

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

*William Ryan Hilary*  
**Tunnels**

**NOTE:** This is a story only for those who have the appropriate temperament to handle love. If the Department of Emotional Tabulation (D.E.T.) has given you clearance please continue. If not, I ask that you see the pertinent administrator for corrections. Before entering the world of this story, make sure that you are willing to concede a little good will and bear the burden of some sadness. You have been warned. You may continue.

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**M**any years ago, on the soft, sleepy edges of a mean and floral city there lived a boy and a girl fated to be together. They, in intertwined ways, both succeeded and failed to meet their destiny, and thus we can learn much from them, if we are cautious and brave. Through verse and cunning, they managed to sustain a shared life in the midst of great upheaval, hiding from the boring cranks that would have otherwise ruled their lives, and escaping the consequences of an increasingly heartless and dysfunctional world order. By touching and tasting each other in private, and doing things that old ladies gossip about whilst drinking India tea, they survived mundanity and death. Sort of. At least there's a template form written in honor of them, still waiting in the D.E.T.—intended for others actually, who wish to register such a life, so as to keep up to standard with the overseers. These days, this form is seldom needed.

Although they were only children and had yet to experience much of what is worldly, this typical pair—names forthcoming—found themselves immediately in the midst of a love affair as unexpected and eternal as any that has ever been told. Theirs was a phenomenon that I have witnessed only once before, on the windowsill of a dreary New World apartment when two purple tulips insisted—against all the laws of light and growth—on bowing their heads together until their stems were almost crawling out of the water, and their petals had fallen into in shadow. They became as faded and twisted as a pair of twigs on the street.

The boy and the girl lived in adjoining mansions in a dull quarter of Saint Lutetia, in Europa, one of the few capitals that had survived last decade's brutal firestorm of conquests and revolutions. Their neighborhood was rumored to be the finest in what remained of the Old World, with its surviving baroque mansions and tree-lined streets of sun-soaked stone. Families adjoined in that era, were always in some manner of conflict, mostly through wit and intellectual speculation. Thankfully, the Camille's and the Thompson's did not bicker too openly and allowed their children the requisite amount of freedom for a story to be told.

The girl's name was Lily Camille, the boy's Tom Thompson. Lily was born with a startling aesthetic abnormality. Her hair and eyes, which were both a deep shade of chestnut brown at the height of winter, lightened with each passing month so that on the day of the summer solstice—when the transformation would begin again—she was as blond haired and

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

blue-eyed as a cherub. She was short. She was shapely. He was gaunt, and sharp and lean. She was May to his July. He was snow. She was sky. Together they melted, meshed and resounded with a harmony so pure that it pleased the universe.

Together, Lily and Tom were an inseparable pair. On cherry-tree streets, they huffed and hop scotched, and conjured dragons out of air. She had the elegant arrogance of a 1920s flapper, he the fiery temperament of a Crimean soldier at arms. Their relationship assumed, at a tender age, the respectful maturity of an epic Russian novel, and sometimes they would sneak, even as six-year-olds, a cacophony of hushed kisses beneath the willow tree by the lake in the park, pressing their lips swiftly together and then retreating into awkward blushes and prolonged stretches of silence, the mere memory of which was enough to satisfy them for days. Since they did all this in secret, neither of their families realized the extent to which the pair had entered into the land of romance. It was known, in society, that Tom and Lily liked to play with each other. But neither family saw this as a problem, as it displayed the health of each lineage and its capacity to procreate within certain bounds. Children playing were not adolescents courting, bear in mind.

As time passed, and they moved out of their nurseries into larger, 'adult' quarters, they found themselves in adjoining bedrooms, where they discovered it possible to talk through a particularly thin wall panel. On Lily's side a maudlin picture of steam train progress hung near her bed. On Tom's side the wall was painted with a mural of a woman tucking a baby into its crib. There, they would converse long into the night, constructing each other's respective bodies from the lilt and tone of their distant, muffled voices. At the end of these evenings, when the first pale light of dawn broke on the horizon, they were not tired or sore, but glowed as if they had slept the soundest night of sleep in the history of slumbersom children.

By the time they were eleven, Lily had fashioned them a glittering future from the pages of the history books and plays, which lined her shelves. Tom, she proposed, would serve – as so many young men had – in the Emperor's carnival army – while she launched a successful acting career in the sister city of Saint Denise – a far more cosmopolitan town, that St Lutetia. Poor Tom would be gone for many brutal years, and would face a series of epic trials. In his absence she would fall in and out of love with a carefully arranged slew of directors, not one of which would live up to the temperament of her beloved. And then one day, in the middle of the fourth act, as she was giving the performance of a lifetime, she would spot him sitting in row one, in seat A, a gaunt hero, middle aged, with a bouquet of silver roses in his left hand, waiting for the final applause. She would see him in his beaten blue uniform, with his haggard hero's face, and would hesitate over a trifling line before riding a surge of passion to the symphonic end of her scene. And afterwards, instead of merely throwing the flowers onstage, he would sweep her up in his arms, holding her face to his chest so that she could smell the dust on his jacket and the soil of foreign lands in his hair. He would take her backstage.

