

A CASE OF CLOTHING AND SMELL OBSESSION IN A BISEXUAL ADULT WOMAN

MARIANNE WESSON*

I.

Martha considered it a serious flaw in her character that she could scarcely reminisce about any event in her life without instantly remembering what she wore to it. She didn't think of herself as a clothes-horse like some of those sorority girls she used to know, but she couldn't deny that clothes had a starring role in her memories. Not just her high school prom or wedding, although she certainly remembered those outfits, but occasions when you might think clothes would be unimportant. Not long ago she had gotten a letter from her junior-college roommate reflecting on how far they had come from the days they had demonstrated in front of the President's office against the invasion of Cambodia. Martha had started to think seriously about this dubious progress but lapsed into a reverie about what had become of her bell-bottom blue jeans. Even her fantasy life was infected with her inability to get past the costumes. Her daydreams of sexual bliss featured black lace camisoles, and her fantasies about political triumph depended on creamy silk dresses. Inevitably, the outfit eclipsed the accompanying activity, even (in one favorite but highly unrealistic scenario) when the activity was being sworn in as Governor. (Martha was definitely a believer in equal opportunity even if she did get hung up on clothes). And it wasn't only happy occasions either. Her memories of disastrous occasions were often accompanied by the satisfaction of recalling that at least she was wearing— well, for example when the doctor told her she was pregnant after she left Tom Slade, a nice ivory blouse with tucks in front. So she was surprised to have to admit that she didn't remember what she was wearing on the day the sheriff came to her house with the custody order and took Laurie and Bea away. She could remember later that night, after her friends had left, curling

* Professor of Law, University of Colorado at Boulder. President's Teaching Scholar. A.B. Vassar College, J.D. University of Texas.

up into a comma in her black sweat pants and a Los Lobos T-shirt. She could remember going to court that next Friday in her gray suit to try to get them back— she even remembered the *underpants* she wore to court. She had thought about what to wear for hours, because there wasn't anything else that she could stand to think about. Flats or heels? she had argued with herself all afternoon. But not what she had on when the sheriff came. It bothered her, but she couldn't remember.

There were lots of other things she couldn't remember either, but they didn't surprise her. Her memory wasn't that good for anything but clothes. Like the name of the neighbor they had around the corner, the one who was so kind and kept asking her, when he would see her, how she was getting along. (I'm *fantastic*, she'd lie, how are *you*?) Something like Meyer but that wasn't it. And once she had gotten into an argument with Tom about remembering smells. He claimed that you remember smells in a way that's different from the way you remember other experiences, and that it's not really possible to remember a smell the way you remember, say, a piece of music. The music you can replay in your head, he said, but the smell you can't— all you can do is wait to be reminded of it when you have a chance to smell it again. Martha thought this was wrong— remembering a smell is just as satisfactory as remembering a piece of music. Just as unsatisfactory, too, compared to the original. But all the same she started to wonder whether this smell business was the way for most people that Tom said it was for him, and whether she was the odd one out again. Sometimes she thought about whether there were any things that were *better* in memory than in the actual happening of them— not because of distortion or nostalgia, but because they just lent themselves to remembering better than to experiencing, the way some films are more beautiful in black and white. Martha was interested in amnesia, too, and used to wonder a lot what it would be like. Once she read a book called THE MAN WHO MISTOOK HIS WIFE FOR A HAT about people with amnesia and all other kinds of strange difficulties. She didn't remember all that much of the book, but she did think sometimes about the man in it who woke up in the middle of the night terrified because he was convinced that his leg wasn't really his any more, that his own familiar leg was missing and that there was some horrible heavy foreign flesh attached to his hip where his leg had been. He would try to heave the disgusting object out of his bed and end up throwing himself onto the floor. This was a man she could understand. In fact, she thought, I know how he feels, especially the part about trying to throw the thing that's gone bad on you out of your bed and ending up angry and baffled on the floor yourself.

Strange thoughts. Sometimes Martha thought that she had *gotten* strange from the time she lived alone for three years. But on the whole

she thought it was just that getting enough sleep, which she had for at least a couple of those years, freed her mind up to wonder about things she'd never had the energy for when the girls had been there. They had been champion talkers, those two. They never stopped asking questions, especially Laurie—questions like “Why do the planets all go around the sun in the same direction?” Martha never knew the answer, and what was worse was that in those days she didn't even want to know. Remembering this, she pulled out her notebook and started a new list. Casualties of a Bad Marriage, she printed at the top, then crossed out Bad and wrote Dead above it. She skipped a line or two and began to number down the left side; 1. Curiosity, she wrote. Considering, she wrote below it: 2. Sex. She was starting to think about 3. when the lights went out. She put the notebook under her pillow and pulled the blanket up over her shoulders. She was wearing red knee socks and a gray prison jumpsuit. She was doing four to six years for kidnapping her daughters. She fell asleep remembering how Bea's hot hair used to smell when she came running into the house after a soccer game.

