

A black and white portrait of Spalding Gray, a man with short, wavy hair, looking slightly to the left of the camera with a serious expression. He is wearing a light-colored, button-down shirt. The background is a textured, light-colored wall.

the journals of
spalding gray

edited by nell casey

listening to someone please
late at night - watching
the importance of spontane
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We can all do it but it's
who carries it off. I can
I want to know what it must be like.
with a horn, a camera
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because we feel he
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After reading Char
was very happy, and
need to get back to
I can once more share
friends I have. I feel
than ever before. I need
mist thoughts and ideas
house a physical place

THE JOURNALS
OF
Spalding Gray

EDITED BY NELL CASEY



ALFRED A. KNOPF
NEW YORK
2011

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK
PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

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I HAD BEEN brought up to look forward to heaven then began to think of heaven as history, that I would lie old and forever in the arms of someone while they accounted my life. That no matter what the pain, it would all have distance when it was recounted at another time. Told as a story in front of a fire through a very long night, left with a slight memory of it in the morning. This was in a way what I came to see as hope. Hope was a fantasy of the future and now with age the future has shrunk and so has the investment of hope in that future. What was there left to do but to report to myself the condition of the world that is out there, as I saw it. What was there left to do but to ask you to listen?

SPALDING GRAY
(1941–2004)

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A WOODEN DESK, a glass of water, a notebook, and a microphone—this was the stage setting for a Spalding Gray performance. Gray, with his long patrician face and habitual plaid shirt, sat alone before an audience for the first time in 1979 and, in his distinct New England accent, told stories from his life. It was an ancient notion—the history of confessional storytelling is made up of a group as various as Saint Augustine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Sylvia Plath, and Richard Pryor. Yet Gray’s work transformed the theater world, creating an autobiographical genre that has since been so widely replicated it is hard to imagine the daring it took to come first. Until Gray appeared as himself, the monologue implied a performer inhabiting another character or characters while roaming the stage, such as the theatrical portraits Ruth Draper premiered in 1920 or Lily Tomlin in her 1977 Broadway show, *Appearing Nitely*. Gray, on the other hand, absented his body, always sitting calmly at his desk, speaking nakedly about himself: the formative wounds of his childhood, his repressed WASP upbringing, his tangled romantic life, and the intriguingly neurotic way in which he viewed the world.

Despite his natural ability to tell a story, it took some time for him to discover the monologue as his form. Throughout college and his early twenties, Gray acted in traditional theater but soon found that he did not want, as he once wrote in his journal, to “go on the stage every night and fake emotions.” (And yet he was not ready to be himself either. “I wanted to be a not-be,” he later remarked of his acting at this time, “all the glorious imitation of life.”) After moving to New York City in 1967, at twenty-six years old, Gray became passionately involved in avant-garde theater, where he took on roles that hewed closer to his own personality.

He also began to cast a wide net for inspiration; he devoured all forms of theater and literature. He studied the works of an eclectic range of playwrights and writers and philosophers—Eugene O’Neill, Virginia Woolf, Jerzy Grotowski, Robert Lowell, André Gide, and Ram Dass, among them—all of whom offered him a more incisive sense of himself and therefore a new way to conceive of his own story.

In 1970, he became, along with his girlfriend at the time, Elizabeth LeCompte, a member of the experimental theater troupe the Performance Group; later, they co-founded the theater company the Wooster Group. In 1975, in collaboration with LeCompte, Gray began developing a trilogy of ensemble plays, exploring his childhood and family, called *Three Places in Rhode Island*. In the second piece, *Rumstick Road*, he stepped forward momentarily and addressed the audience as himself, thus beginning his career—and his particular cross to bear—in offering his life as art.

Gray premiered his first solo show, *Sex and Death to the Age 14*, in 1979.

