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129 Jay Street  
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# A Bedtime Party

BY ROSHNI CAPUTO-NIMBARK

Readers may recall a piece of bedtime lore about Lily White's Party. Growing up on Long Island in the 1980s, I learned about this charming affair when my mother would tuck me in at bedtime. My grandmother transmitted the lore to my mother in 1950s Brooklyn. Its questionable origins notwithstanding, of interest to me are the shifting form, function, content, and context of the text's retelling.

## **“You're not going to bed, you're going to Lily White's party”**

My mother, Maryann, grew up in an enclave of Brooklyn inhabited largely by

Italian Americans like herself. Her description of the neighborhood in the 1950s illustrates tensions between the old and new worlds of ethnic New York:

The old women would go to church every morning, and they would bend over and pick greens that were growing through the concrete sidewalks and put them in their aprons. In the '50s the people from, say, my mother's generation were now kind of stuck between being here and then still having a certain sentiment that was attached to their heritage, which was southern Italian. So, it was pretty much like growing up as if we were, in many ways, very Italian, and at the same time, we were also urban New Yorkers. I always

personally felt a bit marginal, like being neither here nor there. And I think my mother did, too. I think that's why she was also interested in things from white middle-class America.

Their home was a cellar. Out the front window stood a concrete wall. Maryann shared a bed with an older brother and sister, while the two eldest brothers shared a room. Her father, Tony, was a street peddler. Her mother, Olga, was a homemaker who worked odd jobs and who, by the end of a stressful day, wished finally to unwind:

She worked as a full-time houseworker, and she always had some odd kind of job



Tony with his truck, Crown Heights, 1963. All photos provided by the author.



Maryann wearing her favorite outfit, 1960.

I wear my bloomers with the ruffles?” Yes. “Can I wear my anklet socks with my T-strap shoes? Or my velvet Capezios?” Yes, yes. “And can I wear that dress with the bow in the back?” Yes, of course. “And the shoes, the shiny patent leather ones?” From hairdo to shoes, this idealized party image excited her tremendously, as she did not often have the occasion to dress up. Olga would return downstairs after tucking her daughter in, which made her cry even more. Tony, who woke up at two in the morning for work, would then complain of the noise, whereupon

Maryann would finally go to her room, disappointed but hopeful about the prospects of attending a party. Why did Maryann continue to believe her mother? “Because I wanted to believe that what she said was true. I didn’t feel that I was getting her anyway, so if she actually took the time to tell me we were going to a party, I really thought maybe this time it was real.”

The Lily-White text was essentially a dialogue, with Maryann asking questions and her mother confirming them, and the basic function being to fulfill her daughter’s wishes and allay her fears about bedtime, and also grant herself much needed relaxation. The content of the dialogue emerged from Maryann’s desire to wear her favorite clothing and play with her idealized companions—“Are there gonna be the little girls like in the story that I like to read?”—and to eat cake at a table decorated with balloons and dolls. The context was an overworked family in a run-down home, where a whining child refused to go to sleep out of fear.

because she needed the extra money, and then, she’d come home, and she’d cook dinner for seven people every day of the week. So, by the time of kitchen clean-up and everything, she was tired. That was the beginning really of television, so she’d sit and watch her shows.

Maryann would be sent to bed earlier than the rest of her siblings when she was three to five years of age. Afraid of being alone upstairs— “You’re putting me in this room by myself in the dark with mice that could possibly come on my bed, I don’t think so”—she would cry until her mother employed the Lily White tactic. Olga would sit Maryann on the toilet bowl, give her a sponge bath, and tell her, “No, you’re not going to bed. You’re going to Lily White’s party.” The sponge bath happened about three times a week, and she got a bath once a week. “That was a guarantee going to Lily White’s party if I got a bath.” Whether on the toilet or in the tub, the dialogue would commence.

“Tonight?” my mother would ask, hopefully, and my grandmother would nod. “Can



Maryann’s first birthday party with Tony and her brother Carmen, 1953.



Image from Christine Suhré's book, *Lily White's Party*, 2016. Image courtesy of Poughkeepsie Journal, 2017. <https://www.poughkeepsiejournal.com/story/entertainment/2017/02/15/children-literature-books-lily-whites-party-sleep-dreams/97909302>

Olga possessed a burning curiosity about greater America. By reading women's magazines, she absorbed notions of an imagined middle-class America. It is likely in one of those periodicals that she encountered *Lily White's Party*. According to Maryann:

If you read a once-a-week, or a once-a-month, publication and it's a little bit of this and a little bit of that, it's a portrait of America, and I think part of her sense of person was about that piece that she could never have, because her family never had anything. She never really was middle class, and I think she probably became very fascinated with the printed word as a story about society. I have a feeling the *Lily White* story is part of that thing that she learned just from trying to understand the larger America. Here's a fascinating look at a bedtime story, and here's the little girl, *Lily White*. It's like *Alice in Wonderland*. *Lily White* gives the party and you could all join in.

