

# Lila

An Inquiry into Morals

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to Wendy and Nell

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# Part One



# 1

Lila didn't know he was here. She was sound asleep, apparently in some fearful dream. In the darkness he heard a grating sound of her teeth and felt her body suddenly turn as she struggled against some menace only she could see.

The light from the open hatch above was so dim it concealed whatever lines of cosmetics and age were there, and now she looked softly cherubic, like a small girl with blond hair, wide cheekbones, a small turned-up nose, and a common child's face that seemed so familiar it attracted a certain natural affection. He got the feeling that when morning came she should pop open her sky-blue eyes and they should sparkle with excitement at the prospect of a new day of sunlight and parents smiling and maybe bacon cooking on the stove and happiness everywhere.

But that wasn't how it would be. When Lila's eyes opened in a hung-over daze she'd look into the features of a grey-haired man she wouldn't even remember – someone she met in a bar the previous night. Her nausea and headache might produce some remorse and self-contempt but not much, he thought – she'd been through this many times – and she'd slowly try to figure out how to return to whatever life she'd been leading before she met this one.

Her voice murmured something like "Look out!" Then she said something unintelligible and turned away, then pulled the blanket up around her head, perhaps against the cold breeze that came down through the open hatch. The berth of the sailboat was so narrow that this turn of her body brought her up against him again and he felt the whole length of her and then her warmth.

An earlier lust came back and his arm went over her so that his hand held her breast – full but too soft, like something overripe that would soon go bad.

He wanted to wake her and take her again but as he thought about this a sad feeling rose up and forbade it. The more he hesitated the more the sadness grew. He would like to know her better. He'd had a feeling all night that he had seen her before somewhere, a long time ago.

That thought seemed to bring it all down. Now the sadness came on in full, and blended with the darkness of the cabin and with the dim indigo light through the hatch above. Up there were stars, framed by the hatch opening so that they seemed to move when the boat rocked. Part of Orion momentarily disappeared, then appeared again. Soon all the winter constellations would be back.

Cars rolling over a bridge in the distance sounded clearly through the cold night air. They were on their way to Kingston, somewhere on the bluffs above, over the Hudson River. The boat was berthed here in this tiny creek for a night's rest on the way south.

There was not much time. There was almost no green left in the trees along the river. Many of the turned leaves had already fallen. During these last few days, gusts of cold wind had swept down the river valley from the north, swirling the leaves up off their branches into the air in sudden spiralling flights of red and maroon and gold and brown across the water of the river into the path of the boat as it moved down the buoyed channel. There had been hardly any other boats in the channel. A few boats at docks along the river-bank seemed abandoned and forlorn now that summer had ended and their owners had turned to other pursuits. Overhead the "V"s of ducks and geese had been everywhere, flying down on the north wind from the Canadian Arctic. Many of them must have been just ducklings and goslings when he first began this voyage from the inland ocean of Lake Superior, a thousand miles behind him now and what seemed like a thousand years ago.



## LILA

There was not much time. Yesterday when he first went up on deck his foot slipped and he caught himself and then he saw the entire boat was covered with ice.

Phædrus wondered where he had seen Lila before, but he didn't know. It seemed as though he had seen her, though. It was autumn then too, he thought, November, and it was very cold. He remembered the streetcar was almost empty except for him and the motorman and the conductor and Lila and her girlfriend sitting back three seats behind him. The seats were yellow woven rattan, hard and tough, designed for years of wear, and then a few years later the buses replaced them and the tracks and overhead cables and the streetcars were all gone.

He remembered he had seen three movies in a row and smoked too many cigarettes and had a bad headache and it was still about half an hour of pounding along the tracks before the streetcar would let him off and then he would have a block and a half through the dark to get home where there would be some aspirin and it would be about an hour and a half after that before the headache would go away. Then he heard these two girls giggle very loudly and he turned to see what it was. They stopped very suddenly and they looked at him in such a way that there could have been only one thing they were giggling at. It was him. He had a big nose and poor posture and wasn't anything to look at, and tended to relate poorly to other people. The one on the left who looked like she had been giggling the loudest was Lila. The same face, exactly – gold hair and smooth complexion and blue eyes – with a smothered smile she probably thought covered up what she was laughing at. They got off a couple of blocks later, still talking and laughing.