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Given her penchant for romantic tales, and her love for Dr. Firebird's fairytale theater, it is no surprise that Lily Camille was somewhat pleased when her parents announced, on the eve of her fourteenth birthday, an impending and controversial engagement to Private Franklin Johnson of the New, New World. "Wherever *that* is," Lily said grinning with characteristic chameleon mirth. She told Tom he would have to rescue her, and the danger of this arrangement was the source of much excitement.

Tom paced and fumed. *He* was not excited.

"Why do people have to get married?" he asked his parents. "Why do they have to get jobs, and settle down? And what do they do then? Just sit around their living rooms, knitting or reading the paper. Paying bills? Worrying about everything? Is that all?"

He retrieved his father's pistol from the downstairs gun rack and practiced aiming it in his room. On the following Sunday he examined the business pages from the newspaper and read about the Johnson's latest purchases in the great rolling nugget of West America, where all was gold and frontier, and men were men, unless they were Indian. He knew, too, Franklin was far away—yes—but a man could take a train and then a boat and could shoot a fellow right in the heart if he wanted. The thought crossed his mind—that was all. His pubescence was not yet in full bloom.

Then on a mild Monday, while he was reading in his room, there came a loud tap on his bedroom wall, and the muffled sound of Lily's voice. "Tommy, Tommy! Are you there?"

"Yes."

Her tone had the willowy tremulousness of a tree in a storm and conjured images of her blond tresses all askew, and her plump, plum cheeks red and tear-stained. "It's that jarhead Johnson," she said. "I forget his first name. He's here...in my house. A surprise family visit. I have to eat with him in twenty minutes."

Tommy took the pistol from beneath his bed. "He's there, in your house?" he asked. "Right now?"

"Yes, yes. But this is *serious*. I'm afraid I was wrong. He's a beast. His voice is repulsive—a fine nasal whine. He has no class. His hair is so perfectly flat and shiny. His eyes are the nasty color of grandma's veins. And he looks at me as though I'm a doll. I thought this could all be a fun adventure, but he isn't like a traditional villain. He's so...so...plain! So adult! You've got to rescue me."

Tommy cocked the gun. "I'm going to say something now," he began, "which I have never said before, and will never say again. I love you Lily Camille, although I have absolutely no idea what that means. I simply know it. Just as I know that I'm going to kill—"

"Oh, Tommy, this is no time for theatrics. Think of something else. Think of something practical."

"Something practical! Who do you suppose I am? I have my father's gun, and if you don't let me in, I shall blast my way through."

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

Frustrated, Lily struck the wall panel and uttered the curse word that she had heard her father most often mutter while reading the morning paper. To her surprise, the panel swung inward like a hidden trap door, and for a moment she teetered on the brink of an endless black precipice. Then she stood back, gasping and smoothing down her dress. There was a long silver ladder before her.

"Lily?" Tom called. "Are you all right?"

"Yes darling," She replied. "I'm fine. But I need you to give the panel on your wall a great big shove. Really push on it."

Tommy hesitated. "Why?" From downstairs he heard his father call his name. Next door, Lily heard Madame Camille call hers.

"Never mind why," Lily shouted. "Just do it."

He complied, pushing once, twice, and then with a final shove stumbling into the impossibly wide space between the walls. He and Lily found themselves facing each other across a deep chasm.

Instinctively, with no regard for personal safety, they reached across to share a quick kiss.

"Now, down the ladder," Lily hissed. "And close that door quick. They'll never find us there."

Moments later they were standing in a long tunnel, staring miles ahead towards a pinprick of light. It came, they discovered, from a long line of streetlamps, which stretched into infinity like the rows of candles that lined the Chapel pathways at Christmas. They looked at one another and grinned. "Should we turn back," Tommy asked, beginning to laugh.

Lily skipped ahead. "Go back to face old bloodhound Johnson? No thanks. I like it down here. It feels...it feels..."

"I don't know how it feels," Tom said softly. "It feels...like the first few moments after waking up!"

