

David Hayes

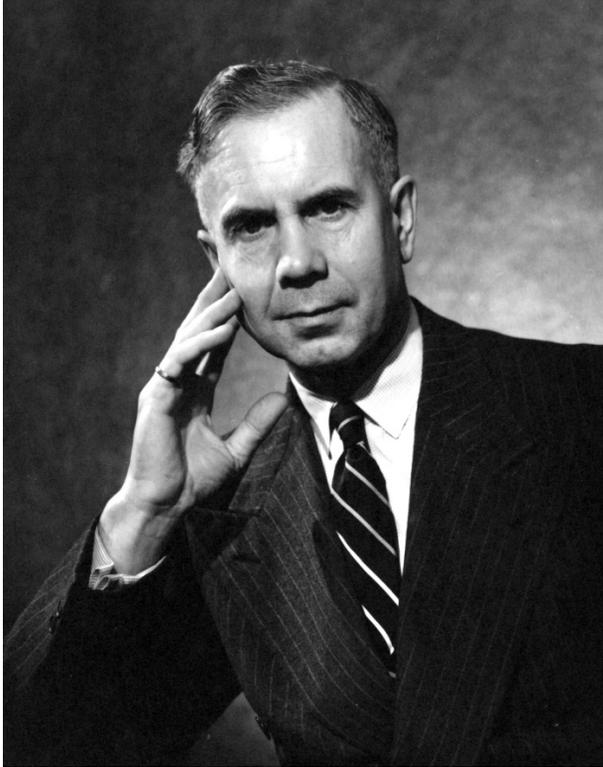


MY FATHER'S SECRET



First the snapshots. In this one, my father, then twenty-eight years old, is sitting in a 1932 Plymouth roadster convertible, beige with a red pinstripe along the side. It has red leather upholstery, including the rumble seat. My father was, according to my mother, a rakish bachelor who lived with a gang of fellows in a house in St. Catharines, nicknamed “the homestead.” His friends called him “Hurry-Up Hayes” because he walked purposefully, with short, quick steps, as though there were important things ahead. My mother was a tall, leggy brunette with an angular face who looked like a great, noble,

wading bird. She had her pick of eligible men, and chose my father. Later, when he infuriated or disappointed me, I would remind myself of this past life of his, the easy grace with which he carried himself, defining for me the idea of unforced masculinity. I believe to this day that he was more self-possessed, more relaxed with who he was than I was at his age, or, for that matter, later.



Here he's sitting, obviously posed but looking most at ease, every inch the successful executive: the double-breasted chalk-stripe suit, the dark tie with bold diagonals, the half-Windsor knot. It's the mid-50s and he is now in senior management at Abitibi's head office on University Avenue in Toronto. Look at his steady gaze into the camera, as if to say, *I am a man both comfortable and successful in this masculine world*. Sometimes, on a Saturday morning when he had work to catch up on, he took me downtown with him, setting me up at a desk in the office next to his with a pad and pencil. It all seemed

rather grand, this world of men and work—his big mahogany desk, the important-looking typed pages, the wooden paper trays, his black dial phone with the Empire exchange, the leather office chairs that smelled like a baseball glove. My father's working life seemed dignified and important, having risen from a young chemical engineer to mill manager to Toronto executive.



Look at this, the perfect nuclear family, circa 1961. That's the year my father and mother took their younger daughter and me to Nassau. I'm eight years old, clutching Rabbit, one of my favourite stuffed animals. My father and mother are both dressed in North American tourist finery. Even in the summer, going out for a casual dinner, my father wore polo shirts and dressy Bermuda shorts, as well constructed as a good pair of trousers, with knee-length Bermuda socks. He was a stylish if conservative dresser, his presentation natty but without fanfare. He was what women would have described as

“well turned out,” although I don’t remember him discussing this with me, except to declare angrily, around the time I was twelve or thirteen, that I couldn’t wear all black, like a delinquent, nor grow my hair below the ears, in the style of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. I rebelled against that, of course, but absorbed the idea that men put thought into what they wore, and that understatement was superior to flamboyance.



