the fact that a man preferred other men. His wife, a third-rate actress if ever there was one, got all the plum parts put her way just so she would continue to cover for him, and Mayer must surely be growing sick of this long-standing arrangement. Thalberg had a congenital heart problem and had now been in hospital for a couple of weeks. He'd only narrowly escaped having a heart attack.

Pola hesitated. She scrutinised Selznick, who was having difficulty controlling his expression. Then she went on the offensive.

'I have to make a phone call,' she ordered.

Selznick pushed the little white telephone towards her with a casual sweep of his arm.

'But don't shout,' he growled. 'Whenever you're on the phone it always sounds like you want to be heard in Texas.'

Paying no further attention to him, Pola dialled her agent's number. As she had anticipated, the sly dog pretended he was out, so straight away she called her own number instead. Her hands were damp with sweat, and she fumbled with the dial.

'Lena, listen. Tell the papers,' crooned Pola into the mouthpiece. 'Pola Negri is celebrating her comeback.'

She replaced the receiver with a flourish. She had strutted round to the other side of the desk, and now, in one swift movement, she opened the little glass door and fished the gorilla out of the display case. Immediately Selznick leapt to his feet and dived towards her. For a while they wrestled silently, then the gorilla hit the floor with a muffled thud. The impact dislodged one of its two blank monkey eyes. Stunned, the producer knelt down and patted his one-eyed hero.

'You've destroyed my gorilla.'

'Take it out of my wages,' said Pola, still breathless.

'That thing cost a fortune,' Selznick wailed, casting inhibition to the winds. The artery in his neck was swollen. He scrambled to his feet to launch himself at her again. Pola, however, ducked nimbly under the bulky man's arm, grabbed the gorilla and stalked towards the exit. In the doorway she stopped and struck another pose.

‘You will give me that part, or the whole of Hollywood will find out that you intend to topple Thalberg. Don’t say a word – it’s written all over your face. Booting out a man with a heart condition. You should be ashamed of yourself.’ Once again a deep blush spread across Selznick’s features. ‘Ha. So it’s true,’ she gloated.

‘Of course it’s not true.’

‘Well, so what if it’s not? It’s still a good story.’

‘No one will believe you.’ Selznick was visibly struggling for breath.

‘You have until tomorrow morning.’ Pola had instinctively adopted a secret agent’s turn of phrase. She felt a bit like Miss Nobody, the detective in a series of early German silent films whose cunning stratagems struck fear into the hearts of men. Pola had scarcely closed the door behind her when Selznick finally let rip with a deafening screaming fit.

She drove straight over the crossroads and parked her Cadillac in front of the bar on the street corner. She wasn’t wearing a headscarf, just a little hat with a net veil, and the sharp grains of sand blowing in the autumn wind prickled on her neck and face.

The young man who took her order was sporting a moustache. His hair was cropped to within a centimetre of his scalp. Judging by the sound of muffled voices there seemed to be a few people sitting in the back room. Over by the bar a fat drunk was propped up on the counter.

Pola clambered onto a bar stool, dug out her cigarette holder and lit herself a Chesterfield. It was only now that she noticed how much she was shaking. She’d actually had the audacity to challenge Louis B. Mayer, the undisputed colossus of Hollywood, creator and custodian of American dreams. Mayer’s power was reputed to be limitless. A couple of years earlier the MGM actor Gary Cooper had killed a pedestrian while driving under the influence. That same night Mayer had found an unemployed man who, for a couple of thousand dollars, claimed that he had been at the wheel and let himself be locked up instead of Cooper.

The young man filled her glass with care. Ever since alcohol had been banned, the employees in the speakeasies had started cradling bottles like raw eggs, in both hands.

There was a mirror on the wall behind the bar. Two hazelnut-brown eyes gazed back at her out of a round face with strong cheekbones. Gone were the days when women all over the country would copy the Pola Negri look. Nowadays it was

inconceivable that a girl would completely pluck out her eyebrows in order to draw them on with a black kohl pencil, or would adorn her backside with a diamanté-studded butterfly as big as a fan.

The cognac flashed in her glass, the Chesterfield glowed in the ashtray, and now there was no denying that the face in the mirror was that of a disreputable, man-eating woman – the face that had made her famous. Pola grimaced. You had to be careful with these things. Somehow or other everything you acted in front of the camera found its way back into your own life.

She took a long drag, puffing sophisticatedly, and tried to blow smoke rings in the air as she exhaled. But the circles disintegrated before properly taking shape, and she stubbed out the smouldering cigarette. She would show the world that she still knew how to extract a spark of noblesse from this pathetic, inadequate thing called life. She raised the net veil from her face and lured the bartender over with a lascivious bat of her eyelashes.