They explored further, discovering that there was not merely one tunnel, but an entire network of intersecting passages and caverns, some the size of a city-square, flanked on all sides by the shells of abandoned shops and houses, as if an entire city had sunken underground, as if the neighborhood of St. Lutetia had followed their descent towards the center of the earth without even bothering to turn off its lights. In each room, of each abandoned building, the furniture was immaculately arranged and organized—tables, chairs, wardrobes and beds. The only missing elements were parts of walls and roofs, both of which had been replaced by shelves of rocks, or by the starless night above. For the first time in their young lives, Lily and Tommy were completely and utterly alone.

They had never been as content. The more they explored the more rapturous they felt, holding hands; the more they forgot about the world behind them. They frolicked through rooms and bounded up stairs. They stared out of glassless windows to where the underground city streets and neighborhoods sat mute in the darkness. They laughed and whooped. They shouted just to hear their voices echo against the stone. They opened

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

drawers and ransacked cupboards. In one bedroom they found an assortment of suits and gowns—far too large for either of them. With cries of delight they peeled off their own clothes and dressed anew. Then, amongst dusty, under-used, but soon-to-be tussled sheets, they laid curled together like interlocked question marks draped in fabric, and drifted into a deep, forgetful sleep.

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Days, months and years passed in the space of a nap. They grew into their clothes. Neither Charles nor Lily felt any impulse to return to the surface; eventually they forgot about their old lives completely. They forgot about the blue sky and green trees, the bedrooms they had once lived in, with blue and pink linen, and toys falling from the closets. She forgot about the vase of purple tulips on the dining room table, and the way that the maids gently shook her awake in the morning. And he forgot about shooting ranges, golf clubs and afternoon tea. They did not need to eat or drink. They were never hungry. They marked the passage of time only by the changing color of Lily's hair and eyes – blue in the summer, brown in the spring, and although their skin eventually became wrinkled and their curls white, they did not feel weak or aged. Forgetfulness seemed to breed in the air. Memories were made and then discarded forever. What happened one day was forgotten the next. And in this state of perpetual novelty—of sudden newness—they were happy merely to *be*, to roam, to live, to breathe in the underground world where even the deepest recesses of the darkness were beautiful. Sometimes it felt as though the entire sequence of events had occurred over the course of a few hours. At other times, they felt as if they had been living in the moment forever. They had only one rule: never to separate, for this was their sole fear: that if either was to become lost in the blissful network of underground nooks and crannies, then both their lives would become unbearable.

One day, a curious thing occurred. Lily, old and bent and barely able to walk, awoke in the bedroom of the house they had chosen to most frequently occupy, and announced that she was quite sick and possibly dying. Tommy, unsure what either of those words meant, but certain that they were terrible, sat up in bed and looked at her with an expression of sheer terror. As he touched her fragile skin, a number of strange images, once safely encumbered for almost a hundred years—now free and dangerous—flashed through his mind. He saw, in an instant, the ether-reeking sheets of his grandfather's bedroom, and the fresh grave of a beloved childhood dog. "Illness?" he muttered to himself. "Dying?"

"You know what those words mean?" Lily asked

"Do you feel different? Do you feel deathly sick?"

"I feel sick, sure, and yes something else. But deathly? I don't know what that means."

"Me neither." He stared glumly at the sheets.

"I feel a little more sleepy than usual."

"Sleepy? Death! Sleep and Death." Tom leapt out of bed and began to pace the floor.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

"You're making me nervous," Lily said.

"There's something hovering at the back of my mind, some lost concept – a green bottle, a parcel of pills. Medicines! That's what they are. That's what I need."

"Medicine?" Lily said. "Why, even if I knew what that was, it wouldn't be possible to find any of it. You know you can't leave me alone."

"I have to, my dearest." Tom said. "Or I fear we will be apart for a long, long time – longer than ever before. I have the vague inkling of something – the strangest sense. I can't quite put my finger on it, but it sends chills deep down into my soul."

Lily exploded in a fit of coughing sobs. "I won't let you go." she said. "I won't!"

He laid a hand on her silver hair and closed his eyes until he believed that he had come across something quite original to say. Then he bent and kissed the papery creases of her ancient face. "Now you listen to me Lily Camille," he whispered. "I shall say something now which I have never said before, and will never say again. That I love you more than anything in this dark world of ours, although I have no idea what that means. I simply know it. Just as I know I must go and find you the strange 'medicine' that will help you out of this bed. Do you understand?"

With her eyes twinkling and the ghost of a memory teasing her heart, she looked up at him, and smiled despite herself. "No, my darling," she said sadly. "I don't understand at all. This isn't time for theatrics. Please be practical. Please stay."