### Questionable origins

The origins of the text are uncertain. There was the lily-white movement, an anti-African American movement active within the Republican party between the 1880s and 1920s, which was powerful enough to

remove black politicians from office and garner strategic support from at least two US presidents, Hoover and Taft. Whether or not *Lily White's Party* derives from this iteration of racist America, my mother assured me that Olga "would never, ever, ever relate to anything like that. She had her story about everybody, but she didn't spare you if you were White, Irish, Italian, Black. Everybody was still gonna be in the same boat as far as being seen as a *mushade* [Neapolitan slang for someone who is not all there; literally, mushy], or this or that."

Through the Internet, I learned that a handful of baby boomers encountered *Lily White* at bedtime. One *New Yorker* recently

published a cutely illustrated children's book and extended poem, *Lily White's Party* (Suhré 2016), inspired by her own childhood experience with the lore. She attributed the concept to an anonymous letter written in the 1930s, from a father to his daughter to encourage her to go to sleep, but the existence of this letter is unverifiable, as well as unclear how it would have been transmitted to the general public.

My mother's hypothesis about its circulation via publications is plausible. A poem by George Cooper entitled "Miss Lilywhite's Party" first appeared in *St. Nicholas: An Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks* in 1887, then in other journals, such as *The Evening Journal of Ottawa* and *The Boston Daily Globe*.



Olga as a young adult, 1930.

“May I go to Miss Lilywhite’s party?”  
 But Grandmamma shook her head:  
 “When the birds go to rest,  
 I think it is best  
 For mine to go too,” she said.  
 “Can’t I go to Miss Lilywhite’s party?”  
 Still Grandmamma shook her head:  
 “Dear child, tell me how.  
 You’re half asleep now;  
 Don’t ask such a thing,” she said.  
 Then that little one’s laughter grew hearty:  
 “Why, Granny,” she said,  
 “Going to Miss Lilywhite’s party  
 Means going to bed!”

This poem resembles the text I described, but the performative roles are reversed. Here, the child is demanding her confused grandmother to allow her to go to a party at bedtime, eventually revealing that “going to Miss Lilywhite’s party means going to bed!”

The term also appears in the cooking section of a Missouri newspaper, *The Stanberry Headlight*, in 1933. This article is entitled, “Convalescent Cookery for Those Who Attend ‘Lily White’s Party’” and lists “some simple foods for ‘Lily White’s party-goers’ which will make the luncheon tray an event instead of a duty.” Before listing the food, however, it speculates that the term relates to “a person who is sick abed” and was “invented by a children’s nurse who wanted to make bed more inviting for her young charges.” Olga, born in 1910, would have been 23 at the time of this publication, and it is very likely that she read about Lily White’s Party, if not in this Missouri newspaper, in a more local one when in her young adult years.

### “If you go to bed, you can go to Lily White’s party!”

As a child of three, four, or five, it was common that I whined before bed. There were far too many things I would rather do in the realm of wakefulness. My mother had a fairly consistent formula, however. As soon as bedtime was met with resistance, she would say, “But if you go to bed, you can go to Lily White’s party!” She would then lay down and talk about the party. Vivid mental images would form, based on her words, combined



Olga and her sister Livia, Prospect Park, 1933.

with any preconceived notions of parties, and inevitably, I would fall asleep. Occasionally, she ended up snoozing in bed with me.

What was this “story” that seemed to cast a spell on an obstinate child? To the best of my memory, with verification from my mother, a typical story went: “Lily White is a sweet little girl, and every night she has a big party, and all your friends are there, and you wear your best clothes and have a ball.” It is not a

lengthy story. It is hardly a story at all. In fact, though my memories are foggy, I do have a strong recollection of *feeling* like I never quite understood the story, and perhaps, it was the intrigue that was so effective and affective. The mere mention of this party was enough to convince me that I wanted to go. The name Lily White is evocative, perhaps because both are picturesque words, a noun and an adjective, which, when inverted, produce an image



Roshni and Maryann getting ready for Lily White's Party, 1988.

of a white lily. A girl with such a pretty name would surely throw a phenomenal party!

