

I



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 unflinching cheeriness, and I dearly hope she did not continue so.

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 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 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 knubbed, 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 original is transfigured, as the dream itself transfigures waking experience. This does not prevent me from crediting dreams with all sorts of numinous and prophetic implications. But surely it is too late in the day for Lydia to leave me. All I know is that this morning I woke in the pre-dawn hour with an oppressive sense of loss and deprivation and all-pervading sadness. Something seems set to happen.

I think I was a little in love with Billy Gray before I was a lot in love with his mother. There is that word again, love; how easily it trips off the pen. Strange, thinking of Billy like this. He would be my age now. That is hardly remarkable—he was my age then—yet it



gives me a shock. I feel as if I have suddenly taken a step up—or is it a step down?—into another phase of ageing. Would I know him if I met him? Would he know me? He was so upset when the scandal broke. I am sure I felt the shock of public disgrace as much as he did, or more so, I should think, but all the same I was taken aback by the passion with which he repudiated me. After all, I would not have minded if he had been sleeping with my mother, difficult though that would have been to imagine—I found it difficult to imagine anyone sleeping with Ma, the poor old thing, which was how I thought of her, as poor, and old, and a thing. That surely was what so troubled Billy, having to contemplate the fact that his mother was a woman whom someone desired, and furthermore that the someone was me. Yes, it must have been all kinds of agony for him to picture the two of us rolling naked in each other's arms on that filthy mattress on the floor in Cotter's place. He had probably never seen his mother without her clothes on, or not that he could remember, anyhow.

It was he who first stumbled on the Cotter house, and I used to worry that one day he would stumble on his mother and me at our love-play there. Was she aware that Billy knew the place? I cannot remember. If she was, my worry would have been as nothing compared to her terror at the thought of discovery by her only son as she was being made love to by his best friend in the midst of ancient squalor on a dirty, leaf-littered floor.

I recall the day I first saw the house. We had been in the little hazel wood along by the river, Billy and I, and he had brought me up to a ridge and pointed out the roof among the treetops. From the height on which we stood only the roof was visible, and at first I could not make it out, for the slates were covered with moss as green as the surrounding foliage. That must have been why it remained hidden for so long, and why presently it would make such a secure trysting-place for Mrs Gray and me. I wanted to go down and break in straight away—for we were boys, after all, and still young enough to be on the look-out for what we

would have called a club-house—but Billy was reluctant, strangely, as it seemed to me, since he had discovered the place and had even been inside it, or so he said. I believe he was a little afraid of that house; perhaps he had a premonition, or thought it haunted, as indeed it soon would be, not by ghosts but by the Lady Venus and her sportive boy.

It is odd, but I see our pockets that day filled with hazel nuts we had collected down in the wood and the ground around us plated with the hammered gold of fallen leaves, yet it was April, it had to have been April, the leaves green and still on the trees and the hazel nuts not even formed yet. Try as I will, however, I see not spring but autumn. I suppose we straggled away, then, the two of us, through the green not golden leaves, with our pockets not full of nuts, and went home, leaving Cotter's place undisturbed. Something in me had been struck, though, by the look of that sagging roof among the trees, and I went back the very next day, led by love the necessitous and ever-practical, and discovered in the tumbledown house just the place of shelter Mrs Gray and I were in need of. For, yes, we were by that time already intimate, to put it as delicately as I may.

Billy had a sweetness to his nature that was very attractive. His features were nice, though his skin was poor, somewhat pitted, like his mother's, I am afraid, and prone to pimples. He had his mother's eyes, too, of a liquid umber shade, and wonderfully long fine eyelashes, each lash perfectly distinct, so that I thought, or think now, of that special paintbrush that miniaturists use, the business end a single filament of sable. He walked with a curious bow-legged rolling gait, swinging his arms in a hooped fashion that made it seem as if he were gathering invisible sheaves of something out of the air before him as he went along. That Christmas he had given me a manicure set in a neat pigskin case—yes, a manicure set, with a pair of scissors and nail clippers and a file, and a polished ivory stick, shaped at one end like a tiny flattish spoon, which my mother examined

doubtfully and pronounced either a cuticle-pusher—a *cuticle-pusher*?—or more prosaically an implement for prising dirt from under the nails. I was puzzled by this girlish gift yet accepted it with good if uncertain grace. I had not thought to get him anything; he did not seem to have expected that I would, or to mind that I had not.