A few months later he saw her again in a downtown rush-hour crowd. It happened in a moment and then it was over. She turned her head and he saw in her face that she recognized him and she seemed to pause, waiting for him to do something, say something. But he didn't act. He didn't have that skill of relating quickly to people, and then it was too late, somehow, and they each went on and he wondered for a long time that afternoon,

and for days after that, who she was and what it would have been like if he had gone over and said something. The next summer he thought he saw her at a bathing beach in the south part of the city. She was lying in the sand so that when he walked past her he saw her face upside down and he was suddenly very excited. This time he wouldn't just stand there. This time he would act, and he worked up his courage and went back and stood in the sand at her feet and then saw that the right-side-up face wasn't Lila. It was someone else. He remembered how sad that was. He didn't have anybody in those days.

But that was so long ago – years and years ago. She would have changed. There was no chance that this was the same person. And he didn't know her anyway. What difference did it make? Why should he remember such an insignificant incident like that all these years?

These half-forgotten images are strange, he thought, like dreams. This sleeping Lila whom he had just met tonight was someone else too. Or not someone else exactly, but someone less specific, less individual. There is Lila, this single private person who slept beside him now, who was born and now lived and tossed in her dreams and will soon enough die and then there is someone else – call her *lila* – who is immortal, who inhabits Lila for a while and then moves on. The sleeping Lila he had just met tonight. But the waking *lila*, who never sleeps, had been watching him and he had been watching her for a long time.

It was so strange. All the time he had been coming down the canal through lock after lock she had been making the same journey but he didn't know she was there. Maybe he had seen her in the locks at Troy, looked right at her in the dark but had not seen her. His chart had shown a series of locks close together but they didn't show altitude and they didn't show how confusing things could get when distances have been miscalculated and you are running late and are exhausted. It wasn't until he was actually in the locks that danger was apparent as he tried to sort out green lights and red lights and white lights and lights of locktenders' houses and lights of other boats coming the other way and lights

of bridges and abutments and God knows what else was out there in that black that he didn't want to hit in the middle of the darkness or go aground on. He'd never seen them before and it was a tense experience, and it was amidst all this tension that he seemed to remember seeing her on another boat.

They were descending out of the sky. Not just thirty or forty or fifty feet but hundreds of feet. Their boats were coming down, down through the night out of the sky where they had been all this time without their knowing it. When the last gate opened up from the last lock they looked out on to a dark oily river. The river flowed by a huge construction of girders towards a loom of light in the distance. That was Troy and his boat moved towards it until the swirl of the confluence of the rivers caught it and the boat yawed quickly. Then with the engine at full throttle he angled against the current across the river to a floating dock on the far side.

"We have four-foot tides here," the dock attendant said.

Tides! he had thought. That meant sea level. It meant that all the inland man-made locks were gone. Now only the passage of the moon over the ocean controlled the rise and fall of the boat. All the way to Kingston this feeling of being connected without barriers to the ocean gave him a huge new feeling of space.

The space was really what this sailing was all about and this evening at a bar next to the dock he had tried to talk about it to Rigel and Capella. Rigel seemed tired and preoccupied and uninterested, but Bill Capella, who was his crewman, was full of enthusiasm and seemed to know.

"Like at Oswego," Capella said, "all that time we were waiting for the locks to open, crying about how terrible it was we couldn't get going, we were having the time of our lives."

Phædrus had met Rigel and Capella when rain from a September hurricane caused floods to break through canal walls and submerge buoys and jam locks with debris so that the entire canal had to be closed for two weeks. Boats heading south from the Great Lakes were tied up and their crewmen had nothing to do. Suddenly a space was created in everyone's lives. An unexpected

gap of time had opened up. The reaction of everyone at first was frustration. To sit around and do nothing, that was just terrible. The yachtsmen had been busy about their own private cruises not really wanting very much to speak to anyone else, but now they had nothing better to do than sit around on their boats and talk to each other day after day after day. Not trivially. In depth. Soon everyone was visiting somebody on somebody else's boat. Parties broke out everywhere, simultaneously, all night long. Townspeople took an interest in the jam-up of boats, and some of them became acquainted with the sailors. Not trivially. In depth. And more parties broke out.

