

## Lily

*Maggie Power*

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### Editor's Note

The following is an excerpt from Power's second novel, *Lily* (1994), currently out of print. The impoverished drawing master Jonathan Hopgate agrees to marry his invalid pupil Lily Flood, believed to be dying of consumption, the only daughter of his wealthy and widowed industrialist employer, in exchange for her dowry which enables him to regain and refurbish his ancestral home of High Withens. Increasingly disgusted by his wife's nouveau rich vulgarity, her unseemly passion for him, and her debilitating illness, Jonathan falls in love with the local curate's daughter, Agnes Slane, fuelling his desire for his Lily's speedy demise, which he surreptitiously assists. Shortly after her death, Jonathan discovers himself infected by his wife's true illness, of which Lily herself was kept in ignorance, namely syphilis – but not before he has already in turn infected Agnes, the seduced object of his desire and second wife-to-be. In the reproduced passage, re-instated as master of High Withens and awaiting his first wife's death, Jonathan recollects the precipitous courtship with Lily.

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In the Sabbath light he could see how friable were the walls of High Withens, how the thick stems of wisteria dragged the masonry awry, and the green rot and black fungus seeped up from the foundations. A pile of tin needed to be spent on the place to re-point the walls and secure the roof, that leaked even more than the church did. He envisioned thick carpets and curtains that weren't faded silk with a pall of dust on them.

He should have held out for a larger bride price. But what was the real cost of a woman with a cankered spine in his bed? Her father had plenty of tin with which to buy his girl's happiness but there should have been

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more, more filthy lucre to assuage the misery of having death in his bed at nights.

He remembered the day that she had thrown herself at him, hands fevered, tearing at his hair with an access of passion. With Lily he'd been lulled into safety; he hadn't expected a girl waiting for death to want a lover.

He had at once disliked her father's house, with its cache of fashionable paintings that the merchant had snapped up at the Royal Academy. It was a white stucco villa where the carpets were all crimson and velvet plush, a faeryland of crystal lights and ruby lustres, the wall hangings as sheeny as silk; a house that dust never entered. Fine panels of Honiton lace festooned the windows, not the inexpensive machine lace from which George Flood had made his fortune, and the furniture which had been ordered after the Great Exhibition was opulent, heavy stuff. No antiques, with their containment of worm or the tawdry ravages of time, passed the threshold.

'I like a picture to tell a story. You always know where you are with a plain tale,' Flood had explained to Jonathan as he showed the drawing master his paintings of scenes of Shakespeare and the old faery tales, or the affecting contemporary sequences of degradation. Jonathan cast a swift, scornful eye over a triptych entitled *Daughter of Intemperance*.

'What do you think of my collection, Hopgate?' Lily's father had asked in a voice that was accustomed to throw itself across the clatter of machinery.

Jonathan half closed his eyes, the better to veil the Hopgate haughtiness. 'Oh I'm a Renaissance man,' he said.

Lily had had far more aptitude than the rest of Jonathan's pupils – a not insignificant talent, in fact, although her taste ran to the morbid, because of her disease he supposed. She saw death in everything. The flowers she drew in full bloom were always spoilt by the one petal that had begun to wither, already shrivelling, and her preference was for faery princesses in the catatonic state of lovelessness before the prince arrived. He showed her prints of Botticelli, Filippo Lippi and Giotto, because her taste had been formed by her father's stuff and her appetite fed with sentimental portraits of lovers' trysts, broken vows and sobbing, abandoned women in exquisite evening dress – dresses as fine and modish as those she herself wore. Wore uselessly. Cumbersome crinolines, scarcely practical for a recumbent

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invalid, swelled over the couch where she generally sketched during her drawing lessons with Jonathan. So much of her time was spent on artifice, on self-adornment. There were too many jewels, too many frills and ribbons, and she applied too much pomade – too much of everything, he thought wearily. And why should he complain, he who had always had so little, he who had been denied so much?

