

# SHORT FICTION/ESSAYS

## LOST INNOCENCE

**Barbara Ann Porte**

It's a party game that they're playing, not quite a dozen young ladies gathered in the lounge of a dormitory of a certain northeastern Ivy League University, where, in their grandmother's day, girls couldn't go. If nothing else, their outfits would mark them as modern: night shirts with writing; T-shirts and shorts; green cotton scrub uniforms; drawstring pants and sleeveless tops, some with undershirt straps peeking out; or some combination. Their two week, pre-college summer program is over, their possessions all packed. Everyone is dispersing tomorrow, flying, driving, some way getting back home.

Whose idea had it been: staying up this whole final night, trading stories, exchanging intimacies? Girls who likely would never see one another again; or who just might wind up freshmen roommates, in another year, here or on some other campus. "Tell!" Like a chorus, they coax each new comrade in turn. "No holding back. Every detail. When and how, on account of whom, did you lose your innocence?" Giggling, gulping, limbs pressing limbs, various shades and shapes, girls so young they think they've discovered this game.

Viv begins. "There was this boy in my class last year..."

Julia goes next. "My uncle, my father's youngest brother—very dashing; a bachelor; he also taught me to ski..."

Followed by Marie. "My cousin Mario and I played undressing games in my bedroom..."

"Me too," offers Cyd. "Doctor; I used to play it with Shirley. 'You be the man, I'll be the patient.'..."

Sherelle. "I had a crush on my PE teacher. After night games, he gave me lifts home. In the front seat of his car he told me, 'My wife's always tired. You're so fresh and so innocent.' Then he changed that."

Annie. "Mine was a man I babysat for. Four children and a British wife. He drove me home, too. We did it in the back seat."

On and on. Lily listens. How pitiful! What do they know? Such children. At last comes her turn.

"When I was fifteen my father left us for another woman." That's how she sees it; always has. Not left her mother. Left them all. Left her. Left her two brothers. Left even the dog. Well, a dog is just a dog. And isn't her mother a grown person, old enough to look out for herself? But Peter and Mark were ten

and twelve, nearly babies. Lily could protect them only so far. Once she starts college, not really at all. “His girlfriend was almost my age.” She means her age now. She exaggerates. So what! “Any younger, she would have been jailbait.” A word from one of her bought-used pulp mystery novels.

How satisfactory now to Lily hearing the in-sucked breaths of the others as the mood of the room swings—though the theme stays the same: Men do these things—again and again—lessons are learned. What?

“Details please.” “Was she pretty?” “Was she witchy?” “Was she married, too?” “Did she have any children?” “How did your father meet her?” Why not? Once the floodgates are open, all questions are fair game.

Lily considers; then, sweeping her long red-gold hair off her neck, over one shoulder, says, “He could have met her anywhere. My father was a traveling man, a financial advisor. Wherever the rich went, there went my dad, to help them manage their money: Las Vegas, Jackson Hole, San Francisco, Paris, London, Amsterdam, Singapore, and Brussels, Beijing. You name it, he’d probably been there: Venezuela, Argentina, even Panama and Nicaragua. He sent home to us all glorious presents from everywhere, with cards that read, ‘I’m thinking of you. Love, Dad.’ Well, until after he met her, at some posh penthouse party in Manhattan, he said. A mutual friend, a hedge fund trader, introduced them. ‘She’ll knock your socks off,’ he told my father. Which she did.”

Here, Lily pauses. She’s picturing her dad and his girlfriend. Illuminated by electric lights, they stand out-of-doors, late at night, alongside the rooftop garden railing, sipping drinks, holding hands, admiring the view of Central Park. The new girlfriend moves to rest her head on Lily’s father’s shoulder. One push, Lily thinks, and she’s gone. Except it didn’t happen that way. Too bad!

Instead, “Flashy, I’d call her. Much older looking than her age; hard-edged, I’d say, and scheming. Well, a bond trader, after all; a money changer. She swept my father off his feet. He lost his mind.

“‘I still love your mom,’ he told us, then packed his bags and moved across town to live in a condo with Trish. That’s her name.”

“Give or take a vowel,” someone says, eliciting laughs. Lily ignores them.

“‘To be near us,’ he said. How humiliating! Well, he hardly ever was. Both of them traveled, alone or together. Some weekends they flew to L.A. where Trish had a house. By any measure, a long way from Oyster Bay and us.

“Then, on one of his solo trips back, he took my brothers and me out to dinner. ‘Trish is dying to meet you. Sooner is better than later,’ he said. ‘Lily, you and she have a lot in common. I’d like you to be friends.’ Sure, I thought: Our age, my dad. What else?

“‘I’m not ever meeting her,’ said Mark.