In this picture, taken around the same time, my father is standing with my mother in the living room of the house in which I grew up in north Toronto. It’s evening. He and my mother are on their way out to a party or formal dinner. He’s wearing another smart dark suit, one of many in his closet; my mother is wearing her stylish and elegant black Persian lamb jacket. In the mornings, or on evenings like this one, I often watched him standing in the bathroom shaving, then pulling on a starched white dress shirt that made a sound like a page ripped from a pad. I always thought my parents looked rather stiff in this picture. Maybe it was because my father loved living in small towns close to nature but, like most people, hadn’t been able

to resist a major promotion to the big city that would mean a dramatic jump in income and status. Or maybe it's that time when so many marriages stiffen, decades on. Or maybe I'm imagining it. Still, something had changed, and I'm sure I can see it in photos like this one.

Today I know that at this time the secret was out, or at least shared privately between the two of them. Is that what I see, a development around this time that became a hidden current unsettling the placid surface of their lives?



Our earliest understanding of masculinity comes from our fathers, although it's easier to absorb than explain. When I was small, I eagerly waited for my father to come home from work, change into casual clothes and roughhouse with me on the living room rug. I imagined this is what a powerful bear must be like playing with a cub. What impressed me as a child was his mastery over a physical strength that could hurt, but never did. I remember the smell of a sweet aftershave. Unless he was going out, most evenings he took me for a walk in the wooded area across the street. There, walking along a rough trail amidst the fir, spruce and pine trees, he extemporaneously spun his own versions of my favourite childhood reading—Thornton W. Burgess's woodland tales, featuring Peter Rabbit, Reddy Fox, Jerry Otter, Billy Mink, Hooty Owl, Jumper the Hare, Shadow the Weasel and others.

“Father Brown's boy went to the edge of the farm and looked out in the distance, and there was Bowser the Hound going *ow-whooo, ow-whooo*, because he couldn't see Peter the Rabbit, because Peter's fur, which was brown in the summertime, had turned white and it blended into the snow on the ground. And Bowser hoped that his *bow-wow-wowww* sound would startle Peter the Rabbit into running and then he'd catch him for sure.”

My father paused, lit his pipe. A plume of smoke rose into the half-light. From our spot in a cluster of spruce trees, I stood spell-bound, alternately staring at him or into the forest where I was

fairly sure Peter would soon appear. His voice grew quieter, conspiratorial. “So Peter the Rabbit sat still as the deuce, even his eyes closed, so Bowser couldn’t see the black of his eyes. Peter wished he’d obeyed the warning of Mrs. Peter and stayed in the safety of the old Briar Patch...”

These were among our most intimate moments, and I remember them with much fondness. My father didn’t talk about emotions. He was born not that long after the Victorian era ended and came from solid Ontario stock. His father was a blacksmith in the town of Cannington, Ontario, who managed to make the transition from horse-drawn wagons to repairing motorized “Tin Lizzies,” while maintaining a sideline shoeing race horses. His mother was sickly. His siblings, with the exception of his eldest sister who had religion and was energized by it, always seemed melancholy to me.

My father loved hockey. Our ritual was going to Leafs games at Maple Leaf Gardens on company tickets. He told me about how, when he’d finished high school, he’d spent a year working at a paper mill in Iroquois Falls, 300 kilometres northwest of North Bay, to earn money for university but also because he wanted to play hockey with the highly ranked Iroquois Falls junior team. Later he was a scrappy left-winger for the University of Toronto Varsity Blues.

He taught me to skate, with a tiny hockey stick in hand, when I could barely walk. I played organized hockey with my church team until I was fourteen. The coach believed in teaching children the principles of equity and fair play. He alternated his three lines every few minutes, so every boy had an equal chance. Even if, in the final minutes of a close game, the third, and weakest, line came around in the order, he would play it rather than substitute the stars in a ruthless bid to win. A handful of overbearing fathers—the type who bully coaches to favour their son and, in some cases, top up their snack-bar soda pop from a small flask—would hurl abuse, call him a fool, a pansy. My father always supported him. Driving me and a few of my teammates home in the car, en route to the ritual stop at Harvey’s Charcoal-Broiled, he would have a compliment for each kid, no matter how badly he’d played. About the fathers, he would quietly remark that people “shouldn’t behave that way,” adding that the coach was “a good man.”