And he was off: he presented six monologues in quick succession over the next three years. These monologues—and the ones that followed—were a strenuous exercise in memory. From the start, Gray worked only from an outline for his shows. He tape-recorded his performances in order to play them back and edit the story in his mind; he would alter the piece to make it, as he explained in a 1999 interview, “more dramatic and funny by juxtaposing a little hyperbole here and playing with it a little bit there.” As a result, he began an ongoing creative relationship with his audience—tweaking his stories based on their reaction, what he called a “dialogue”—that he would rely on for the rest of his career. “I start wide open and want it to come down to something set organically,” Gray explained. “I never memorize my lines. I’m trying to corral them every time. It’s like bushwhacking—I hack my way up the hill each night until eventually I make a clear path for myself.”

In 1983, Gray debuted an early version of his one-man show *Swimming to Cambodia*, an artful blend of personal and political history, telling stories from his life and from his experience acting in the Roland Joffé film *The Killing Fields* while also narrating the Cambodian genocide that the movie depicted.

Swimming was Gray’s watershed monologue. The piece was met with near-fanatical critical praise and, in 1987, was made into a well-received film directed by Jonathan Demme. Consequently, Gray was invited to perform his next solo show, *Terrors of Pleasure*, largely about the disastrous experience of buying his first house, at Lincoln Center in New York City. With this move, he further broadened his audience, extending it from his cult downtown following to the well-heeled theatergoers of uptown Manhattan. He made appearances on *Late Night with David Letterman* and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Three more of his monologues—*Terrors of Pleasure*, *Monster in a Box*, and *Gray’s Anatomy*—were turned into independent films, directed by Thomas Schlamme, Nick Broomfield, and Steven Soderbergh, respectively. He wrote a novel, *Impossible Vacation*, published by Knopf in 1992. He began appearing in Hollywood movies—Garry Marshall’s *Beaches*, which starred Bette Midler, and John Boorman’s *Beyond Rangoon*, among them—though never as a leading man, typically as a side character spun off of the persona of his solo shows. He even played a recurring role as a therapist in *The Nanny*, a television sitcom starring Fran Drescher, starting in 1997. All the while, Gray continued to present his monologues at Lincoln Center as well as tour them in the United States and abroad. Throughout his twenty-five-year solo career, from 1979 to 2004, Gray pulled off the fine trick of portraying both the beautiful and the terrible aspects of his life while simultaneously allowing his audience to feel understood. He had, after all, just spoken the difficult truths for them. Gray had become our preeminent theatrical confessor.

The details of Gray’s death are now nearly as well-known as his oft-performed life: He was in a serious car accident in Ireland in 2001 that left him with a broken hip, a limp, and a titanium plate in his head; he struggled with brain trauma and severe depression afterward; he was institutionalized several

times for psychiatric care; and finally his dramatic life came to its surpassingly dramatic end. On January 10, 2004, Gray threw himself, it is believed, from the Staten Island Ferry into the dark, freezing water of New York Harbor. The feeling of public devastation that rose up after his death came in no small part from the fact that the decision to end his life—and the act itself—were so private. Gray, by virtue of the ongoing autobiography of his monologues, had promised to tell his audience everything. His story was our story. But his public narrative, despite his seemingly having always whispered it in our ears, was masterfully composed.

These journals—which begin when Gray was twenty-five years old and end just before his death at sixty-two—illustrate a teeming under life that the performer only hinted at onstage. Gray was not only surprisingly capable of keeping parts of his life to himself; he was able to skim these parts, shaving just the top layer of a secret and offering it up as a convincing whole. “The well told partial truth to deflect the private raw truth,” Gray himself observed about his monologues in his journal.

This is not to say that Gray wasn’t compelled to publicly confess. He was. This need—as well as the release and redemption he felt in confiding to an adoring audience—was possibly the greatest driving force of his life. But as his career evolved, as he grew older, as his interests and desires and relationships became ever more complex, his aim to continually tell his story became more difficult. Gray could not reveal everything, not only because he knew the best stories were lively distillations, but also out of the fear that too bold a truth might alienate his followers. He craved the love of his audience—and his audience wanted only a representative of Spalding Gray, a spokesperson for truth.

This dynamic made Gray increasingly introspective, ever aware of his public, even as he was simply going through the day. The audience became the witness without whom he felt as if he didn’t exist. “The description of a memory makes a new reality,” he wrote in an undated journal entry. “Am I more real in front of an audience?” In 1991, he wrote simply: “THERE IS NOTHING PRIVATE LEFT.” As long as he considered everyone and everything as material for his story, there was little room for “real,” or unself-conscious, life.