I wonder now, suddenly, if it was his mother who bought the manicure set for him to give to me, a coy and secret gift, delivered by proxy, that she thought I might guess had really come from her. This was some months before she and I had become—oh, go on and say it, for God's sake!—before we had become lovers. She had known me, of course, for I had been calling for Billy at the house most days that winter on the way to school. Did I look to her like the kind of boy who would think a manicure set just the thing for Christmas? Billy's own attentions to personal hygiene were less than thorough. He bathed even more infrequently than the rest of us did, as indicated by that intimate, brownish whiff he gave off on occasion; also the pores in the grooves beside his nostrils were blackly clogged, and with a shiver of mingled relish and revulsion I would imagine getting at them with my thumbnails for pincers, after which I would certainly have had need of that elegant little ivory gouge. He wore jumpers with holes in them and his collars seemed never to be clean. He possessed an air rifle and shot frogs with it. He was truly my best friend, and I did love him, in some way or other. Our chumship was sealed one winter eve when we were sharing a clandestine cigarette in the back seat of the family station wagon parked outside the house—this is a vehicle we shall become deeply familiar with presently—and he confided to me that his given name was not William, as he would have the world believe, but Wilfred, and further that his middle name was Florence, after his dead uncle Flor. Wilfred! Florence! I kept his secret, I can say that for myself, which is not much, I know. But, ah, how he wept, for pain and rage and humiliation, the day he met me after he had found

out about his mother and me; how he wept, and I the prime cause of his bitter tears.

I cannot remember the first time I saw Mrs Gray, if she was not the woman on the bike, that is. Mothers were not people that we noticed much; brothers, yes, sisters, even, but not mothers. Vague, shapeless, unsexed, they were little more than an apron and a swatch of unkempt hair and a faint sharp tang of sweat. They were always dimly busy in the background, doing things with baking tins, or socks. I must have been in Mrs Gray's vicinity numerous times before I registered her in any particular, definite way. Confusingly, I have what is certain to be a false memory of her, in winter, applying talcum powder to the shinily pink inner sides of my thighs where they had become raw from the chafing of my trousers; highly unlikely, since apart from anything else the trousers I was wearing on that occasion were short, which would hardly have been the case if I was fifteen, since we were all in longed-for longers by the age of eleven or twelve at the latest. Then whose mother was that one, I wonder, the talc-applier, and what opportunity for an even more precocious initiation did I perhaps let pass?

Anyhow, there was no moment of blinding illumination when Mrs Gray herself stepped forth from the toils and trammels of domesticity and came skimming towards me on her half-shell, wafted by the full-cheeked zephyrs of spring. Even after we had been going to bed together for some time I would have been hard put to give a fair description of her—if I had tried, what I would have described would probably have been a version of myself, for when I looked at her it was me that I saw first, reflected in the glorious mirror that I made of her.

Billy never talked to me about her—why would he?—and seemed to pay her no more heed than I did for so long. He was a laggard, and often of a morning when I called for him going to school he was not ready, and I would be invited in, especially if it was raining or icy. He did not do the inviting—remember that

suffusion of mute fury and burning shame we experienced when our friends got a glimpse of us *in flagrante* in the naked bosom of our families?—so it must have been she. Yet I cannot recall a single instance of her appearing at the front door, in her apron, with her sleeves rolled, insisting I come in and join the family circle at the breakfast table. I can see the table, though, and the kitchen that it almost filled, and the big American-style fridge the colour and texture of curdled cream, the straw basket of laundry on the draining board, the grocery-shop calendar showing the wrong month, and that squat chrome toaster with a seething gleam of sunlight from the window reflected high on its shoulder.

Oh, the morning smell of other people's kitchens, the cotton-wool warmth, the clatter and haste, with everyone still half asleep and cross. Life's newness and strangeness never seemed more vividly apparent than it did in such moments of homely intimacy and disorder.