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Tom searched endlessly. He traversed every inch of gloomy stone, every creaking floorboard and dusty marble hall. He wandered through the great, grand abandoned cathedrals all the way to the dull and dreary railway lines. Deeper and deeper he went, until he was exploring passages so narrow that he could barely stand up. He found strangely colored stones, empty bottles and weird accoutrements. But when he sat down to meditate upon these – his potential panaceas – he knew, in his dim, distant heart, that they would not help poor Lily Camille. As they had expected, he lost his way. He believed that if he found the cure, it would lead him home. But in the mean time, he was separated from Lily by his stubborn ways. Eventually he began to despair. His despair turned to anger. He beat the walls with his fists. He shook his fist at the stone sky. Then, in a particularly dark passageway, where the nearest lamp cast only a shred of light, he crawled into fetal position and closed his eyes.

It was there, in the midst of that defiant sleep, that the first glimmer of silver light appeared on the dark horizon of his mind, only a twinkle at first – a gossamer thread, which seemed to insist that in a distant land the sun was trying to rise.

The sun.

A sensation passed over him like a jolt of electricity. His eyes snapped open. His heart began to beat faster – frantic, like someone running to

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

catch the bus. He had known the sun once, surely, on a playful field, in a light-dappled room. He had known its golden radiance upon the cream façade of the houses on a pretty street. At first these memories were only the empty vessels of meaningless words. Then they began to fill up with meanings and feelings. He *saw* the grass, the trees, the twig-littered roads of St. Lutetia's widest boulevard. He recalled, dimly, one sunny Sunday, gorging on a plate of blackberries that were sitting on the kitchen counter; he remembered the consequent scolding of his father.

Father! Mother! Aunt, Uncle, Cousin...

He remembered the soft touch of a woman's cheeks and the fragrant floral smell of her neck as she pressed him to her chest. He remembered the cherry tree lined streets and the red firebird emblazoned on the wall of a local playhouse. He recalled the pale blue hue of Sunday morning, and the gray bristles on a tutor's chin. He heard words that rhymed and worked together: phrases that held, lyrical miasmas that shined. This torrent of memory increased until he could no longer place each image, but saw only a colorful blur. Then he fell into a trance.

When he awoke again, he was standing at the foot of a long iron ladder, with the lantern-lit corridor stretching behind him. "I have died," he thought. Had he looked at his hands he might have noticed that his skin had become smoother. But he didn't look. He only climbed, slowly at first and then faster and faster, until his palms were cut and scraped, and his heart was beating so hard against his chest that he could barely breathe.

With each passing second a new image entered his mind: a brown suckled teat; a wooden crib; the dark space of pre-consciousness where he floated in brine, a placenta protruding from his translucent belly.

By the time he reached the surface, he had completely forgotten about Lily Camille.

He was standing in the park near his house, blinking in the sunlight beneath a plum tree. He was very sleepy, with no idea where he had been. A distant clock tower chimed five o'clock. The light was fading, and his mother and father would be terribly upset with him for being so late. He ran home.

Tom had spent a lifetime in the underground city, but in the Neighborhood of St. Lutetia he had only been gone for a night. His parents, of course, were pleased to see him. The maids ran shrieking through the house. His mother held him tight to her chest and wouldn't let him go. Even gray-eyed father could not help but grin. Then there was a furor in the garden and the Camilles came storming in. "Where is Lily, Where is Lily?" both parents shrieked in unison. "We haven't seen her since yesterday at three! Where did you take her!? Where?"

But because Lily had not emerged with him, Tom had no idea who she was. That—it seemed—was the way things worked in this dastardly game.

"I shall get my pistol," Monsieur Camille cried, moustache bristling. "I shall make the lad talk."

"The girl is not here. She was never here. But since you have so rudely

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

interrupted my Sunday morning reading, you can go ahead and get your pistol," Tom's father said. "And I shall get mine."

"Gentlemen!" Mrs. Camille roared. "If either of you say even one more word I shall get *my* pistol. And believe me, you do not want that to happen."

The fathers calmed down, shook hands and called the police. Soon every family in the neighborhood was searching for the lost girl. They dredged the river, combed the park. They looked through the national newspapers for similar cases—a national trend, perhaps, of girls going missing, drowning themselves in droves. They found nothing—only quiet nooks littered with stones, and the vague rumblings of yet another war.

Since most of Tom and Lily's taunts had occurred in complete secrecy, there was not much evidence of them playing together. But in their despair, the Camille's rewrote history so that during childhood, Tom and Lily had been inseparable. They now claimed that Tom had been a frequent presence at dinner. He had slept at their house so often that an extra bedroom was added. Eventually, the Camille's brought in their lawyer. They sized up the case against their neighbor's son and brought him before the local magistrate. In the courtroom, their goading was so fierce that young Tom eventually broke down and cried out: "Listen! I don't know who Lily Camille is, and I never have. And what's more, I don't want to know! She's caused me more bother than anything else in this great golden city. I hate her! It's truly so! So please, leave me alone."