The notion of a party is equally evocative. From personal experience in my first few years of existence, and from TV and books, I already had a basic idea of what constituted a child's party. Balloons, tables with food and cake, singing, playing, and music were just some of the images that entered my mind's eye, all centered on Lily White herself, a beautiful girl in a white dress, flowers in her hair, smiling and laughing; in short, the perfect hostess of a gallant gathering.

**“When you go to sleep at night, you have to *dream* about Lily White's party.”**

I do not recall ever actually attending this party, nor did inaction produce negative sentiments. My mother's mysterious lack of detail precluded deception. She must have intimated

that it happened only in dreamtime, since I never felt duped. The purpose was to make me excited about going to bed. She wanted dreams to be a special place where I would feel safe and happy. Yet, with her grandchildren, Mia and Max, the party became more explicitly a function of dreams:

With Mia, I would tell her, “When you go to sleep at night, you have to *dream* about Lily White's party,” and she'd say, “What is it?” “Well, Lily White, if you can imagine, is this little girl, and she would like you to be her friend in her dream.” And then, I'd make up a story so that it was not like she'd be, all of a sudden, like—wait a minute, I thought I was going *someplace*. Creating the image in her mind of how the perfect party would be, it's almost like an evolution of Lily White. Like, I got it. I was hit in the face. I wanted this party, and none of that was happening. With you guys, I'd try to make it comfortable

and sweet. By the time I got to Mia, now I'm really inside a kid's head, with a lot more freedom to be a grandmother. I wanted her to imagine that in her dreams, if she could imagine going to Lily White's party, it would be a beautiful experience.

Whereas Lily White was a story likely told to little girls in the past, Maryann often told it to Max, illustrating how the story's context is shifting and adapting to a society in which gender norms are becoming less a matter of fact. Gender-neutral names, clothing, toys, and activities are commonplace today. Non-binary storytelling is just another example of society's attempts to counter gender stereotypes that develop at a young age.

**We're all invited to Lily White's Party**

Some of the earliest recorded texts of Lily White's Party are poems or sayings, hinting at

its vernacular function as a playful bedtime story for sweetening a child's dreams. My grandmother, who inhabited a marginal existence between the old world of Italian peasants and the new world of rapidly modernizing Brooklyn, learned of the story's deployment by an imagined middle-class America and resolved to use it in her own tired and stressed household.

For Olga, Lily White's Party became a tactful co-performance to coax her daughter to bed, so as to afford herself relaxation after a stressful day. My mother eagerly engaged in the storytelling act, hoping to escape the harsh realities of everyday life. Through dialogue, she could direct the plot to allow herself to wear those special clothes and hairdos that made her feel clean, feminine, and secure. Although my grandmother wanted those things for her children, her deceptive tactic fueled resentment in my mother, and perhaps, a moral resolve to alter future performances.

In my case, Lily White's Party was less about escaping harsh realities than entering a mysterious bedtime realm. My childhood was relatively comfortable. My mother wanted me to have pleasant associations with dreams, and rather than rush me off to provide her

own peace of mind, she would sometimes even fall asleep with me. I complained about going to bed, not because I was afraid, but because I was having so much fun being awake. I did not wear fancy dresses, not because my family could not afford them, but because I genuinely preferred overalls, a sign that gender-normative prescriptions were easing by the late '80s. My performative role was passive, but equally engaged. I trusted my mother that I would enjoy Lily White's party and demanded no validation about its contents. There was little deception about its location in dreamland.

A third generation has also received this text. My niece and nephew learned about Lily White through my sister and their grandmother. Olga also transmitted Lily White to her grandchildren. According to my mother, Olga's storytelling was different in her later years. She was a carefree visitor in our suburban home and loved to indulge us with full attention and sincerity. At long last, Lily White became a figment of our imagination, an enchanted entity in a magical place, accessible only in our dreams.

My 80-year-old aunt still declares, "Time to go to Lily White's party!" whereupon my relatives nostalgically understand her in-

tent to go to bed. Lily White's Party is an evocative performance, monologic or dialogic, terse phrase or elaborate story, that lures children into a dreamy wonderland, uncertain, but intrigued enough to check it out. It is a metaphor for safety, comfort, magic, and indulgence that transforms children into prospective partygoers without having to leave the comfort of their bed. Whatever its questionable past, Lily White's Party lives on as an enduring exemplar of bedtime lore—in my family at least. ▼

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Olga and Maryann with Roshni, not long before Olga's death, 1986.

Roshni Caputo-Nimbark is a doctoral candidate and instructor in the Department of Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland & Labrador. Born and raised on Long Island, she resides in rural Newfoundland, where she runs a small eco-inn and large garden. Her current research centers on the local management and display of commons, Queerness, and critical heritage within a community-led, ecomuseum space. Photo courtesy of the author.



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