

Lili's Loves

by Louis Couperus

Lili's first love was her grandfather. Lili was an orphan, as rosy and blonde as a picture, a delicate poppet, and when at the age of five she and her nursemaid moved into her grandparents' home, she at once fell in love with her grandfather. She had never been in love before and, being five years old, made no effort to conceal her love from her grandmother. Lili's grandfather was fifty years old exactly, a hussar captain, and with hardly a gray hair, he still cut a fine figure in his red-braided uniform and clattering saber. Lili adored her grandfather on horseback, on foot, at home, at the table, in his large, leather armchair, legs wide; Lili adored Grandpapa's cap, his cigarettes, his voice, his military boots, his two horses; yes, in truth, Lili was every bit as enamored of her grandfather as a precious five-year-old with blond curls and a bow at either temple can possibly be enamored of a grandfather who is a captain of cavalry.

In this first love, Lili was utterly happy. She would sit on her grandfather's lap and lay her picture-perfect blonde head against his red braiding. Sometimes she sat in front of her grandfather on his horse—just for a moment, just for fun. Grandpapa was very considerate and would bring her great big bonbons, even letting her hunt for them in his overcoat. For her part, she would often light the match for Grandpapa's cigarette, and he would playfully blow the smoke into Lili's dear little face, sending her into raptures. In short, this first love brought Lili nothing but happiness, and her love was not unrequited, considering that in love there is always one who gives and another who takes, one who idolizes and another who is idolized.

Lili's second love was a different story. This second love was a seven-year-old boy, while Lili herself had already turned ten. The boy had two sisters, and the three of them and their two nursemaids would "rendez-vous" in a sandpit on the beach at Scheveningen. He was a handsome lad, well-built, with chestnut hair—Lili would always have a weakness for attractive specimens of the male sex—but his character was decidedly unpleasant, entirely unlike that of her grandfather, who was round, jolly, and affable, a bit rough-edged but always so terribly sweet. The boy would pinch Lili's arms to hurt her and pull on her blonde hair, and whenever she built a sand castle, he would sneak up behind her and kick the fragile walls to pieces. Since Lili—strange psychological case, mystery of the female heart—was infatuated with him anyway (in fact, I believe she truly loved the lad), this second love of Lili's was a most unhappy affair, and often made Lili miserable. Yet she buried her suffering deep in her little heart, and now and then was sad, and when Grandpapa asked her what the matter was, she said nothing, out of shame, for she blamed herself for falling out of love with her grandfather, who, though he had grown slightly grayer, was truly such a fine, upstanding major.

After that, Lili had a string of loves. She was a most short-skirted girl, with two pigtails and a very large bow, who went to school with her books under her arm in the company of other girls, and I think I must limit myself to a brief survey of all Lili's loves in this stage of life. The objects were generally boys on bicycles with books strapped to the front, boys wheeling bicycles alongside them, boys at young people's dances and parties—in a word, boys: Lili's loves were all around sixteen or seventeen years old. Lili's loves were smoking their first cigars and wearing their very first dinner jackets. Lili's loves went in for tennis and football; in short, Lili fell in love very, very often. Her loves did not last long; they were agitated, often unhappy

episodes, suffused with pangs of jealousy and other disappointments. Lili, who knew full well that she was not keeping the promise she had made as a perfect blonde poppet at the age of five, tried to conceal her multitude of sufferings behind a façade of brusque indifference—a tactic Lili’s grandmama believed she had learned from her grandpapa—as well as behind the sweeping strides of long legs beneath very short skirts, and also behind a nose lifted into the air.

I shall not dwell on the following period, fascinating though it was. In fact, it was rather too fascinating for this brief account, and I lack the space to analyze it properly. Lili, who had gone traveling, was simultaneously in love with an Italian vendor of plaster statuettes she had met in Brussels and with her world history teacher in The Hague. Lili nourished her love for the raven-haired Italian by mooning for hours over a set of picture postcards which that son of the South had passed off as portraits of himself, and she tried to do justice to her love for her teacher by making excellent grades and knowing the Punic Wars like the back of her hand. Then there was her love for a chauffeur in the service of a friend of her grandfather’s, a friend who now and then took Lili out for a spin, but I mention this merely for completeness’ sake, for Lili was only smitten with the chauffeur when she could see him, and forgot her love the second she stepped out of the car.

A passionate interlude followed. Lili went to boarding school in London, and her love for Mrs. Gower’s nephew was passionate indeed, on her part and on that of the young Gower, a sporting English youth six feet tall, like all heroes of English novels, “handsome and strong,” with a straight nose and clean-shaven lip. Their love was complicated by promises of marriage, letters, notes, telephonic tragedies, and kisses on secret walks in the rear of the school garden. It took on all the semblance of true love, and while it did not lead to an elopement, by the time Lili returned to The

Hague her girlish loves had softly sculpted her into a young lady of remarkable beauty. Her seventeen summers roused memories of the unspoiled, picture-perfect beauty of her childhood, or to put it as simply as possible, Lili came back a very pretty girl with an empty, somewhat disillusioned little heart, a red morocco suitcase full of souvenirs, and a kind of love for Byron, though not nearly enough to satisfy that empty heart.

Lili's loves grew decidedly more serious. Lili joined the dance club, the tennis club, the golf club, and a dozen other clubs; Lili sold flowers in the street for charity; Lili drank tea at the Princess and other "Cottages." Though she may have felt brief throbbings for a tango dancer or a violinist in a red tailcoat, I would not call such feelings love. They were not red roses in the garden of Lili's heart; more often, they were weeds that drove out or overgrew each other. I have no wish to discuss them at all and shall now proceed directly to Lili's first engagement, which was to a second lieutenant of cavalry—probably in memory of Lili's first love, for her grandfather, who by this time was a colonel. The second lieutenant was endowed with an excellent name, fortune, and physique, but he did stutter. Lili struggled mightily with herself, but one fine day she solemnly announced to her grand-and-foster-parents that she could not abide that stuttering, and she broke off her engagement.

