

BILLY GRAY WAS MY BEST FRIEND and I fell in love with his mother. Love may be too strong a word but I do not know a weaker one that will apply. All this happened half a century ago. I was fifteen and Mrs. Gray was thirty-five. Such things are easily said, since words themselves have no shame and are never surprised. She might be living still. She would be, what, eighty-three, eighty-four? That is not a great age, these days. What if I were to set off in search of her? That would be a quest. I should like to be in love again, I should like to fall in love again, just once more. We could take a course of monkey-gland injections, she and I, and be as we were fifty years ago, helpless in raptures. I wonder how things are with her, assuming she is still of this earth. She was so unhappy then, so unhappy, she must have been, despite her valiant and unfailing cheeriness, and I dearly hope she did not continue so.

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What do I recall of her, here in these soft pale days at the lapsing of the year? Images from the far past crowd in my head and half the time I cannot tell whether they are memories or inventions. Not that there is much difference between the two, if indeed there is any difference at all. Some say that without realising it we make it all up as we go along, embroidering and embellishing, and I am inclined to credit it, for Madam Memory is a great and subtle dissembler. When I look back all is flux, without beginning and flowing towards no end, or none that I shall experience, except as a final full stop. The items of flotsam that I choose to salvage from the general wreckage—and what is a life but a gradual shipwreck?—may take on an aspect of inevitability when I put them on display in their glass showcases, but they are random; representative, perhaps, perhaps compellingly so, but random nonetheless.

There were for me two distinct initial manifestations of Mrs. Gray, years apart. The first woman may not have been she at all, may have been only an annunciation of her, so to speak, but it pleases me to think the two were one. April, of course. Remember what April was like when we were young, that sense of liquid rushing and the wind taking blue scoops out of the air and the birds beside themselves in the budding trees? I was ten or eleven. I had turned in at the gates of the Church of Mary Our Mother Immaculate, head down as usual—Lydia says I walk like a permanent penitent—and the first presage I had of the woman on the bicycle was the fizzing of tyres, a sound that seemed to me excitingly erotic when I was a boy, and does so even yet, I do not know why. The church stood on a rise, and when I looked up and saw her approaching with the steeple beetling at her back it



seemed thrillingly that she had come swooping down out of the sky at just that moment, and that what I had heard was not the sound of tyres on the tarmac but of rapid wings beating the air. She was almost upon me, freewheeling, leaning back relaxedly and steering with one hand. She wore a gaberdine raincoat, the tails of it flapping behind to right and left of her like, yes, like wings, and a blue jumper over a blouse with a white collar. How clearly I see her! I must be making her up, I mean I must be making up these details. Her skirt was wide and loose, and now all at once the spring wind caught it and lifted it, laying her bare all the way up to her waist. Ah, yes.

Nowadays we are assured that there is hardly a jot of difference between the ways in which the sexes experience the world, but no woman, I am prepared to wager, has ever known the suffusion of dark delight that floods the veins of a male of any age, from toddler to nonagenarian, at the spectacle of the female privy parts, as they used quaintly to be called, exposed accidentally, which is to say fortuitously, to sudden public view. Contrary, and disappointingly I imagine, to female assumptions, it is not the glimpsing of the flesh itself that roots us men to the spot, our mouths gone dry and our eyes out on stalks, but of precisely those silken scantlings that are the last barriers between a woman's nakedness and our goggling fixity. It makes no sense, I know, but if on a crowded beach on a summer day the swimsuits of the female bathers were to be by some dark sorcery transformed into underwear, all of the males present, the naked little boys with their pot bellies and pizzles on show, the lolling, muscle-bound lifeguards, even the hen-pecked husbands with trouser-cuffs rolled and knotted hankies on their heads, all, I say, would be on



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the instant transformed and joined into a herd of bloodshot, bay-ing satyrs bent on rapine.

I am thinking particularly of those olden days when I was young and women under their dresses—and which of them then did not wear a dress, save the odd golfing girl or spoilsport film star in her pleated slacks?—might have been fitted out by a ship's chandler, with all sorts and shapes of rigging and sheeting, jibs and spankers, sheers and stays. My Lady of the Bicycle, now, with her taut suspenders and pearly-white satin knickers, had all the dash and grace of a trim schooner plying fearlessly into a stiff nor'wester. She seemed as startled as I by what the breeze was doing to her modesty. She looked down at herself and then at me and raised her eyebrows and made an O of her mouth, and gave a gurgling laugh and smoothed the skirt over her knees with a careless sweep of the back of her free hand and sailed blithely past. I thought her a vision of the goddess herself, but when I turned to look after her she was just a woman rattling along on a big black bike, a woman with those flaps or epaulettes on the shoulders of her coat that were fashionable then, and crooked seams in her nylons, and boxy hair just like my mother's. She slowed prudently in the gateway, her front wheel wobbling, and gave a chirrup on her bell before proceeding out into the street and turning left down Church Road.