And, in my eyes, so was my father. There was a time, of course, when I suddenly saw his faults. With all the self-absorbed arrogance of a pampered middle-class teenager—adolescence was a period of life my father was utterly unable to understand, as my sisters could attest—I decided he was cautious, uncomfortable with spontaneity, overly concerned with his reputation in the community. He was always an avid reader, a gift he passed along to me, but for a time I was tragically disappointed that his tastes were so middlebrow. (He had the classics in his library but spent more time reading Arthur Hailey, Ian Fleming and Nicholas Monserrat.) He committed a sin in the eyes of a child of the '60s—he was *conventional*.

I was aware that he could behave insensitively toward people, although I seldom saw this in his relationship with me. In reaction to a household dominated by women—my mother, my maternal grandmother and my two sisters (until my eldest sister married when I was four)—he adopted a defensive posture. He would sit in his red leather club chair in his den, the door half-shut, smoking his pipe behind *The Toronto Star*, looking like a *New Yorker* cartoon waiting for a caption. We argued about politics or the length of my hair. He loved me but had little time for my fool ideas. Once, though, when I was about nineteen, he listened patiently while I ranted about the immorality of his career with Abitibi, a company that in my eyes raped forests and polluted rivers. Then he disarmed me by disclosing that he chose the Abitibi job in Toronto over another, higher-paying offer from Hooker Chemical, the company responsible for Love Canal, a chemical landfill under a fifteen-acre neighbourhood in Niagara Falls that had become, around that time, the biggest man-made environmental disaster in the world. The tension evaporated and we both laughed.

Once I became an adult, our bickering was never poisonous but we were often at loggerheads, mainly because I wanted him to be someone he wasn't. Foolish as it sounds, I wanted him to share intimacies, tell me about the things he'd felt when he was young, about the dynamics of his courtship with my mother, about fear, about lust. My father would have no part of it. Whenever I tried to steer our conversation in this direction, he would change the subject to the weather or the Leafs or one of his favourite tales—the train

derailing at night in the Rockies or the time Buddy the beagle got the porcupine quills in his nose.

Much later, I became intrigued by the ways he had shaped who I am. Perhaps it was my father who taught me that masculinity is a shell that we learn to wear from an early age. Perhaps he subtly taught me something more complicated and valuable, too—how to wear the shell, and how to slip it off.

I am described by friends as a straight man in touch with his feminine side. Like my father, I paid attention to how I dressed—although he didn't always think so, especially during my hippie cowboy period. I liked buying clothes and when shopping with women I could offer competent advice on fabrics and patterns that worked together. I've always put the toilet seat down. In the company of stereotypically macho guys, I feel either vaguely uncomfortable or bored. Men who adopt the pose of being unable to operate a washing machine or cook a meal seem infantile to me.

Are we born the way we are? Are we shaped by our environment, our culture? Am I who I am because I grew up in a houseful of women? Or because of my close relationship with my good-humoured, curious, tolerant and adoring mother?

And where did my father fit into all this? One day, in one of those curiously weightless free-association sessions with a therapist, I started talking about how, on a sunny summer weekend, my father would go into the backyard wearing a standard issue, early-60s-style man's blue-and-white-striped bathing suit. He'd unfurl a blanket, lie face down and bake in the sun for hours. He would also fold down the bathing suit until the crack of his ass was visible, until it was little more than one of those European bikini affairs that I think of as a pouch with a pair of side straps for stability. It was always just my father's backyard ritual, something I didn't think a lot about, but as I described it I realized it sounded odd.

"So, he was vain?" the therapist said. "Even though you describe him as so conventional a man, he also had a sensual, hedonistic side?"

I hadn't thought of it that way before, but said, "Yes, I guess that was true."

"Do you think he was in touch with feminine qualities himself, maybe ones you hadn't realized?"