Billy had a sister, younger than he, an unnerving creature with the look of a pixie, with long, rather greasy plaits and a narrow sharp stark white face the top half of which was blurred behind enormous horn-rimmed spectacles with circular lenses as thick as magnifying glasses. She seemed to find me irresistibly amusing and would wriggle inside her clothes with malignant hilarity when I appeared in the kitchen with my schoolbag, shuffling in like a hunchback. She was called Kitty, and indeed there was something feline in the way she would slit her eyes when she smiled at me, compressing her lips into a thin, colourless arc that seemed to stretch all the way between her intricately voluted, translucent, prominent pink ears. I wonder now if she, too, might have been sweet on me and all the snuffly amusement were a means of hiding the fact. Or is this just vanity on my part? I am, or was, an actor, after all. There was something the matter with her, she had some condition that was not spoken of that made her what in those days was called delicate. I found her unnerving, and was I think even a little afraid of her; if so, it was prescient of me.

Mr Gray, the husband and father, was long and lean, and myopic, too, like his daughter—he was an optician, as it happens, a fact the high irony of which is unlikely to be lost on any of us—and wore bow-ties and sleeveless Fair Isle jumpers. And of course there were, presently, those two short stubby horns sprouting just above his hairline, the cuckold's mark, which I regret to say were my doing.

Was my passion for Mrs Gray, at the outset, at any rate, anything more than an intensification of the conviction we all had at that age that our friends' families were so very much nicer, more gracious, more interesting—in a word, more desirable—than our own? At least Billy had a family, whereas there was only me and my widowed mother. She kept a boarding-house for travelling salesmen and other transients, who did not so much lodge in the place as haunt it, like anxious ghosts. I stayed out as much as I could. The Grays' house was often empty in the latter part of the afternoons and Billy and I would lounge about there for hours after school. Where did the others, Mrs Gray and Kitty, for instance, where did they get to at those times? I can still see Billy, in his navy-blue school blazer and grubby white shirt from the collar of which he had just yanked one-handedly a stained school tie, standing in front of the fridge with the door open, gazing glassy-eyed into its lighted interior as if he were watching something engrossing on television. In fact there was a television set in the upstairs living room, and sometimes we would go up there and sit slumped in front of it with our hands plunged in our trouser pockets and our feet on our schoolbags, trying to watch the afternoon horse-racing from exotic-sounding places on the other side of the sea, such as Epsom, or Chepstow, or Haydock Park. Reception was poor, and often all we would see would be phantom riders cocked astride their phantom mounts, floundering blindly through a blizzard of static interference.

In the desperate idleness of one of those afternoons Billy hunted

out the key to the cocktail cabinet—yes, the Grays possessed such an exotic item, for they were among the town's more well-to-do folk, though I doubt anyone in the house ever actually drank a cocktail—and we broke into a precious bottle of his father's twelve-year-old whiskey. Standing at the window, cut-glass tumbler in hand, my pal and I felt like a pair of Regency rakes looking down in high disdain upon a drably sober world. It was my first drink of whiskey, and although I would never develop a liking for the stuff, that day the sullen, bitter reek of it and the scald of it on my tongue seemed portents of the future, a promise of all the rich adventures that life surely had in store for me. Outside in the little square the wan sunlight of early spring was gilding the cherry trees and making the black, arthritic tips of their branches glisten, and old Busher the rag-and-bone man on his cart went grinding past, a wagtail scurrying out of the way of the frilled hoofs of his horse, and at the sight of these things I felt a sharp sweet ache of yearning, objectless yet definite, like the phantom pain in an amputee's missing limb. Did I see, or sense, even then, away down the tunnel of time, tiny in the distance yet growing steadily more substantial, the figure of my future love, chatelaine of the House of Gray, already making her abstracted, dallying way towards me?

What used I call her, I mean how did I address her? I do not remember saying her name, ever, though I must have. Her husband sometimes called her Lily, but I do not think I had a pet-name, a love-name, for her. I have a suspicion, which will not be dismissed, that on more than one occasion, in the throes of passion, I cried out the word *Mother!* Oh, dear. What am I to make of that? Not, I hope, what I shall be told I should.

Billy took the whiskey bottle into the bathroom and topped up the telltale gap with a gill of water from the tap, and I dried and polished the glasses as best I could with my handkerchief and put them back where they had been on the shelf in the cocktail cabinet. Partners in crime, Billy and I were suddenly shy of each other, and I took up my schoolbag hurriedly and made my getaway,

leaving my friend slumped on the sofa again, watching the unwatchable racers pounding through the electric snow.