And so this catastrophe, this disaster that everyone originally bewailed, turned out to be exactly as Capella described it. Everyone was actually having the time of their lives. The thing that was making them so happy was the space.

Except for Rigel and Capella and Phædrus the tavern had been almost empty. It was just a small place with a few pool tables at the far room, a bar in the centre opposite the door and a lot of dingy tables at their own end. It omitted all appearances of style. And yet the feelings were good. It didn't intrude on your space. That's what did it. It was just a bar being a bar without any big ideas.

"I think it's the space that does it," he'd said to Rigel.

"What do you mean?" Rigel asked.

"About the space?"

Rigel was squinting at him. Despite Rigel's jaunty striped shirt and knitted sailor's cap he seemed unhappy about something he wasn't talking about. Maybe it was because his whole purpose for this trip was to sell his boat down in Connecticut.

So as not to get into an argument Phædrus had told Rigel carefully, "I think what we're buying with these boats is space, nothingness, emptiness... huge sweeps of open water... and sweeps of time with nothing to do... That's worth a lot of money. You can't hardly find that stuff any more."

"Shut yourself up in a room and lock the door," Rigel had said.

“That doesn’t work,” he had answered. “The phone rings.”

“Don’t answer.”

“UPS knocks at the front door.”

“How often? You don’t have to answer.”

Rigel was just looking for something to argue about. Capella joined in for the fun of it, “The neighbours will take it,” Capella said.

“Then the kids will come home and turn up the TV.”

“Tell them to turn it down,” Capella said.

“Then you’re out of the room.”

“Okay, then just ignore them,” Capella said.

“Okay, all right, fine. Now. What happens to someone who sits in a locked room and doesn’t answer the phone, and refuses to come out when someone is knocking at the front door, even when the kids are home and have turned up the TV?”

They thought about it and finally smiled a little.

The bartender’s face when they had come in had been completely bored. He had hardly any business. But since they had arrived four or five more customers had come in. He was talking to two of them, old customers it looked like, relaxed and used to the place. Two others were holding pool cues, apparently from some tables in an adjoining room.

“There isn’t any space,” Rigel said. He still wanted to quarrel. “If you were from here you’d know that.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no space here,” Rigel repeated. “It’s all crowded with history. It’s all dead now but if you knew this region you’d see there’s no space. It’s full of old secrets. Everyone covers up around here.”

He asked Rigel, “What secrets?”

“Nothing’s the way it seems,” Rigel said. “This little creek we’re on here, do you know where it leads? You wouldn’t think it goes back more than a few hundred yards after it completes that turn back there, would you? How far would you guess you could go, on this little tiny creek here, before it stops?”

Phædrus guessed twenty miles.

Rigel smiled. "In the old days, you'd go for ever," he said. "It goes all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. People don't know that any more. It goes behind the whole state of New Jersey. It used to connect to a canal that went over the mountains and down into the Delaware. They used to run coal through here on barges all the way from Pennsylvania. My great-grandfather was in that business. He had money invested in all sorts of enterprises around here. Did well at it, too."

"So your family comes from around here," Phædrus said.

"Since just after the revolution," Rigel said. "They didn't move from here until about thirty years ago."

Phædrus waited for Rigel to go on but he didn't say any more.

A cold draft hit as the door opened and a large crowd came in. One of them waved at Rigel. Rigel nodded back.

"Do you know him?" Phædrus asked.

"He's from Toronto," Rigel said.

"Who is he?"

"I've raced against him," Rigel said. "They're all Canadians. They come down at this time of year."

One Canadian wore a red sweater, a second had a blue navy watch cap cocked back on his head and a third wore a bright green jacket. They all moved together in a way that indicated they knew each other very well but did not know this place at all. They had an outdoorsy exuberance, like some visiting hockey team.