“Peter kicked the table leg, splashed Dad’s wine, shouted, ‘I want to go home. Now! Fuck Trish! I want Mom.’ Did I mention, my youngest brother is mildly Tourettic? Except when he’s upset, you don’t really notice it.

"I agreed with my brothers. 'Me too!' I said. It set the stage for future engagements."

Yawning girls cover their mouths with their hands. So what? Plenty of parents get divorced. Even theirs. Life goes on. Isn't Lily here, properly dressed and all in one piece? They know worse stories: of riches to rags; of girls who'd lost horses; moms who'd lost houses; entire families, minus dads, moving in with grandparents; nothing impossible; this, that, so much more. Oh, what's the use of saying?

"You need to get over it," they tell her.

"Wait," Lily says. "There's more. You don't know my dad. He's used to getting his way. His golden rule is, whatever it takes. 'We'll see about that,' he told us. He started small, then upped the stakes incrementally. Too bad he held the only cards that counted.

"I sold out first. Truly disgusting. For a pair of high riding boots, I agreed to meet Trish. How low-minded was that? 'A lesson in economics,' my dad called it. Mark held out for an I-pod and a laptop. Only homebody Peter stuck to his guns.

"So don't pay the mortgage. Who cares?" Peter said. Cool in public, at home he threw stuff. 'Promise we won't ever have to move,' he begged Mom. Then, climbing onto her lap, he shouted obscenities."

Lily's listeners shift restlessly. Some tsk sympathetically. But really, isn't it all old hat?

Lily warns, "Hold on! I'm almost at the climax." That gets their attention. "In the end, even Peter gave in. Totally shocking! 'Sell out! What for?' I said, having watched as Dad's car stopped to let him off by the bushes in front of the house, then sped away, Dad and Trish in it, both of them waving.

"In that way that he has when excited, head bobbing, eyes blinking, words tripping out, Peter explained: 'They're in a hurry. They have a plane to catch. They're on their way to Monaco, a pre-honeymoon, Dad said.' Well, sure. He still was married to our mom. How embarrassing!

"Yes, go on," I told Peter.

"He took a deep breath, then announced: 'Now we won't ever have to move. Dad promised. He said when I grow up, he'll even sell me the house. I can live here forever. Mom, too. Well, so can you and Mark if you want to.'" Finally, Lily had some use for that SAT word; *magnanimous* was how Peter sounded. Now, as then, her stomach churns. She feels like throwing up. "See," she says, "That's how I learned: In the end, everyone has a price."

"Oh," says her sleepy chorus. They thought everyone already knew that. What of Peter, though? Surely headed for a fall. How trust his dad to keep his word, a man who hadn't even kept his marriage vows? Thinking that, girls murmur, "Poor Peter."

Stupid girls! Lily thinks, glad that after tonight she won't know them. "Not really!" she says. "We're still living the same as before. Only my dad and Trish got their just deserts."

"Yes?" girls whisper, interest revived.

Lily goes on: "After several days in Monaco, they were bored. They hired a helicopter for a sight-seeing tour. They flew over the seas and the coastline, crashed into a mountain. All passengers and pilot dead."

Girls gasp. "How awful!"

"Tragic," Lily says, calmly. "But fortunately for my family, my father had lots of insurance. So did the helicopter company." Ah, girls think. So that explains Lily's presence among them, here on campus, with her clothes and her horse. Well, the horse is at home, but safe in its stable. What's that their parents say: "Money may not buy you happiness but it goes a long way?" "Beats by a mile whatever's in second place?" Not that all of them believe that. "True love is what counts." "Achieving one's goals." "Getting famous." "A good marriage." "A happy family." Sure, Lily thinks; in India maybe, or Sri Lanka. Every girl in the room too sleepy now even to keep her eyes open, they discard their all-night plan. "Good night, sleep tight." Before heading out, they hug and kiss, promise to keep in touch. Not for a moment does Lily believe them. Liars! she thinks. Not any one of them any better than she is.

Soon after, alone in her dorm room, lying in bed, fingers fondling her special place, Lily tells herself, All's well that ends well! Not that her dad and Trish really are dead. No. For all Lily knows they had a fight and broke up in Monaco. Where Trish is now is anybody's guess. Lily's father is back at home, living in the basement. What next? Lily reflects. Which version is better? Half horrified, half thrilled, Lily asks herself, How could you? and means, How could she so readily have killed off two people? What else might she do? Anything! "To thine own self be true," she recites; sees that lost innocence is just another name for freedom. She wonders if that's how Eve felt having sampled the forbidden fruit. Finally empowered! So thinking, Lily falls into a deep, untroubled sleep, knows only fools hope to live happily forever after.