

# Innocence

Kathleen Tessaro

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Extract

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The first thing you should know about Robbie is she's dead. She died in a car accident in New York – a hit and run, crossing the street one February afternoon to buy more Diet Coke. She really loved Diet Coke. Couldn't function without it. And she was never the type of girl to cross at a street corner.

The second thing you should know is that we'd lost touch years before that. Not exactly fallen out so much as given up on one another. We no longer saw the world in the same way. She refused to grow up and, at the time, I thought being grown up was a very serious, terribly important business.

I'm not so sure now.

She was larger than life, even at nineteen. Too large, as it turned out. But sometimes fate is mean in its portions of love, boldness; of heroism. The sweeping colours of the canvas are reduced to that irritating point precision of Seurat, the man with all the dots that join up from a distance, when what one wants is the audacity and eloquence of Michelangelo; that rare feeling that being alive is a grand and glorious thing.

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There's an art to life. Some people have a talent for it. A boundless hope illuminates them. Where others are vague and tentative, they have only sharp, clear edges. Energy soars; lights burn brighter when they enter a room.

And that's the other thing you should know about Robbie.

She had that knack in spades.

In hindsight, it was a mistake serving wine at the Thursday night adult education drama and poetry workshop. I'd imagined that it might help the group bond; loosen everybody up.

Mr Hastings is certainly loose now. In fact, he's drunk. He's decided to recite *The Waste Land*.

Again.

He reads it every week. According to him, it's the best poem ever written and can't be heard too many times. Some of us feel differently. But he's immune to any encouragement to broaden his poetic horizons.

So we sit, all eight of us, in a circle of old sofas and wooden chairs, gazing out over the rooftops of London from our attic room in the City Lit, listening to Mr Hastings's now infamous weekly reading.

The fluorescent lights wink, the air vent wheezes and, outside, rain drums incessantly against the dirty windowpane. Below, the narrow winding streets and alleyways of Covent Garden weave from one famous theatrical landmark to another; round the Theatre Royal and the Lyceum,

through an elegant, affluent opening night crowd at the Royal Opera House. They duck past the Wyndham's, the Garrick, and the Duke of York's; squeeze down a low, dark passageway between the Vaudeville and the Adelphi, where stagehands and chorus girls shelter in the doorways, finishing their cigarettes just moments before curtain up, unaware that another great performance has already begun.

Mr Hastings is a huge fan of a rolled 'r'. He makes John Gielgud sound like a pre-Rex Harrison version of Eliza Doolittle. And he's not afraid of the odd shout, randomly notching up the volume on any word that takes his fancy. For a while, I thought there might be some sort of interpretive reasoning to it. I was wrong.

*April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with warm spring rain*

Clive Clarfelt, whose thick black quiff of hair has stood the ravages of time better than his face, tries to refill his glass. Mr Hastings shoots him a look. Clive challenges him – even going so far as to snort in defiance. Mr Hastings's eyes widen – something in the vein of Dracula hypnotizing a virgin.

Clive retreats.

And the reading continues.

The sound of Mr Hastings's random, rolling voice,

coupled with the suffocating warmth of the central heating, has an almost instant narcotic effect. My heartbeat slows, my breath grows shallow. And my mind wanders . . .

Suddenly, silence.

I jerk up.

Mr Hastings is moved to tears. He's wiping his nose on what he thinks is his hankie but is in fact Mrs Patel's woolly winter glove. She's far too polite to mention this and smiles nervously as he mops his brow, then jams it into his breast pocket.

It's time to stage an intervention.

'That was just beautiful! Really moving! Don't you all agree?' I look around the room. The sound of my voice rouses the others; they blink like a group of nocturnal animals caught in a torchlight. 'You read so . . . so *clearly*, Mr Hastings, that I'm sure you've inspired everyone else.'

A few nodding heads, even some helpful noises.

I take the plunge. 'With that in mind, why don't we give someone else a chance? What about you, Brian?'

Mr Hastings's smile disappears. 'But I'm not done yet! There are twelve more pages!'

I count to three in my head. 'Yes, but the thing is, it's such a long poem and we're really quite a large group today. I think it's best to press on so that everybody gets a go. Then maybe we can go back to the Eliot if we have time at the end.' I look hopefully at Brian. 'What have you got for us today?'

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‘A person simply doesn’t interrupt Eliot!’ He’s taking this badly. ‘The whole *sense* of the piece will be lost! Fractured! Where was I?’ And he accelerates, raising his voice:

*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images . . .*

‘Mr Hastings, please!’

*And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at the morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at the evening rising to meet you  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust!*

‘Please, Mr Hastings!’

It must be the wine.