These journals make up the rough draft of Gray’s adult life, the version he sought and often felt he lost once it was crafted and brought to light in his monologues. Here is the raw material—the wrenching emotional breakdown he suffered in 1976 following a trip to India, his time in Thailand making *The Killing Fields*, his jittery first marriage—that Gray later reproduced with swift, literary hindsight in his performances. These pages show how the monologist intuitively shaped his narrative, as well as the character of “Spalding Gray,” with a penetrating eye and a soothing bit of self-deprecation, for his audience. In the journals, he frequently comes across in a more extreme way, his anguish and needs not tempered by his perceptive charm.

And yet the themes of Gray’s life as they appear here are consistent with

those of his monologues. His story, and this book, begin and end with suicide: that of Gray's mother, Elizabeth Horton, and of Gray himself. From early on, Gray writes with eloquent precision about the ways in which depression and suicide felt like an inheritance to him. He articulates the obsessions and vulnerabilities that he suffered, and fought, as a result of his mother locking herself in the family car one night in 1967 and gassing herself to death.

By his own analysis, Gray was always looking to satisfy the longing that his mother's outsized personality, and tragic end, had instilled in him. He traced many of his problems back to her, reasoning that she, and his distant father too, had left a part of him arrested as a needy, self-indulgent boy throughout adulthood.

"The new fear was that mom had not only killed herself," Gray once wrote on a scrap of paper, "but had also laid the groundwork to kill me." He drew the parallels often between his mother and himself, emphasizing not only their similar emotional fragilities but also their vivaciousness. He frequently cites their shared love of the ocean. (Water, in general, has a constant and eerily foreshadowing presence in these journals.) He mythologized her life, particularly at the end of his own, obsessing about the ways in which he had replicated her circumstances for himself. Gray felt that his mother, more than anyone else, was written into his genes.

When he later became romantically involved, Gray constantly thrashed and bucked within the confines of commitment. This pattern plays out with the three women involved in the major relationships of his life: Elizabeth LeCompte, Renée Shafransky, and Kathleen Russo.

Gray writes searchingly about these women, each one overlapping with the last, each becoming involved in his work in a crucial way. LeCompte was one of his most influential theater directors as well as the first person to suggest that Gray speak to the audience directly. Together, Gray and LeCompte developed a revolutionary model of theater with the Wooster Group, whose work not only broadened the scope of theatrical imagination but also endures as a powerful cultural force today. Shafransky was his muse, appearing as a character in his monologues throughout the eighties and nineties, as he rose to fame. She also became Gray's first wife—and the backbone to his successful career, eventually assuming the role of manager, producer, and director for many of his professional endeavors. Russo, who gave birth to Gray's first child while he was married to Shafransky, became his second wife and had another son with him. She was the subject of his last monologues, in particular *Morning, Noon, and Night*, a tribute to the unexpected pleasure he found in his late-blooming family life and his relationship with his stepdaughter, Marissa, and two sons, Forrest and Theo Gray.

These journals account for Gray's artistic history as it shapes—and reshapes—itsself around each of these women. A portrait emerges of a restless performer, with hungrily self-destructive instincts offstage, whose talent and ambition were focused by the commanding women in his life. Gray chronicles his long attachment to alcohol, torturous and beloved, and the way he used it

as a magic carpet ride out of the strained reality of intimate life. He also expresses guilt about his selfish impulses and his inability to see past them. “I lay sick in bed and told Renée that I felt I used her as a nurse to get famous,” he wrote in 1991. “Just used her to keep me afloat.” But in the free fall of loss and regret after their breakup, a more appreciative Gray emerges: “The image that constantly tears my heart, the image that rips at me is of Renée on her red bike with the fender rattling and her in her brown shorts and we are riding together down to the ocean to take our morning walk and I am there but not there. A kind of be here then sort of guy and she is looking back at me with love in her gaze and I respond.”