‘In a couple of days I’ll be thirty-five,’ Pola lied. With admirable foresight she had in her youth, like every actress, taken two years off her age. ‘I’ve survived fifty-three films, two husbands, and a world war. And now, can you imagine – Hollywood doesn’t want me any more.’

‘You’re an actress?’

Pola looked at him, aghast.

‘You don’t know who I am?’ She took the glass between her teeth, threw back her head and swallowed the cognac in a single gulp. ‘What the hell. If it all goes wrong, I’ll just go back to Germany,’ she said, on the spur of the moment. She set down the glass and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

‘You’re German? You don’t sound it.’

‘Polish. I’m Polish.’

Even her step-father, who was a supporter of the Polish nationalist Piłsudski, would have been taken aback by the sharpness of her tone. Pola wasn’t one of those foreign stars who was always going on about their yearning for the homeland they had left behind. A shadow lay over the land of her childhood.

‘I guess I should know you,’ the boy enquired.

When Pola said her name he burst into peals of laughter.

‘What a coincidence. I was at a party at Chaplin’s last weekend. He did this hilarious slapstick number, and d’you know what it was called? “Pola Negri at the Grave of Rudolph Valentino”. Chaplin’s favourite party piece these days.’

At the word ‘Chaplin’ something twitched in the face of her drunken neighbour. Fatso was suddenly wide awake.

Pola could hardly believe her ears. She and Charles had separated more than ten years ago, and it hadn’t been what you would call amicable. She was astonished, though, that he was still making jokes at her expense after all these years. Obviously he was still upset that Pola had given his engagement ring to his successor, Rudolph Valentino.

Like all women on both sides of the Atlantic, Pola had been crazy about Rudolph Valentino. For two years, though, the most beautiful man in Hollywood had actually been hers. In 1926, when he was not yet thirty-one, he had died of a mysterious stomach complaint. Pola had used the funeral to make one of her grand appearances. She turned up at the grave in a skin-tight black dress with a plunging neckline. Propped up by four bodyguards and accompanied by a press agent and a photographer, she fainted repeatedly, eventually collapsing in tears. She had sent an arrangement of white roses to be placed on the coffin, spelling out ‘POLA’ in capital letters. People had been incensed. Nobody had bought her performance as the grieving widow. Then, only about six months later, Pola had remarried. The combination of these two events was still regarded as one of the worst *faux pas* of the silent movie era, exceeded only by the scandal of the corpulent Fatty Arbuckle, who had crushed a girl’s internal organs so badly during sexual intercourse that she had died of internal bleeding.

The lardass beside her slid off his stool and staggered out of the door, laughing spitefully. The guests in the back room had already said goodnight. They were alone. Smiling, confident of success, the boy came out from behind the bar and sat down beside her.

‘And you want to be an actor too, right? Like everyone here,’ Pola enquired, shifting away from him slightly.

The boy’s face darkened. His attractive mouth and large, straight nose twitched; the look in his eyes was almost beseeching.

‘They say my voice is too high for a man.’

The timbre of his voice was indeed reminiscent of Disney's hysterical cartoon characters.

'Amateurs,' Pola lied. 'Don't listen to them.'

'If only it were that easy.' The boy sent his dishcloth skimming across the bar. She gazed at him, wide-eyed. 'There will always be losers. That's what the producer said to me, the one I auditioned for. "There are fans, there are extras, there's the B-list, and there are stars."' The boy reached for her hand. "'That's all there is.'"

Pola gazed at him. His moustache quivered.

The barkeeper had already snuck off when the alarm clock roused Pola the next morning. The gorilla had popped out of her handbag and was dangling head down over the polished marble floor. Pola massaged her forehead. Who wanted to wake up next to a woman who carried a one-eyed gorilla around with her?

Her recollection of the night before was hazy. She could visualise outlines, movements, and they reawakened the feeling of emptiness that overwhelmed her whenever she slept with a man whose only flaw was not to be Glen Kidston. Glen's melodic English, his scent – Mitsouko – and the many millions of English pounds in his bank accounts had wrapped her in a soft, warm, silken blanket as long as their relationship had lasted. It was more than a year since Glen had crashed in the Andes, but she still flinched whenever a light aircraft glided overhead.

On tour, Pola had been able to forget her sadness. The performances were often badly attended, the dance floors looked worm-eaten. Nonetheless, Pola had been in the company of others, and performing her songs had made her happy. Here, in Hollywood, she was alone. Glen and all the other men, living and dead, were shadows creeping around inside her head.