What he considered most was whether the work would last, or whether she would die fairly soon so that he would be obliged to seek another position. And wondering even now, *would* she die? Soon? How soon?

Sometimes, if it was one of her good days, she would be standing at her easel in the conservatory when he arrived at the house for her drawing lesson. He was always on time. Punctilious. He remembered the conservatory, the heat, and the almost suffocating bouquets of hot-house flowers. When it was not too hot, canary birds perched in a little Arabesque cage of some gilded metal, but their trilling always distracted him and he had to ask her to remove them.

Yes, he remembered the heat. He remembered the choking ferns and rampant flowers that took his breath away. So sultry an atmosphere that he had to take off his jacket while he instructed her, and was embarrassed when she said, ‘Oh you’ve a tear in your shirt sleeve, Mr Hopgate. You must let our maid repair it for you.’ Her damnably vulgar directness!

‘Excuse me,’ he had apologised at once, reassuming his jacket and never again removing it at that house, so that from then on he associated her presence with the cold heat of perspiration that made the clothes stick to his flesh like leeches.

He had inwardly diagnosed curvature of the spine when he was first introduced to her. Her head hung to one side so her ringlets drooped over her pale face. Her shoulders were stooped so she appeared shorter than she was, which was no great height in any case. He towered over her, and was obliged to half kneel on a hard chair when he assisted her with drawing.

For a year he had attended the house, regularly at first, offering one lesson a week, and then the appointments were increased to thrice weekly as a passion for watercolours gripped her with an energy belied by her condition, which he had by now learnt was mortal.

Three times a week he tutored her, and because she was an eager pupil he continued to bring her prints of the old Italian masters, endless

madonnas and countless annunciations, depicting hosts of angel Gabriels with flaring wings.

The girl had startled Jonathan when, after he had spent time perusing the painterly techniques of half a dozen annunciations with her, she said, 'But look at all these angels. Are they boys, young, hot-blooded Italian boys?' She was half murmuring to herself. 'And yet they have a girlishness, too – such prettily curled hair and flowing robes.' She had glanced up at Jonathan and smiled wickedly. 'Don't you think that's maybe why the Virgin looks so astonished? It's not the dreadful news the angel's bringing her; she's wondering: is this a boy or girl thrusting its way into my bedchamber? Or perhaps a great bird about to ravish her.'

She had spread two of the prints on her lap to compare them. 'Just look,' she said, 'the energy in the taut wings and stirring draperies of this angel with such a Florentine face proclaims the hot-blooded male of the species, don't you think?' She laughed. 'But his skin is soft and whiter than the Virgin's. And now this one,' she speculated, holding aloft one of the prints for Jonathan's scrutiny, 'is glacial as the Mary he's flown in on, and has ...' Lily screwed up her mouth. '... I'd say a prettier, more delicate face. Is this Gabriel a boy or girl angel, do you reckon?'

'I suppose all angels are of necessity ambiguous creatures, their being, strictly speaking, above the physical plane,' Jonathan had replied stiffly.

'You mean there are no men nor women angels either?' Lily asked, her face darkening. 'So they cannot love one another.'

Jonathan felt uncomfortable with the turn her conversation had taken.

'Then I wouldn't be one of them,' Lily went on with a sudden violence. 'I would never choose to be such an angel, dwelling in a passionless paradise.'

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Passion, Jonathan thought distastefully, as his horse stumbled and slithered over some fallen branch half hidden by sodden earth ... passion prevailed over death in her.

The lessons had gone on, though now she was possessed with a desire to draw only angels. When he had reminded her – very gently and carefully,

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not wishing to upset this lucrative pupil – that she had declared the creatures passionless, and it was now time to extend her repertoire and progress to some other subject, she has challenged him. ‘But I must find their secret. Such beauty must have a secret. Cold beauty, but it stirs a fire in me. How can something so cold ignite such a fever of admiration?’ She went on, ‘There is an ambiguity in all these quattrocento seraphims and archangels; they are a puzzle I must solve, whether male or female, passionate or ethereal – wherein does their true nature lie? Perhaps in copying them I may discover their truth. I cannot believe true beauty lacks passion.’