I would like to be able to say it was that day, because I remember it so particularly, that I came face to face with Mrs Gray for the first, real, time, at the front door, perhaps, she coming in as I was going out, her face flushed from the thrilling air of outdoors and my nerves tingling still after the whiskey; a chance touch of her hand, a surprised, lingering look; a thickening in the throat; a soft jolt to the heart. But no, the front hall was empty except for Billy's bicycle and an unpartnered roller-skate that must have been Kitty's, and no one met me in the doorway, no one at all. The pavement when I stepped on to it seemed farther away from my head than it should be, and tended to tilt, as though I were on stilts and the stilts had squashy springs attached to the ends of them—in short, I was drunk, not seriously so, but drunk nevertheless. Just as well, then, that I did not encounter Mrs Gray, being in such a state of soggy euphoria, for there is no telling what I might have done and thereby ruined everything before it had even started.

And look! In the square, when I come out, it is, impossibly, autumn again, not spring, and the sunlight has mellowed and the leaves of the cherry trees have rusted and Busher the rag-and-bone man is dead. Why are the seasons being so insistent, why do they resist me so? Why does the Mother of the Muses keep nudging me like this, giving me what seem all the wrong hints, tipping me the wrong winks?

My wife just now climbed all the way up here to my eyrie under the roof, unwillingly negotiating the steep and treacherous attic stairs that she hates, to tell me that I have missed a telephone call. At first, when she put her head in at the low door—how smartly I encircled this page with a protective arm, like a schoolboy caught scribbling smut—I could hardly understand what she was saying. I must have been concentrating very hard, lost in the lost



world of the past. Usually I hear the phone ringing, down in the living room, a far-off and strangely plaintive sound that makes my heart joggle anxiously, just as it used to do long ago when my daughter was a baby and her crying woke me in the night.

The caller, Lydia said, was a woman, whose name she did not catch, though she was unmistakably American. I waited. Lydia was looking dreamily beyond me now, out through the sloped window in front of my desk, to the mountains in the distance, pale blue and flat, as if they had been painted on the sky in a weak wash of lavender; it is one of the charms of our city that there are few places in it from which these soft and, I always think, virginal hills are not visible, if one is prepared to stretch. What, I asked gently, had this woman on the phone wished to speak to me about? Lydia with an effort withdrew her gaze from the view. A film, she said, a movie, in which it seems I am being offered a leading part. This is interesting. I have not acted in a film before. I enquired as to the movie's title, or what it is to be about. Lydia's look grew vague, I mean more vague than it had been up to now. She did not think the woman had told her what the title is. Apparently it is to be a biopic, but of whom she is not sure—some German, it seems. I nodded. Had the woman perhaps left a number so that I might call her back? At this Lydia lowered her head and frowned at me from under her eyebrows in solemn silence, like a child who has been asked a difficult and onerous question the answer to which she does not know. Never mind, I said, no doubt the woman would phone again, whoever she was.

My poor Lydia, she is always a little dazed like this after one of her bad nights. Her name, by the way, is really Leah—Lydia is a mishearing of mine that stuck—Leah Mercer *as was*, as my mother would have said. She is large and handsome, with broad shoulders and a dramatic profile. Her hair these days is a two-tone shade of what used to be called salt-and-pepper with, in the undergrowth, a few uncertain sallow lowlights. When I met her first her hair had the lustre of a raven's wing, with a great silver streak in it, a flash of

white fire; as soon as the silver began to spread she allowed herself to succumb to the blandishments of Adrian at Curl Up and Dye, whence she returns hardly recognisable after her monthly appointment with this master colourist. Her glossy, kohl-black eyes, those eyes of a desert daughter, as I used to think them, have lately taken on a faded, filmy aspect, which makes me worry about the possibility of cataracts. In her young days her figure had the ample lines of one of Ingres's odalisques but now the glory has fallen and she wears nothing but loose, billowing garments in muted hues, her camouflage, as she says with a sad laugh. She drinks a little too much, but then so do I; our decade-long great sorrow simply will not be drowned, tread it though we will below the surface and try to hold it there. Also she smokes heavily. She has a sharp tongue of which I am increasingly wary. I am very fond of her, and she, I believe, is fond of me, despite our frictions and occasional tight-lipped disagreements.