I guess he was. By then, at the time of the conversation he was in his eighties, a frail old man supporting himself with a cane, all but blind from glaucoma. He dressed in the uniform of the twenty-first century elderly male as seen in malls everywhere—sweats or casual pants with a drawstring waist and runners with Velcro straps—but still proudly donned a sports jacket and ascot for special occasions. He was dependent on others and that made him either passive or cantankerous, especially around my mother. He was probably suffering from some kind of depression familiar to geriatric specialists, but he wouldn't go for counselling. Fiercely private, he brushed aside my suggestion that he might like to “talk to someone,” and turned further inward. None of this was especially unusual for men of my father's generation.

By forty, I had found balance in my relationship with my father. He loved nothing more than when I would read to him a work-in-progress from a magazine article or one of my books. He was inordinately proud of my writing career. As a younger man, returning home from business trips to the *Chicago Tribune* or *New York Daily News* where he spent his time troubleshooting glitches in Abitibi's newsprint shipments, he would tell me excitedly about walking through the newsroom on his way to lunch or to his hotel late at night, after the final press run. The reporters pounding out stories on typewriters and working the phones, the editors barking out orders, the urgency in the air—it all seemed impossibly romantic to him.

For many men, being male is a private and lonely world. They bury their doubts and wrestle with their demons internally, often frustrating the women close to them who want them to share their emotional lives. And the deeper and more private the secret, the further down they burrow.

By this time, I mostly resisted badgering my father about his innermost feelings. Then it no longer mattered. He arose from bed very late one night, probably felt a dizziness sweep over him and called out to my mother. Later, the doctors assured us that the stroke that killed him probably did so painlessly before he hit the floor.



About a year after the funeral, I visited my mother, who had sold their house and moved into a comfortable apartment in a quiet neighbourhood. She was, by then, seventy-nine, a grey-haired, regal presence with a sharp mind and a laugh that, in full throat, sounded like a goose honking and compelled anyone nearby to laugh with her. She also has a habit of shifting conversational gears without warning from a lighthearted anecdote to a staggering revelation. We were casually reminiscing when she told me a story about a Saturday evening in the late 1950s when she and my father were entertaining their best friends in the recreation room. It was a common ritual: watching the hockey game and playing bridge. Suddenly my mother saw something that startled her. Excusing herself to get the food she'd prepared, she paused at the top of the stairs.



“I called your dad to come and help me,” she said. “When he came up, I told him, ‘I don’t know what you’re wearing under your pants, but get upstairs and take them off!’”

What she had seen was this: something black and ruffled and unmistakably feminine sticking out the bottom of his trousers. I knew

before she told me what my father's reaction would have been. Looking away, he hummed uncomfortably under his breath before murmuring an assent and walking upstairs to their bedroom. Later, when pressed, he shrugged and said, "Oh, it's nothing."

My mother looked stricken. "Do you think I was living my entire marriage with a homosexual?"

I was flabbergasted myself, and still digesting the revelation. I explained to her that today we understand that a taste for women's underwear is a not uncommon heterosexual man's fetish. Like having an obsession with women's feet or... well, I thought it better not to enumerate all the varied, and sometimes alarming, fetishes out there. She looked relieved.

"Did you ask him about it later?"

"Yes. I asked him what this was all about. He just chuckled and brushed it aside. He always said, 'Oh, nothing.'" My mother paused and shook her head. "You know your father. He wouldn't talk about something like this."

Then she explained that one day, while putting away clothes in their shared walk-in closet, she noticed a lump in the sleeve of one of my father's suits. Assuming it was a stray shirt that hadn't made it to the wash, she pulled out some women's underwear.

"Was it yours?" I asked.

"No," said my mother.

"What did it look like?"

She looked thoughtful. "Black, like pantyhose. Fancy stuff, with a pattern."

"Did you think he might be having an affair?"

"No," she said firmly. "Besides, other times I found *my* underwear." A serious look crossed her face, and she added: "Not my good things, they were beautiful. I had a moss green set, really lovely. But this was my everyday beige stuff. I had lots of it and wouldn't have noticed an item or two missing."

"There were other times? How many?"

After thinking about it, she guessed eight or ten times, maybe more, over perhaps as many years. Each time the underwear was in the sleeve of a suit.

“What would you do?”