Lili then embarked on a period of delicious freedom. Thanks to her broken engagement, her adorable blonde head was ringed with a vague nimbus of experience, and for a long while she did not fall in love, but flirted furiously. Lili flirted with everyone, with all the male members of all her clubs; she also flirted with, yes, with her grandfather and, well, with the new chauffeur who was working for her grandfather's old friend, the one with the automobile. Lili flirted right and left, and

was blissfully happy. She had never thought that such a long interval without even puppy love—an interval brimming with nothing but flirtation—could bring such happiness. A lingering handshake, a stealthy kiss now and then—these trifles were more than enough to satisfy the flirtatious Lili, and for her there was nothing at stake but the wicked desire, if not to break men’s hearts, then at least to make them pound a bit faster, and to set men’s heads spinning. Lili always looked back with secret pleasure on this “blissful” period.

Lili was engaged twice more after that, without consummating either engagement at City Hall or Church. On one occasion, the ceremony fell through because Lili did not wish to go to the Indies, where her fiancé hoped to make his fortune in sugar despite very difficult times. On the other occasion, Lili broke off her engagement the day before the reception because her fiancé had scolded her too harshly for being a coquette, a shameless flirt, saying that *he* intended to be lord and master. Lili’s high-strung nature rebelled against this tyranny, and yet the oddest thing about this stage of Lili’s psychological development was that, once she was in fact married, to a somewhat older man who worshipped her, she stopped flirting, disapproved of flirting, and was the dearest wife you can imagine. For three years. Then Lili, without flirting, fell madly in love, and this time she was truly transported, for her love had all the qualities required to make Lili both very happy, and very unhappy. That he was a remarkably handsome man will come as no surprise to you, dear reader. That he was also a wretched fellow is a fact that I cannot, alas, conceal. That he squandered Lili’s inheritance in Monte Carlo is beyond all doubt. Fortunately, Lili’s grandparents were still in this world, along with their fortune. Lili passed many years in foreign lands with this love of hers. She divorced her devoted husband, who died—of old age, I believe—and just as soon as she could, she married that scoundrel,

who had such charming lips. Lili had no children, not by her good husband, nor by her bad one. But she had a great deal of sorrow, our Lili, who had become a most beautiful woman, except perhaps that she wore a bit too much make-up, in Paris and in Nice.

For the duration of this marriage, poor Lili had no other loves. She gave her whole heart to her second husband, who beat her and was unfaithful. For years, she remained faithful to him, even though he abused and neglected her. Lili flirted no longer, and just one kiss from her scoundrel was enough to make her happy. But those brief moments of bliss cost her no end of suffering.

Lili was a woman over forty when that fellow died. Her grandparents had passed away. She returned to The Hague, heir to the same house where she had spent her childhood years. She did not remarry, but felt a second, platonic, love burgeoning inside her for, well, for her first fiancé, the stutterer. He, now a widower, often called on Lili for a cup of tea, and the two of them would talk about the old days. Lili confessed that she could never forget her second husband, that she had never loved anyone else as she had loved that cad. That she probably never would love, nor ever marry, again. That she was growing old. The conversations between Lili and the stutterer, in the dim light of Lili's salon, took on a melancholy hue and the fragrance of the things of this life that have passed.

Lili felt in her soul and wardrobe that she was growing old. It was all over for her. She was forty-five; she had been through so much . . . How badly we read our futures. When the stutterer presented his nephew to Lili—his sister's son, a young lieutenant of cavalry—she suddenly and immediately understood that she was not old at all. She was young, a young woman still. The gray strands were invisible amid her rich mass of amber hair. In truth, Lili was very beautiful, always had been and still

was. And, well, the lieutenant of cavalry, predisposed by nature to fall in love with mature women, fell head over heels in love with Lili.

It was Lili's destiny to find much, if not everything, in the cavalry. Even if she did not find her greatest passion there, the after-passion of her later years again wore that same red braiding. There are uniforms—or rather, details of garments—that return fatefully throughout our lives. In Lili's life, it was red braiding.

Let me assure you that Lili's third marriage was very happy indeed, though brief. Her charming young husband died of a neglected cold. Lili never forgave herself that neglect . . . His neglect? Hers? As a nurse, had she fallen short?

Lili has grown a little older now. But as she has never been the type of woman to live entirely without love, she has fallen in love with, well, a twenty-year-old boy, whom she has taken as her son. Keep in mind that Lili never had children and that this twenty-year-old boy is a poor blood relation of Lili's grandmama and has a great talent for literature besides. And how I hasten to assure you, O reader, that this love of Lili's is wholly pure and motherly, however deeply felt it may be! To be sure, Lili adores her foster son when he bends his head over a sonnet or the short story he is writing to win the five-hundred-guilder *Hague Post* prize. Yet the sum of Lili's love is to place her fair, plump hand—still so graceful, with its sweet mount of Venus—maternally on his brown curls, and then Lili is moved by a late but genuine twinge of wistful happiness.

There is not so very much she misses then . . .

And she *never* speaks of her love, her foolish, pure, ever so slightly maternal, yet fond and fiery, profound and passionate love for her literary-minded foster son. She *never* speaks of it, not even to him, and so he remains entirely oblivious . . .

Truly, readers, do not think too badly of Lili; one day, mark my words, she will see to it that this love (who may be her last) makes a suitable marriage.

Translated by David McKay

For more information, please contact the translator at

mckay@openbooktranslation.com.