We had a dreadful night, the two of us, I with my dream of having been replaced in Lydia's affections by an androgynous writer of Gothic tales, and Lydia suffering one of those nocturnal bouts of mania that have beset her at irregular intervals over the past ten years. She wakes, or at least leaps from the bed, and goes dashing in the dark through all the rooms, upstairs and down, calling out our daughter's name. It is a kind of sleepwalking, or sleepwalking, in which she is convinced our Catherine, our Cass, is still alive and a child again and lost somewhere in the house. I get up groggily and follow her, only half awake myself. I do not try to restrain her, heeding the old wives' caution against interfering in any way with a person in that state, but I keep close in case she should trip over something and I might be able to catch her before she falls and save her from injuring herself. It is eerie, scurrying through the darkened house—I do not dare switch on the lights—in desperate pursuit of this fleeting figure. The shadows throng us round like a silent chorus, and at intervals a patch of moonlight or the radiance from a street-lamp falling in at a window will seem a

dimmed spotlight, and I am reminded of one of those tragic queens in the Greek drama, raging through the king her husband's palace at midnight shrieking for her lost child. Eventually she tires herself out, or comes to her senses, or both, as she did last night, sinking down on a step of the stairs, all in a heap, shedding terrible tears and sobbing. I hovered about her helplessly, not knowing quite how to get my arms around her, so amorphous a shape did she appear, in her sleeveless black nightdress, her head hanging and her hands plunged in her hair that in the dark looked as black as it was the first time I saw her, walking out into summer through the revolving door of her father's hotel, the Halcyon of happy memory, the tall glass panels of the door throwing off repeated, glancing bursts of blue and gold—yes, yes, the crest of the wave!

The worst part, for me, of these extravaganzas of anguished hue and cry comes at the end, when she is all contrition, berating herself for her foolishness and begging to be forgiven for waking me so violently and causing such needless panic. It is just, she says, that in her sleepwalking state it seems to her so real a thing that Cass is alive, her living daughter, trapped in one of the rooms of the house, terrified and unable to make herself heard as she calls for help. Last night she was so ashamed and angry that she swore at herself, using horrible words, until I hunkered down beside her and held her in an awkwardly simian embrace and made her lay her head in the hollow of my shoulder, and at last she grew quiet. Her nose was running and I let her wipe it on the sleeve of my pyjamas. She was shivering, but when I offered to fetch her dressing-gown or a blanket she clung to me the more tightly and would not let me leave her. The faintly stale smell of her hair was in my nostrils and the ball of her bare shoulder was chill and smooth as a marble globe under my cupped hand. Around us the hall furniture stood dimly in the gloom like shocked and speechless attendants.

I think I know what it is that torments Lydia, besides the unassuageable grief she has been nursing in her heart throughout

the ten long years since our daughter died. Like me, she was never a believer in any of the worlds to come, yet I suspect she fears that through a cruel loophole in the laws of life and death Cass did not fully die but is somehow existing still, a captive in the land of the shades and suffering there, half of the pomegranate seeds still unswallowed in her mouth, waiting in vain for her mother to come and claim her back to be among the living again. Yet what is now Lydia's horror was once her hope. *How could anyone die who was so much alive?* she demanded of me that night in the hotel in Italy where we had come to claim Cass's body, and so fierce was her tone and so compelling her look that for a moment I too thought that a mistake might have been made, that it might be someone else's unrecognisable daughter who had smashed herself to death on those wave-washed rocks below the bare little church of San Pietro.

As I have said, we had not ever believed in the immortal soul, Lydia and I, and would smile in gentle condescension when others spoke of their hopes of some day seeing again departed loved ones, but there is nothing like the loss of an only child to soften the wax of sealed convictions. After Cass's death—to this day I cannot see those words written down without a disbelieving shock, they seem so unlikely, even as I grave them on the page—we found ourselves venturing, tentatively, shamefacedly, to entertain the possibility not of the next world, exactly, but of a world next to this one, contiguous with it, where there might linger somehow the spirits of those no longer here and yet not entirely gone, either. We seized on what might be signs, the vaguest portents, wisps of intimation. Coincidences were not now what they had been heretofore, mere wrinkles in the otherwise blandly plausible surface of reality, but parts of a code, large and urgent, a kind of desperate semaphoring from the other side that, maddeningly, we were unable to read. How we would begin to listen now, all else suspended, when, in company, we overheard people speaking of having been bereaved, how breathlessly