Now he remembered he had seen them before, in Oswego, on a large boat called the *Karma*, and they had seemed a little clannish.

"They act like they don't think much of this place," Capella said.

"They just want to get south," Rigel said.

"There's something about them though," Capella said, "Like they don't *approve* of what they see."

"Well I approve of *that*," Rigel said.

"What do you mean?" Capella asked.

"They're moral people," Rigel said. "We could use a little of that."

One of the Canadians who had been studying jukebox selections had pushed some buttons and lights now radiated and rotated around the room.

A blast of noise hit them. The speaker was set way too loud. Phædrus tried to say something to Capella. Capella cupped his hand to his ear and laughed. Phædrus threw up his hands and they both sat back and listened and drank their ale.

More people had come in and now the place was really getting crowded; a lot of local people apparently but they seemed to mix with the sailors just fine, as though they were used to each other. With all the ale and noise and friendliness of strangers this was beginning to be sort of a great little joint. He drank and listened and watched little patches of light from some sort of disco machine attached to the jukebox circle around on the ceiling.

His thoughts began to drift. He thought of what Rigel had said. The East *was* a different country. The difference was hard to identify – you felt it more than you saw it.

Some of the Hudson valley architecture had a “Currier and Ives” feeling of the early 1800s, a feeling of slow, decent, orderly life that preceded the industrial revolution. Minnesota, where Phædrus came from, never shared that. It was mostly forests and Indians and log cabins back then.

Travelling across America by water was like going back in time and seeing how it must have been long ago. He was following old trade routes that were used before railways became dominant. It was amazing how parts of this river still looked the same as the old Hudson River school of painting showed it, with beautiful forests, and mountains in the distance.

As the boat moved south he’d seen a growing aura of social structure, particularly in the mansions that had become more numerous. Their styles were getting more and more removed from the frontier. They were getting closer and closer to Europe.

Two of the Canadians at the bar were a man and a woman up against each other so close you couldn’t have slipped a letter-opener between them. When the music stopped Phædrus motioned to Rigel and Capella to look at them. The man had

his hand on the woman's thigh and the woman was smiling and drinking as though nothing was happening.

Phædrus asked Rigel, "Are these some of your moral Canadians?"

Capella laughed.

Rigel glanced over for a second and glanced back with a frown. "There are two kinds," he said. "The one kind disapproves of this country for all the junk they find here, and the other kind *loves* this country for all the junk they find here."

He motioned with his head to the two and was going to say something but then the music and the lights started up again and he threw up his hands and Capella laughed and they sat back again.

After a while, it began to feel cold. The door was open. A woman stood there, her eyes combing the room as though she was looking for someone.

Someone shouted, "CLOSE THE DOOR!"

The woman and Rigel looked at each other for a long time. It looked as though he was the one she was looking for but then she kept on looking.

"CLOSE THE DOOR!" someone else shouted.

"They're talking to *you*, Lila," Rigel said.

Apparently she saw what she was looking for because suddenly her entire expression turned furious. She slammed the door with all her might.

"That SUIT you?" she shouted.

Rigel looked at her without expression and then turned back to the table.

The music stopped. Phædrus asked with a wink, "Is that one of the ones who loves us?"

"No, she's not even a Canadian," Rigel said.

Phædrus asked, "Who is she?"

Rigel didn't say anything.

"Where's she from?"

"Don't have anything to do with her," Rigel said.

Suddenly they were hit again by another blast of noise.



LILA

“TAKE A BREAK!...” it blared out.

The coloured lights flashed around the room again.

“LET’S GET TOGETHER!...”

“ME AND YOU!...”

Capella held up an ale can questioningly to see if anyone wanted more. Phædrus nodded yes and Capella went off.

“AND DO THE THING...”

“AND DO THE THING...”

“THAT WE LIKE...”

“TO DO!...”

Rigel said something, but Phædrus couldn’t hear him. The tall Canadian with the roving hand and his girlfriend were on the dance floor. He watched them for a while, and as you might know, they were good.

“DO A LITTLE DANCE...”

“MAKE A LITTLE LOVE...”

“GET DOWN TONIGHT...”