“I was confused and angry,” said my mother. “I didn’t understand it, and I didn’t like it. Every time I found something and showed it to him, he’d look embarrassed but he wouldn’t talk about it. He’d just say it’s nothing. I told him that under no circumstances should you kids find out about this.”

My poor mother had been forced by my father to confront something that had been misunderstood and demonized throughout her life, something that has only relatively recently become less taboo and, in some quarters, accepted. Depending whom you ask, a fetish is a mere preference or a miserable compulsion. The word (*fétiche* in French; *feitico* in Portuguese; *facticius* in Latin) originally referred to a natural or man-made object believed to have supernatural powers over people. The term was coined by a French scholar to characterize the early stages of religion, but since the nineteenth century it’s been the common term for a psychosexual obsession with a body part (like breasts or feet), object (like shoes, fur or women’s lingerie) or practice (like spanking or exhibitionism). In most cases, the obsession takes root in childhood and is inextricably linked to masturbation. Experts can’t explain why the vast majority of fetishists are men (although every woman I’ve mentioned this to has simply nodded, as though it came as no surprise).

My father’s fascination with women’s underwear was, on the scale of things, quite mild—especially when we consider that the scale includes *coitus à cheval* (a fetish for having sex on the back of an animal), emetophilia (arousal from vomit) and formicophilia, which involves ants and a jar of honey.

Today, studies suggest that somehow a body part, object or practice can become imprinted on what is known as an individual’s “love map,” usually in early childhood, then associated with pleasure and orgasm by puberty and reinforced through repetition.

Learning that my father had a fetish didn’t disturb me. For one thing, it made him more human, as though after his death he had let me glimpse some of that intimate emotional territory that he’d denied me during his life. And, I thought, finally I see that he was, in at least one rather dramatic way, an *unconventional* man.

But there was another thing; my father and I had more in common that I'd ever imagined. While I didn't share his interest in women's underwear, I did have my own fetish, one that for many years I hid as carefully as my father had his. From the time I'd reached puberty my erotic fantasies included bondage and spanking, and for years they were uncomfortably at odds with my view of myself as a progressive, modern "feminist man."



An early memory: I am a child of perhaps four or five, sitting under the dining-room table tying my bare feet with kitchen twine. When my mother lifted the tablecloth and said, "What are you doing under there?" I experienced a frisson of excitement and shame, as though I suspected what I was doing was naughty. It's a great story, except it probably didn't happen, at least not in that way. If I didn't invent the memory, my mother was probably just shooing me out from under the table because dinner was ready.

I remember feeling a tremor of excitement when I saw a woman spanked on a TV western and thrilling to the bondage-related scenes in my parents' James Bond novels. In 1963, I bought a copy of a newly published book, *The Velvet Underground*, a dubiously "academic report" on the "sexual twilight zone" of swingers, sado-masochists and pornographers in modern America, now most famous because its title was appropriated by Lou Reed for his seminal New York band. (What the clerk was thinking when he sold it to a ten-year-old still puzzles me.)

But how could I express the fascinations to anyone? They were hardly topics to bring up among my male teenaged friends. Suggest to the sweet-faced teenaged girls I was dating that I wanted to spank them? It seemed unthinkable. As the author and *New Yorker* staff writer Daphne Merkin put it in her famous essay exploring her own fetish for spanking, these urges created "feelings of embarrassment nestled inside shame nestled inside excitement," like those wooden matryoshka dolls from Russia. Merkin also pointed out that the 1970s and '80s launched a postfeminist world of equal sexual opportunity,

where women could ask for whatever they wanted. But if women could ask for the previously unmentionable, all this made it seem even less appropriate for a modern man to admit to retrogressive thoughts of dominance and submission, symbolizing exactly what women had broken free of. So my desires remained private, although they threatened to bubble to the surface at any moment.

I was in my thirties when a girlfriend with whom I'd been living for a number of years discovered my fetish. She was exactly the kind of woman I had never imagined admitting it to—an intelligent, sophisticated feminist who shared with me distaste for traditional machismo. Yet she was scarcely fazed at all. She admired *Story of O*, the masterpiece of literary S&M that had been written by a woman, and she thought everyone should be free to enjoy his or her fantasies, whatever they were. In fact, we were both aware of friends who incorporated bondage into their sex play and she had freely admitted to being attracted to the fantasy of the “demon lover.”