we hung on their words, how hungrily we scanned their faces, looking to see if they really believed their lost one not entirely lost. Certain dispositions of supposedly chance objects would strike us with a runic force. In particular those great flocks of birds, starlings, I think they are, that gather out over the sea on certain days, amoebically swooping and swirling, switching direction in perfect, instantaneous co-ordination, seemed to be inscribing on the sky a series of ideograms directed exclusively at us but too swiftly and fluidly sketched for us to interpret. All this illegibility was a torment to us.

I say us, but of course we never spoke of these pathetic hopes of a hint from the beyond. Bereavement sets a curious constraint between the bereaved, an embarrassment, almost, that is not easy to account for. Is it the fear that such things if spoken of will take on an even greater weight, become an even heavier burden? No, that is not it, not quite. The reticence, the tactfulness, that our mutual grieving imposed on Lydia and me was at once a measure of magnanimity, the same that makes the gaoler tiptoe past the cell in which the condemned man on his last night is asleep, and a mark of our dread of stirring up and provoking to even more inventive exercises those demonic torturers whose special task it was, is, to torment us. Yet even without saying, each knew what the other was thinking, and, more acutely, what the other was feeling—this is a further effect of our shared sorrow, this empathy, this mournful telepathy.

I am thinking of the morning after the very first one of Lydia's nocturnal rampages when she had started up from the pillow convinced our recently dead Cass was alive and in the house somewhere. Even when the panic was over and we had dragged ourselves back to bed we did not get to sleep again, not properly—Lydia doing hiccuppy after-sobs and my heart tom-tomming away—but lay on the bed on our backs for a long time, as if practising to be the corpses that one day we shall be. The curtains were thick and drawn tightly shut, and I did not realise the dawn

had come up until I saw forming above me a brightly shimmering image that spread itself until it stretched over almost the entire ceiling. At first I took it for an hallucination generated out of my sleep-deprived and still half-frantic consciousness. Also I could not make head or tail of it, which is not surprising, for the image, as after a moment or two I saw, was upside-down. What was happening was that a pinhole-sized opening between the curtains was letting in a narrow beam of light that had turned the room into a camera obscura, and the image above us was an inverted, dawn-fresh picture of the world outside. There was the road below the window, with its blueberry-blue tarmac, and, nearer in, a shiny black hump that was part of the roof of our car, and the single silver birch across the way, slim and shivery as a naked girl, and beyond all that the bay, pinched between the finger and thumb of its two piers, the north one and the south, and then the distant, paler azure of the sea, that at the invisible horizon became imperceptibly sky. How clear it all was, how sharply limned! I could see the sheds along the north pier, their asbestos roofs dully agleam in the early sunlight, and in the lee of the south pier the bristling, amber-coloured masts of the sailboats jostling together at anchor there. I fancied I could even make out the little waves on the sea, with here and there a gay speckle of foam. Thinking still that I might be dreaming, or deluded, I asked Lydia if she could see this luminous mirage and she said yes, yes, and reached out and clutched my hand tightly. We spoke in whispers, as if the very action of our voices might shatter the frail assemblage of light and spectral colour above us. The thing seemed to vibrate inside itself, to be tinely atremble everywhere, as if it were the teeming particles of light itself, the streaming photons, that we were seeing, which I suppose it was, strictly speaking. Yet surely, we felt, surely this was not entirely a natural phenomenon, for which there would be a perfectly simple scientific explanation, preceded by a soft little cough and followed by an apologetic hum—surely this was a thing given to us, a gift, a greeting, in

other words a sure sign, sent to comfort us. We lay there watching it, awestruck, for, oh, I do not know how long. As the sun rose the inverted world above us was setting, retreating along the ceiling until it developed a hinge at one edge and began sliding steadily down the far wall and poured itself at last into the carpet and was gone. Straight away we got up—what else was there to do?—and started our dealings with the day. Were we comforted, did we feel lightened? A little, until the wonder of the spectacle to which we had been treated began to diffuse, to slip and slide and be absorbed into the ordinary, fibrous texture of things.