I did not know her, had never seen her before, so far as I knew, though I would have thought that by then I had seen everyone in our tight little town at least once. And did I in fact see her again? Is it possible that she was indeed Mrs. Gray, the same one who four or five years later would irrupt so momentarily into my life? I cannot summon up the features of the woman on the bike

clearly enough to say for sure if she truly was or was not an early sighting of my *Venus Domestica*, though I cling to the possibility with wistful insistence.

What affected me so in that encounter in the churchyard, besides the raw excitement of it, was the sense I had of having been granted a glimpse into the world of womanhood itself, of having been let in, if only for a second or two, on the great secret. What thrilled and charmed me was not just the sight I got of the woman's shapely legs and fascinatingly complicated underthings, but the simple, amused and generous way that she looked down at me, doing that throaty laugh, and the negligent, backhanded grace with which she subdued her ballooning skirt. This must be another reason why she has become merged in my mind with Mrs. Gray, why she and Mrs. Gray are for me the two faces of the one precious coin, for grace and generosity were the things I treasured, or should have treasured, in the first and, I sometimes disloyally think—sorry, Lydia—only real passion of my life. Kindness, or what they used to call loving-kindness, was the watermark discernible in Mrs. Gray's every gesture towards me. I think I am not being overly fond. I did not deserve her, I know that now, but how could I have known it then, being a mere boy, callow and untried? No sooner have I written down those words than I hear the weaselly whine in them, the puling attempt at self-exculpation. The truth is I did not love her enough, I mean I did not love her as I had it in me to do, young as I was, and I think she suffered for it, and that is all there is to say on the subject, though I am sure that will not stop me from saying a great deal more.

Her name was Celia. Celia Gray. It does not sound quite right, does it, that combination? Women's married names never

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sound right, in my opinion. Is it that they all marry the wrong men, or at any rate men with the wrong surnames? *Celia* and *Gray* make altogether too languid a coupling, a slow hiss followed by a soft thud, the hard *g* in *Gray* not half hard enough. She was not languid, anything but. If I say she was buxom that fine old word will be misunderstood, will be given too much weight, literally and figuratively. I do not think she was beautiful, at least not conventionally so, although I suppose a boy of fifteen could hardly have been called on to award the golden apple; I did not think of her as beautiful or otherwise; I fear that, after the initial gloss had gone dull, I did not think of her at all, but took her, however gratefully, for granted.

A memory of her, a sudden image coming back unbidden, was what set me stumbling off down Memory Lane in the first place. A thing she used to wear, called a half-slip, I believe—yes, undergarments again—a slithery, skirt-length affair in salmon-coloured silk or nylon, would leave, when she had taken it off, a pink weal where the elastic waistband had pressed into the pliant, silvery flesh of her belly and flanks, and, though less discernibly, at the back, too, above her wonderfully prominent bum, with its two deep dimples and the knubbled, slightly sandpapery twin patches underneath, where she sat down. This rosy cincture encircling her middle stirred me deeply, suggestive as it was of tender punishment, exquisite suffering—I was thinking of the harem, no doubt, of branded houris and the like—and I would lie with my cheek resting on her midriff and trace the crimped line of it with a slow fingertip, my breath stirring the shiny dark hairs at the base of her belly and in my ear the pings and plonks of her innards at their ceaseless work of transubstantiation. The

skin was always hotter along that uneven, narrow track left by the elastic, where the blood crowded protectively to the surface. I suspect, too, I was savouring the blasphemous hint that it gave of the crown of thorns. For our doings together were pervaded throughout by a faint, a very faint, sickly religiosity.

I pause to record or at least to mention a dream I had last night in which my wife had left me for another woman. I do not know what this might signify, or if it signifies anything, but certainly it has left an impression. As in all dreams the people in this one were plainly themselves and at the same time not, my wife, to take the principal player, appearing as short, blonde and bossy. How did I know it was she, looking so unlike herself as she did? I, too, was not as I am, but corpulent and ponderous, sag-eyed, slow-moving, a kind of an old walrus, say, or some other soft, lumbering water-going mammal; there was the sense of a sloped back, leathery and grey, disappearing slidingly around a rock. So there we were, lost to each other, she not she and I not I.

My wife harbours no sapphic inclinations, so far as I know—though how far is that?—but in the dream she was cheerfully, briskly, butch. The object of her transferred affections was a strange little man-like creature with wispy sideburns and a faint moustache and no hips, a dead ringer, now that I think of it, for Edgar Allan Poe. As to the dream proper I shall not bore you, or myself, with the details. Anyway, as I think I have already said, I do not believe we retain details, or if we do they are so heavily edited and censored and generally fancified as to constitute a new thing altogether, a dream of a dream, in which the