I'd so carefully nurtured my image as the sensitive man that I'd put myself in the same prison my father had been in, and by that point in our relationship my girlfriend had trouble casting me in this new role. When we talked about my unwillingness to reveal my interests when I was younger, she matter-of-factly said: “All kinds of women would have been attracted to a nice, sensitive guy with a dark side.”

After this, I decided to fess up to future partners. For the past five years I've been in a relationship with a woman—yes, a smart, no-nonsense feminist with an adventurous spirit—who happily shares many of my tastes, but my good fortune also makes me sad. It reminds me that my father had experienced a kind of psychic bondage—the worst kind, the kind that seldom lets up, that never has a safe word. Many women believe that men enjoy the privilege of patriarchy, and when it comes to jobs and income in today's culture they often do. But the inner world of men can be a profoundly lonely, enslaved place, in my father's case causing him to repress an important element of who he was. What a delicious irony that where my father felt restrained from openly expressing his erotic life, his son found liberation in bondage.

But was that true about my father? There were a few things I didn't completely understand. Did my father merely have a fetish for the feel of women's underwear, or was he a cross-dresser, a man who liked to dress in women's clothing, to impersonate a woman? Or might he even have been a transsexual, a man who felt he was a woman trapped in a man's body? And another thing: why did he repeatedly hide his underwear in the sleeves of his suits where my mother was going to find it?



My curiosity led me to a faux Irish pub in Toronto's Riverdale neighbourhood where I met Michael A. Gilbert. He's a stocky, clean-shaven, bespectacled man of medium height with a mop of salt-and-pepper hair, and a father of five as a result of a blended family from two marriages previous to his present one. ("Divorced once and widowed once," he said with a grin. "So I'm not a two-time loser.") In his peach-coloured, short-sleeved polo shirt and black shorts, he could be any middle-aged dad living in this middle-class neighbourhood. He has an engaging, slightly distracted manner, like that of a tenured professor of philosophy at a university, which he is.

But Michael is also a cross-dresser, and his closet contains only his clothes of both genders, not himself. As a nine- or ten-year-old growing up in Brooklyn he remembers raiding the clothes hamper and putting on his mother's panties or panty girdle. Later, he would masturbate wearing women's underwear and eventually began dressing as a woman. Although he's comfortable with his life today, he tells me about the practice of "purging," where fetishists throw away all their paraphernalia with the intention of escaping their fetish. But if you're hard-wired from childhood, the purge is not likely to last.

"Transvestite is the old term for cross-dresser," he explains. "I use the term 'transgender' to mean anyone who plays with, or is uncomfortable with, their birth gender. I'm a male with male equipment and happy with that, but sometimes I like to present as a woman, or as my interpretation of a woman."

Later that week, I drove to York University's main campus to sit in on a workshop put on by the Centre for Human Rights and Equity, which is responsible for addressing issues of sexual and gender diversity in the university. Michael was one of the facilitators at the session, except for this occasion he appeared as his alter ego, Miqqi Alicia Gilbert. She was carrying a black purse and was dressed in black flats with a small buckle, burgundy pants, grey jersey and a shell necklace. Her hair was curlier today, and combed out to appear more feminine than it had the first time we met. It's often said that cross-dressers look more authentic the older they get. Miqqi looked and dressed the way you might imagine any middle-aged, female tenured professor might look and dress.

Addressing the group, Miqqi told them there is a profound difference between a transsexual, who feels trapped in the body of the wrong sex, and cross-dressers. "Cross-dressers wear women's clothing because they like women's clothing. Transsexuals wear women's clothing because they feel like they are women."

Over lunch we discussed my father. Miqqi agreed there wasn't much evidence that he was a cross-dresser unless he was very deeply in the closet. That's possible, she says, since the subject was so illicit in his generation that it was hard to even get information. He might have found his way into the cross-dressing subculture while travelling on business, although getting caught would have been a powerful inhibition. For most of his adult life, though, he would have been aware that the prevailing opinion was that he suffered from a perversion and needed psychiatric help.