Pola rolled over onto her side and smoothed the sheet with her palm. On the wall opposite the bed hung an enormous peacock mosaic in purple rhinestones. Pola hated the mansion, its fourteen rooms and everything in it. The villa had been decorated for her by Paramount when she moved in.

The palm trees surrounding the villa cast patterns onto the floor. Somewhere in the distance, in the vineyards on the hills, those nine magical letters rose up against the sky. Pigeons reared their young in the scaffolding behind them. It was only because the fledglings were constantly spattering the letters with their droppings that they gave the impression of being eternally white.

Pola peered across at her neighbours, the Lubitsches. The removal vans would be arriving before long. The director wanted to move to Bel Air. The villa was too big for him, he said. Ernst Lubitsch was one of the few of the old guard who had always lived modestly and never gave a damn that he didn't produce any blockbusters. He couldn't give people the phoney happy ends that were becoming increasingly popular. If the studio bosses, those hard-boiled young upstarts, compared the takings of his films with those of others like the cartoon dog Rin Tin Tin, Lubitsch just rolled his eyes. Because he refused to bow to them, they respected him. Pola thought wistfully of the films they had made together. At the heart of his work were the magnificent art deco sets through which the actors wandered as if in a fairytale landscape. But Lubitsch didn't tell fairy tales. He showed people as they really were: conflicted, cowardly, seducible, and infinitely tender.

The former genius of silent movies now made talkies too, but Lubitsch still used hardly any dialogue. Pola had learned from him that it was better to trust what was revealed in faces and gestures.

Pola hesitated to go over and see him. For days now the shutters of the villa had been at half-mast, even though Lubitsch was currently filming an operetta for MGM and every day lost was costing him thousands of dollars. She saw the little man in her mind's eye, with his rotund belly, black hair and big black eyes. Everything about him seemed to laugh, right down to his braces. No production, however difficult, had ever managed to faze this earthy clown. But now the film world had been hit with the law banning all physical passion from the silver screen, and Lubitsch was prostrated like a dying moose. Night after night he barricaded himself behind his eternally smoking cigar and tried to anaesthetise himself with whiskey.

The alarm clock rang again. It was almost ten. Pola sat bolt upright. The reporters would soon be arriving. She called for Lena, who immediately appeared in the doorway. Lena Loebel was a tall, lanky woman about Pola's age. Her posture was so excessively erect you might think she had a backbone of steel. With her turban-like hat, the pointed shoes peeping out from beneath the hem of her long skirt, and her buttoned-up blouse and cardigan she was more or less the opposite of Pola, who favoured a more risqué wardrobe. But both had alabaster skin and dark cat-like eyes. It was just that Lena – as Lubitsch would have described it – had no face. You looked at her, and instantly you forgot her. She was more silent than the grave, and did nothing in her free time other than read fat novels.

Lena started to pick up the clothes that lay strewn around the floor, and as she did so her practised gaze scanned the room for any other mess the previous night of love had left in its wake. When she spotted the gorilla she hesitated, but her expression remained entirely neutral. Nothing in her face betrayed what she was thinking.

‘Is there a contract for me in the mail?’ Pola asked, still sitting in bed and without bothering to greet her.

Lena shook her head.

‘Dammit,’ Pola cursed.

Lena stepped over to the squashed gorilla. She had picked it up with her fingertips and was about to throw it in the rubbish, but Pola got out of bed, plucked the creature from her hand and stuffed it back in her handbag. Then she stood in front of the mirror, slipped on a close-fitting, champagne-coloured suit, and started furiously combing out and straightening her curly hair. From one of the jewellery boxes she grabbed her pearl earrings and a slender ring. The jewellery was all Pola had left. Half her money had been squandered by Serge Mdivani, her ex-husband, and Black Friday had taken the little he had left her after their two years together. Apart from her jewellery (which was, mind you, worth a million dollars), the house here in Beverly Hills, a chateau just outside Paris, her Cadillac, and an Isotta rusting away in the garage, there was nothing left of her fortune. She lived from hand to mouth.

Pola took the ring off again. The marriage had been a farce. She had never married the men she loved. And she hadn’t loved the men she married. There must be some connection between the two.

Automobiles could be heard drawing up outside the window. A gaggle of reporters had already gathered on the veranda. Pola checked out the situation from behind the curtain. None of the big shots had turned up. The journalists who awaited her were all B-, if not C-listers.

She leaned against the wall and took two deep breaths. She wanted to act. That was all she wanted. Her fortune had never really meant any more to her than it did to other gypsies who unexpectedly came into money. What was it other than pieces of tin to buy yourself a few pretty diamonds and provide your mother with a roof over her head? She checked her reflection in the mirror one last time. Then she hurried out.