I’m normally quite adept at dealing with rebellious octogenarians. In the three years I’ve been teaching night classes at the City Lit, I’ve managed dozens of eccentrics and their artistic outbursts with little more than a handful of compliments and the occasional shiny object. But add alcohol and they turn wily; playing on your sympathy one minute and then pretending to be deaf the next.

‘Mr Hastings,’ I boom threateningly (or as close to threateningly as I can be bothered to get), ‘that’s enough!’



He glowers at me.

‘Now, Brian . . .’

‘Where’s that handkerchief, damn it!’ Mr Hastings gives Mrs Patel a shove. ‘I sincerely hope you’re not sitting on it!’

She murmurs apologetically.

I turn my attention back to Brian, a lanky young postal worker from Dulwich. Brian’s a little shy and hasn’t read yet in the group. I watch as he fumbles with a worn piece of photocopied paper and readjusts his tie.

‘Yes?’ I smile encouragingly. ‘What have you got there?’

‘Well.’ He’s a touch manic. ‘He he he he! It’s nothing, really,’ he squeals. ‘Just a little Emily Dickinson.’

‘*Jesus Christ!*’ Mr Hastings hisses.

Doris Del Angelo chips in. ‘I *adore* Dickinson!’ And she glares at Mr Hastings, who pours himself another glass of Bordeaux from the table in front of him, ignoring Clive and his empty glass, and staring at her breasts, which are, it must be said, quite amazing. She’s in her late sixties and not afraid to showcase them in low-cut, form-fitting blouses. Each week they play a pivotal role in the dynamic of the group. She heaves them up defiantly. ‘I cannot *wait* to hear this poem!’

Should I attempt to remove the wine from Mr Hastings? Visions of me wrestling the old man to the floor fill my head. Perhaps a tactical relocation of the bottle. Then I notice he’s drained it.

Fair enough.

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Back to Brian. ‘Don’t be shy, Brian. Everyone has to start somewhere.’

He smiles. ‘Actually, I think I’d like to stand.’

He rises boldly. A moment later, his knees give way. He lands abruptly back in his seat.

‘Ah, yes. It’s a bit alarming to stand up and read for the first time, isn’t it?’ (The trick is to use these things constructively.)

‘He he he he he!’ He’s hysterical. His hands are shaking.

‘Why don’t you have a go sitting down?’ I suggest. ‘Just nice and easy. Easy does it.’

The group waits while Brian gathers his strength.

*‘If I can stop one heart from breaking . . .*

‘Oh *fuck!*’ Mr Hastings cradles his head in his hands.

‘Please go on, Brian. You’re doing beautifully!’

*I shall not live in vain;*

*If I can ease one life the aching, [he he he!]*

*Or cool one pain,*

*Or help one fainting robin [strange twitch  
developing in right eye]*

*Unto his nest again,*

*I shall not [he he he!] live in vain.*

He’s about to be sick or pass out.

‘Well done, Brian! Really. Well done you!’

Doris claps, her bosoms quivering enthusiastically. ‘Bravo, dear boy!’

A wave of faint-hearted applause sweeps round the circle. Brian grins, blushing.

‘And how did that feel to you?’

‘Well, um! Unusual!’

‘Well, it sounded bloody unusual too!’ Mr Hastings struggles to his feet.

‘Mr Hastings . . .’

‘Damn Emily Dickinson!’ He makes his way to the door, swaying like a sailor on the high seas. ‘And damn you all!’ Grasping the frame, he wheels round. ‘I have not come all the way across London to listen to the musings of some morbid little American! Goodnight!’

It’s unclear whether this last statement refers to Emily Dickinson or to me, but it’s on the tip of my tongue to remind him that T. S. Eliot was a morbid little American too.

That’s when I notice there’s a wet spot on the sofa. Mrs Patel, ever vigilant for the possibility of an awkward moment, quickly covers it with her scarf.

Hastings’s voice echoes down the hallway, bold and resonant: ‘Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night!’

Sitting there, staring at the scarf and the dreadfulness that lurks beneath it, knowing that the rest of the class are, in

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turn, waiting for my reaction to Mr Hastings's mutiny, the thought enters my head again. I've been fending it off; deftly sidestepping it every time it appears. Only tonight I haven't got the energy to circumnavigate it any longer.

This isn't what I had in mind.

When I left my hometown of Eden, Ohio, fourteen years ago to pursue a career as an actress in London, this is definitely not what I had in mind.

And that's when I see her, lingering in the doorway.

It only lasts a moment, then she's gone. But it's definitely her. And she's smiling at me. Even from across the room, I can see the light, soft spread of her lips; an easy, graceful, teasing grin, as if to say, 'So it's come to this, has it?'

Yes, Robbie. It has.