It was decided that Tom Thompson had gone mad.

He was placed in a sanitarium. Under the observation of Germinus Frost, a New World psychologist famous for his work on the minds of soldiers whose homes, lives and (most importantly) memories had been wrecked by the atrocities of battle. Frost's specialty lay in constructing false histories with the aim of making the present seem more amicable, although he was good at retrieving memories too. Try as he might, however, Dr. Frost could not make Tom Thompson remember Lily Camille. They worked day and night together. They tried hypnosis, sleep deprivation, cave diving and seashell collecting. They took boat trips and recited long passages from Frost's multi-volume work on the nature of memory. Nothing worked. Eventually, the Doctor lost his patience and had Tom discharged on the grounds that "there was absolutely nothing wrong with the bloody child, and he had never known a Lily Camille, not even for a second of his dull little life."

Tom returned to his family and resumed his schooling. In time things returned to normal. The Camilles moved across the ocean to the bright, New World, where they hoped to forget about their lost daughter. Tom finished a few years behind his classmates.

Of course, there was another war, this one worse than the last.

Things had changed in the old world by then. There were things called bombs now, dropped by real dragons, machines as big as beasts, which rattled through the sky and could reduce even the most historically-anchored buildings to rubble in mere seconds. There were atrocities so

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

horrific that they lost all tone and texture and became mere abstractions of horror, indescribable to those who had not been present to experience them. Europa was blown to pieces, all of its quarters destroyed. Even beautiful St. Lutetia was affected by the bombardments and blackouts, caressed by gunfire and the thud of marching feet. All the worlds that we had so proudly conquered suddenly collapsed before our eyes, unable to withstand the weight of our recently revealed ugliness. Entire populations ran, fell and stumbled. There were worse things too...

As a matter of fact, Sergeant Tommy Thompson was present for one of the battles, crouching behind the ruined wall of the Firebird Theater with his rifle trained on an enemy soldier. For some reason the charred insignia of the great phoenix that adorned the wall brought upon him a torrent of tears that he couldn't shake no matter how hard he tried. And when his army finally reclaimed the city, and their tanks rolled through to set up camp, Tom walked away from his battalion and sat weeping in the old park where he had played in his youth. There, beneath a withered plum tree, at the center of a smoking crater, he found a strange opening and was overcome with a warm feeling, as if he were being touched by a beautiful woman. As he approached the entrance however he began to feel weak and old. Then he saw his fingers wrinkle and age and became afraid. He ran away.

The war ended, giving birth to a set of new eras, each of which faded and withered away like the once-white petals of cheap daisies sold on the street during festivals when love can be won or bought. Leaders rose and fell. There were mass migrations from world to world. Time marched onward.

Tom Thompson never saw Lily Camille again, although she stayed with him always, lingering in peculiar sensations, and hanging to the rafters as a pleasant ghost. She whispered to him from the gray space behind moving curtains, on nights when he was alone and it was raining outside. Sometimes, if he was walking down a quiet country lane he would see her figure in the distance, only to find upon approach that it was a dull tree or a scarecrow. Her effect upon his life—although he had completely forgotten her—was intoxicating. He would sense her presence in certain objects – an iron lamppost, a tussled bed, the slow echo of running water or the feeling of completing a job well done and would be overcome with an ecstatic dizziness, which eventually gave way to great longing and pain. He sensed her in certain women too, as the profound bliss of intense love which was wonderful while it lasted, enmeshed in sheets, tangled in limbs.

Even so, certain characteristics would always remain lost to him—her hair, her skin, the magic of her changing eyes; the way she had talked, and smelled, and sung to him in the cavernous city beneath time. He could never recall these specificities—could never even remember *who* Lily Camille was, although he would never forget her name. In the years after the war he thought of her often. He had many images in his head – potentialities for the way that she might appear, slight sketches and sad songs. She was something special, an experience beyond experience, a land he was trying desperately to return to. So he took to wandering the world, collect-

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

ing pictures and trophies and arranging pleasant tableaux on dusty carnival streets for the local children to see for a penny or two or just for free if needed. Perhaps somewhere, on a phantom stage, in a phantom town, there's an old man sitting in the front row of an auditorium, watching his lady love give the performance of a lifetime, smiling away to himself as he plans to sweep her off her feet and carry her off stage when the show is over.

To do what? To go where?

We will never know.