“GET DOWN TONIGHT...”

Sensual. Short driving bursts of sound. A black sermon, up from the ghetto.

He watched Lila, who was now sitting by herself at the bar. Something about her really held his attention. Sex, he guessed.

She had the usual junk cosmetics; blond-tinted hair, red nails, nothing original, except that it all came out X-rated. You just sort of felt instantly right away without having to think twice about it what it was she did best. But there was something in her expression that looked almost explosive.

When the music stopped the sexy Canadian and his girl came off from the dance floor. They saw her and almost stopped, then went forwards slowly to the bar. Then Phædrus saw her say something to them and three people around them suddenly stiffened. The man turned around and actually looked scared. He took his arm off the girlfriend and turned to Lila. He must have been the one Lila was looking for. He said something to her and she said something back to him and then he nodded and nodded again, then he and the woman looked at each other

and turned to the bar and said nothing to Lila at all. The others around them gradually turned back to talking again.

This ale was getting to Phædrus. Still his head seemed strangely clear.

He studied Lila some more: Her legs were crossed and her skirt was above her knees. Wide hips. Shiny satin blouse, V-necked and tucked tight into a belt. Under it was a bust-line that was hard to look away from. It was a defiant kind of vulgarity, a kind of “Mae West” thing. She looked a little like Mae West. “C’mon and *do* something, if you’ve got the nerve,” she seemed to say.

Some X-rated thoughts passed through his mind. Whatever it is that’s aroused by these cues isn’t put off by any lack of originality. They were doing all kinds of things to his endocrine system. He’d been alone on the water a long time.

“DO A LITTLE DANCE...”

“MAKE A LITTLE LOVE...”

“GET DOWN TONIGHT...”

“GET DOWN TONIGHT...”

“Do you *know* her?” he shouted at Rigel.

Rigel shook his head. “Don’t have anything to *do* with her!”

“Where’s she from?”

“The *sewer!*” Rigel said.

Rigel gave him a narrow-eyed glance. Rigel sure was giving a lot of advice tonight.

The door opened and more people came in. Capella returned with an armload of cans.

“DO A LITTLE DANCE...”

“MAKE A LITTLE LOVE...”

Capella shouted in Phædrus’s ear, “NICE, QUIET, REFINED PLACE WE PICKED!!!”

Phædrus nodded up and down and smiled.

He could see Lila start to talk to one of the other men at the bar and the man seemed to answer familiarly. But the others kept a distance and held their faces stiff as though they were on guard against something.

“DO A LITTLE DANCE...”

LILA

“MAKE A LITTLE LOVE...”

“GET DOWN TONIGHT...”

“GET DOWN TONIGHT...”

“GET DOWN TONIGHT!”

“GET DOWN TONIGHT!”

He wondered if he had the nerve to go up and talk to her.

“BABY!!”

He sure as hell had the desire.

He took his time and finished his ale. The relaxation from the alcohol and tension from what was coming just exactly balanced each other in an equilibrium that resembled stone sobriety but was not. He watched her for a long time and she knew that he was watching her and he knew that she knew that he knew he was watching her, and he knew that she knew that he knew; in a kind of regression of images that you get when two mirrors face each other and the images go on and on and on in some kind of infinity.

Then he picked up his can and headed towards the spot next to her at the bar.

At the bar-rail the smell of her perfume penetrated through the tobacco and liquor smells.

After a while she turned and stared into him. The face was mask-like from the cosmetics, but a faint smile showed pleasure, as though she had been waiting for this a long time.

She said, “Where have I seen you before?”

A cliché, he thought, but there was a protocol to this sort of thing. Yeah, “Where have I seen you before?” He tried to think of the protocol. He was rusty. The protocol was you’re supposed to talk about the places you might have seen her in and who you know there, and this is supposed to lead to further subjects in a progression of intimacy, and he was trying to think of some places to talk about when he looked at her, and my God, it was her, the one on the streetcar and she’s asking, “Where have I seen you before?” and that was what started the illumination.

It was stronger towards the centre of her face but it didn’t come *from* her face. It was as though her face were on the centre of a screen and the light came from behind the screen.