It was by the coast too that our daughter died, another coast, at Portovenere, which is, if you do not know it, an ancient Ligurian seaport at the tip of a spit of land stretching out into the Gulf of Genoa, opposite Lerici, where the poet Shelley drowned. The Romans knew it as Portus Veneris, for long ago there was a shrine to that charming goddess on the drear promontory where now stands the church of St Peter the Apostle. Byzantium harboured its fleet in the bay at Portovenere. The glory is long faded, and it is now a faintly melancholy, salt-bleached town, much favoured by tourists and wedding parties. When we were shown our daughter in the mortuary she had no features: St Peter's rocks and the sea's waves had erased them and left her in faceless anonymity. But it was she, sure enough, there was no doubting it, despite her mother's desperate hope of a mistaken identity.

Why Cass should be in Liguria, of all places, we never discovered. She was twenty-seven, and something of a scholar, though erratic—she had suffered since childhood from Mandelbaum's syndrome, a rare defect of the mind. What may one know of another, even when it is one's own daughter? A clever man whose name I have forgotten—my memory has become a sieve—put the poser: what is the length of a coastline? It seems a simple enough challenge, readily met, by a professional surveyor, say, with his spyglass and tape measure. But reflect a moment. How finely calibrated must the tape measure be to deal with all those

nooks and crannies? And nooks have nooks, and crannies crannies, *ad infinitum*, or *ad* at least that indefinite boundary where matter, so-called, shades off seamlessly into thin air. Similarly, with the dimensions of a life it is a case of stopping at some certain level and saying this, *this* was she, though knowing of course that it was not.

She was pregnant when she died. This was a shock for us, her parents, an after-shock of the calamity of her death. I should like to know who the father was, the father not-to-be; yes, that is something I should very much like to know.

The mysterious movie woman called back, and this time I was first to get to the phone, hurrying down the stairs from the attic with my knees going like elbows—I had not been aware I was so eager, and felt a little ashamed of myself. Her name, she told me, was Marcy Meriwether, and she was calling from Carver City on the coast of California. Not young, with a smoker's voice. She asked if she was speaking personally with Mr Alexander Cleave the actor. I was wondering if someone of my acquaintance had set me up for a hoax—theatre folk have a distressing fondness for hoaxes. She sounded peeved that I had not returned her original call. I hastened to explain that my wife had not caught her name, which prompted Ms Meriwether to spell it for me, in a tone of jaded irony, indicating either that she did not believe my excuse—it had sounded limp and unlikely even to me—or just that she was tired of having to spell her mellifluous but faintly risible moniker for people too inattentive or dubious to have registered it properly the first time round. She is an executive, an important one, I feel sure, with Pentagram Pictures, an independent studio which is to make a film based on the life of one Axel Vander. This name too she spelled for me, slowly, as if by now she had decided she was dealing with a halfwit, which is understandable in a person who has spent her working life among actors. I confessed I did not know who Axel Vander is, or was, but this she brushed aside as of no importance, and said she would send me material



on him. Saying it, she gave a dry laugh, I do not know why. The film is to be called *The Invention of the Past*, not a very catchy title, I thought, though I did not say so. It is to be directed by Toby Taggart. This announcement was followed by a large and waiting silence, which it was obvious I was expected to fill, but could not, for I had never heard of Toby Taggart either.

I thought that by now Ms Meriwether would be ready to give up on a person as ill-informed as I clearly am, but on the contrary she assured me that everyone involved in the project was very excited at the prospect of working with me, very excited, and that of course I had been the first and obvious choice for the part. I purred dutifully in appreciation of this flattery, then mentioned, with diffidence but not, I judged, apologetically, that I had never before worked in film. Was that a quick intake of breath I heard on the line? Is it possible a film person of long experience as Ms Meriwether must be would not know such a thing about an actor to whom she was offering a leading part? That was fine, she said, just fine; in fact Toby wanted someone new to the screen, a fresh face—mark, I am in my sixties—an assertion that I could tell she no more believed in than I did. Then, with an abruptness that left me blinking, she hung up. The last I heard of her, as the receiver was falling into its cradle, was the beginning of a bout of coughing, raucous and juicy. Again I wondered uneasily if it was all a prank, but decided, on no good evidence, that it was not.

Axel Vander. So.