She worked avidly. Drew feverishly and made herself ill, so that her father was obliged to take her away for a brief rest cure, although Jonathan was still paid for the cancelled lessons. But when she returned from her sojourn on the south coast her artistry somehow had lost its nerve, and her hand shook terribly when he coaxed her to sketch bowls of fruit and vases of flowers.

She sketched haphazardly, lying on the drawing room sofa. Her head was bent low, her voice thick with suppressed sobs, and Jonathan assumed a melancholia wrought by the certainty she must die had gripped her, and he prepared himself for the cessation of his employment in the merchant’s house as she seemed to lose the heart for drawing.

‘You grow too weary for such exertions,’ he remembered saying resignedly when, after dropping her crayon, executing faulty lines and smudging a charcoal etching, Lily had at last dashed her portfolio to the floor in a rare fit of temper.

He remembered too how he had assisted her from the sofa and led her over to the conservatory, where the door was open on to a raised terrace, because he thought fresh air would soothe her. She leant on his arm, one hand fumbling with her chatelaine that was too tightly fastened. When they had reached the door leading to the terrace, a mesh purse attached to one of the chains suddenly snapped and fell from her waist, scattering sovereigns. He bent down to pick up the purse and the money and, when he stood up, an astonishing thing! Lily flew at him as if all the joys and sensations of the long life she should have had were to be tasted in that moment. Audaciously she had kissed him.

And what could he do? When a lady kissed him he, perforce, must embrace her. On the whole it was an unpleasant kiss, because he was

conscious of her sickness and then her lips were too slack and she salivated grossly.

In stooping to pick up her purse it seemed the things was decided.

He remembered his horror when she said, 'I must tell papa how it is between us.' He saw himself lose favour in half a dozen households: the philandering drawing master!

'Miss Flood, you're too ... precipitous!'

'I have little time left to exercise patience,' she had said directly. 'Papa desires my happiness. Don't be afraid, Jonathan.' When she said his name she salivated as though she tasted the word in her mouth. She kissed him again, wetly. She wouldn't hear his pleas. 'I've lived too long in the fear of death to submit to the lesser fears,' she said.

The very next day he had received a message to call on Mr Flood, so he was obliged to cancel a drawing lesson that he was appointed to give, and had gone to the villa with the old arrogance masking trepidation.

'I'm not the sort to stand on ceremony, you understand,' her father had said. A short, stocky man. Blunt. Too blunt. Like father, like daughter, thought Jonathan. 'My girl wants you. You're a handsome fella, I'll admit. But there's no tin is there? Of course there isn't. A fine gentleman like you wouldn't be doing this sort of thing. I adore that girl, Hopgate. I'd cut out my heart for her. But she's a gonner, you know that, don't you? The consumption's after her like it galloped off with her mother before her. And what'll I have left? My heart's gone into her and my soul's in my work, man. Work is a great saver you know. It'll get you through anything.' The entrepreneurial wisdoms had gone on like a litany in the mouth of the merchant whose loud voice had cracks in it.

'No tin,' Flood repeated. 'Well that'd matter to some, but in the circumstances ... D'you love my girl?'

'Yes,' Jonathan said civilly.

'I understand from the family who recommended your services that your people came over with the Normans. An old family ... but bad blood in it, eh?'

'I come from a long line of gentlemen.'

'And there's an estate gone to rack and ruin, in the hands of bankers.' Flood spat out his cheroot. 'Marry my girl,' he said, his voice thick with emotion. 'Make her last months happy and, before God, I'll buy back your family estate for you. You can have the life of a gentleman if you

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give my girl a year of loving. Think of it! A year of loving for a lifetime's freedom from want. What do you say to that, Hopgate? Is it enough for you, man?'

'Yes,' Jonathan had said as he remembered how her wet mouth fastened on his. 'Yes, I'll marry her.'