If he had been a cross-dresser, I asked, if he'd been hiding so much, wouldn't there have been more evidence as he aged that he was profoundly tormented?

Miqqi said she thought so, then suggested I contact Xpressions, a non-profit support and social group for the transgendered community in Ontario. When I did, I talked to Keith Green, a software developer and designer living in Guelph. Keith, who is married with two children, is an active cross-dresser who attends monthly dinners in which a group of men go out to restaurants dressed as women. During a long conversation, Keith asked me if my mother ever found a stash of women's clothing—not just underwear—

either while my father was alive or hidden somewhere after he died? What about clues among his personal effects—magazines, phone numbers, a post office box to receive materials without having it delivered to the home or workplace? No, I said, nothing had ever been found.

About my mother repeatedly finding his stash, Keith pointed out that most people want to get caught. Sometimes it's a way to finally live authentically, regardless of consequences. It relieves the burden of harbouring a secret. Sometimes the act of getting caught is exciting, or as Keith put it: "Since he kept putting it in the same place, it sounds like he was playing, having some fun."

Either way, my parents had tacitly come to an understanding. "Your mother got angry at him and wouldn't discuss it," said Keith. "But maybe he didn't want to discuss it himself. Maybe he was happy doing what he was doing. He knew how far she would go. She wouldn't leave the marriage, and he could have the thrill of being caught time after time.

"Based on the evidence," Keith concluded, "I would say he just had a fetish for women's underwear."



One last snapshot. It's June 13, 1986 and my mother and father are celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary, a milestone for any married couple. They're toasting each other and the pleasure on their faces is genuine. They've already outlived a number of their peers, not to mention too many collapsed marriages to count (including two within the family). They'd produced three children and one of them, God bless her, had given them grandchildren, one of whom in turn gave them great-grandchildren. My father is 81, just nine years away from his death. The glaucoma that would rob him of his eyesight is rapidly advancing.

After retiring, he occasionally did a little part-time consulting but a few times I arrived for a visit to find him looking decidedly awkward as he vacuumed the living room to keep busy. As he grew frailer, the demands on my mother grew, too. I often overheard snippy exchanges.



Within any enduring marriage, there are more than enough reasons to drive a couple apart but presumably enough reasons to stay together that they do. For the children's sake is one common excuse, but once the children are grown other reasons include habit, laziness and fear, but also genuine fondness, even passion. If the reasons to stay are the right ones, or appearances are well-constructed, the couple is described as "happy." That's easy enough to say, but when you consider that life, in general, is a complex muddle that fuels a vast therapeutic industry ranging from self-help books to psychoanalysts, it's not easy sorting out the true dynamics governing the relationships of elderly parents. But like any married couple, my parents had dealt with irritations, conflicts and disappointments, and one wild card: the matter of those women's underthings. (The term "unmentionables" is poetically appropriate in this case.)

I find myself thinking about what Keith Green had said ("I would say he *just* had a fetish for women's underwear," as though my father had been a mere dilettante in the world of outside-the-mainstream erotica) and I feel a powerful need to defend him. I realize that in today's world, to hardcore cross-dressers like Keith and Michael Gilbert, my father's preoccupation seems pretty

vanilla. But I see him as a pioneer, making his way as best he could through profoundly alien territory. If anything, I now think of him as an even more wonderful father, one who had symbolized masculinity balanced with grace, and grace under pressure.

It brought to mind something the psychotherapist and author Amy Bloom had written in her 2002 book, *Normal: Transsexual CEOs, Crossdressing Cops and Hermaphrodites with Attitude*. “The high-heeled, Chanel-clad lesbian and the football-playing, beer-swilling gay man perplex us, as if surely some norm is violated... Presented with nature’s bouquet of possibilities, a wild assortment of gender and erotic preferences and a vast array of personalities, we throw it to the ground.”

To my surprise and delight, my father was part of that bouquet, and he showed me, in ways both obvious and, I’d discovered, so subtle I’d never realized they were there, that a man is both masculine and feminine, strong and vulnerable, noble and foolish, dignified and pathetic, an infinitely more complex being than our culture’s simple-minded male stereotypes.