II.

She wasn't speaking to her lawyer. Maria had been working at Legal Aid when she went to court with Martha to try to get Bea away from Tom. They hadn't succeeded, because little Bea in her yellow jeans got so confused from Tom's lawyer's questions and finally said that her Mommy had told her to say Daddy hurt her. Maria tried, with a remarkable combination of calm and desperation that Martha thought could only be managed by a lawyer, to show the judge how confused Bea was. Maria called Martha to the stand and Martha, helplessly wondering whether she should have worn a dress instead of the suit, explained that she had only told Bea that it would be safe to tell the truth, and that if she did her Mommy would take care of her. But by that time Bea was scared and crying and couldn't say another word. Martha had to watch the court social worker take Bea out of the room while the judge said that she would stay with Tom, and that Martha couldn't see her for four months. Later when he wrote his order down there was something about the best interest of the child and the psychological parent, but Maria said he was just punishing Martha because he believed that she had coached Bea to tell a lie. That had been awful, but it certainly wasn't Maria's fault. Martha thought Maria had been magnificent in court, in her red suit with her black hair snapping about. But Tom had been so sober and gentlemanly in his navy blazer and gray slacks, and his pudgy lawyer kept calling him Professor Slade in that smarmy voice. And of course the judge knew that Martha had left the dignified Professor Slade for a chiropractor ski

bum named Ski. Probably under the circumstances not even Clarence Darrow could have made the judge believe that Professor Thomas Slade had molested his eight-year-old daughter.

After that Maria had gone into private practice, a phrase Martha always found faintly racy. Martha used to go see her in the Victorian bungalow near downtown where she had her office, and they would drink spicy tea with honey and plan legal strategies for getting Laurie and Bea back. Martha enjoyed the tea and talking to Maria so she went several times, but after two years she figured out that Maria wasn't really ever going to be able to get her girls back by asking some judge for them.

Then after the kidnapping they could only talk in the hot, dusty rooms set aside for that purpose in the County Jail and later in the prison at Goree. But none of that had anything to do with why Martha was so mad at Maria. While she was at Goree, Martha found out that Maria was a dyke—one of the other women there, who had also been Maria's client, told her. Martha didn't *mind* if she was; in fact one of the reasons she was interested was that sometimes she thought maybe she was one too. And wouldn't that be a hoot, after all those years and all those men? Martha had really wanted to talk to Maria about it, but the next time Maria came to see her in the visiting room, when Martha tried to ask about it Maria said her personal life was none of Martha's business. This hurt Martha's feelings, because Martha's personal life was everyone's business. If there was a person in Amarillo who didn't know how many abortions she'd had, she didn't know who it might be, except maybe the residents of a few nursing homes and the man who mistook his wife for a hat. When she was nine her Dad had given her a special newspaper for her birthday that had her picture on the front page with a big headline MARTY LANDON NINE YEARS OLD TODAY; ENTIRE WORLD CELEBRATES. She had loved that newspaper, loved the idea of being a tiny celebrity whose private occasions interested the whole planet. Twenty-seven years later, knowing that everyone, at least everyone in Amarillo, knew about her and Ski and Tom and Bea and Laurie, about her abortions and affairs, made her feel sad and queasy. So it made her mad that Maria, who had been her friend and champion, treasured her difference from Martha, her right to say none-of-your-business, and her good luck that nobody seemed to want to put *her* picture on the front page of a newspaper with some headline like GLAMOROUS LOCAL LAWYER FUCKS OTHER WOMEN; ENTIRE WORLD SHOCKED. Also it made Martha mad that since Maria was being so snooty Martha wouldn't be able to ask her when she knew she was a dyke, and how she found out, and whether a person could become one at thirty-nine, hardly even noticing until one day she started wondering. And whether if you were it meant you hated men, and if it did whether you could still love your Dad for the birthday newspaper he

gave you when you were nine. It occurred to Martha that now she wished it was the last newspaper that had ever had her name in it, including the one that had her wedding announcement: LANDON-SLADE NUPTIALS SET. *Especially* that one. It had a sharp dusty fragrance, like newspapers do. In the picture, she was wearing a black velvet dress with a white lace collar, and pearls. She was looking out from the page, and she couldn't see or smell what was coming.