Still, even while in these long-term relationships, Gray maintained a fluid sense of his sexuality. He analyzed—and upended—every role assigned to him sexually. He speaks of feeling like a woman after sleeping with an aggressive man in a gay bath club in Amsterdam, describes the lure of the young as he grows older, details the scrutiny with which he fought off intimacy, criticizing every woman he loved for a particular physical aspect. But Gray was never able to fully integrate his shifting sexuality into his stage persona. His only public mention, for example, of his involvement with a man was in his 1981 monologue *47 Beds*—and he denounced it to comedic effect. After he became famous, he continued to experiment with men on occasion, but he did not explore homosexuality in his work, except for a fictionalized account of his assignation with the man in the Amsterdam bathhouse in the autobiographical *Impossible Vacation*.

If these journals unveil the shadow story—the plot that hovered outside his monologues—then the question emerges, would Gray have wanted them published? He never stated explicitly to Russo that they should be made public after his death, although he did once suggest it to her in 1991, after reading a review of *The Journals of John Cheever* in *The New York Times Book Review*.

It is possible that Gray kept this record as a promise, or a hope, that it would someday be read. He refers more than once to “you” in these journals, speaking specifically to a reader—whoever that might be. There was a time when the “you” might have been Shafransky: Gray occasionally worried she would read his journals—he said as much in his 1996 monologue, *It’s a Slippery Slope*, and also wrote about this privately. Yet he continued to address “you”—the unnamed reader—long after his relationship with Shafransky had ended. In 1990, he offered this explanation for why he should confess in a diary: “What am I doing? I guess I’m telling it to myself or to you, the reader.” Five years later, he plainly asked: “WILL YOU READ THIS?” In 2000, four years before his death, Gray came as close to saying that the journals were meant for the public as he ever did: “Back in N. Y. C. for an interesting meeting with [*film director*] Peter Greenaway where he asked me who I wrote for when I did a journal ... my audience of course. It is not enjoyable or easy for me to have a non-narrated private experience and I’ve always known that.”

Still, publishing these journals poses a question that echoes Gray's own moral quandary: What is worth revealing? It seems, throughout his career, that Gray wanted both to be known and not, to seek the truth and to create it. And yet this book is an endeavor made in the spirit of his mission. More than once in these journals, Gray quotes a line from the book of Job, spoken by the messengers delivering the news that Job's children and servants and animals have died: "I alone have escaped to tell you."

We have lost Gray, but there is still more for him to tell us.

Nell Casey
June 2011

WHILE I WAS working on this book, the entirety of Spalding Gray's notebooks, videos, and audiotapes were housed in many cardboard boxes in the New York City office of Glenn Horowitz, a rare-book dealer who specializes in selling literary archives to scholarly institutions. (Gray's papers have since been acquired by the Harry Ransom Center of the University of Texas at Austin and currently reside there.) These boxes were neatly labeled—"Journals 1970s and 1980s," "Journals 1990–1995 and Misc. Personal Material," "Notebooks and Performance Notes," and the like—but it seemed at each visit I made, another cardboard box would materialize with sketches Gray had doodled, audiotapes of therapy sessions, short stories, videotapes of performances, and scraps of paper with fascinating one- to two-line glimpses into the performer's mind. Gray apparently wrote notes on every bit of ephemera that passed through his hands: hotel stationery, an Amtrak napkin, a Breast Cancer Coalition pamphlet. Every time I entered Horowitz's office, it felt as if I'd fallen down a rabbit hole into Gray's phantasmagoric vision of life.

Once, in the summer of 2009, when Gray's widow, Kathleen Russo, was packing up the last of his personal papers for the archive, I stood by in amazement as she rifled through the remaining fragments of Gray's life. "This is interesting," she would say, and then hand over a cryptic drawing he'd done as a young man or a letter his therapist had written to him. The papers piled up on a table before me, and as I began to root through them—unfolding wrinkled pages, opening long-forgotten, tattered notepads—a Tampax insert fell into my lap. Somehow, it had made its way from Gray's home into his papers and had been earnestly tucked away in his archives. This was, it seemed to me, not only a fitting tribute to Gray's career of ushering private life into public view but also an excellent symbol for the intimate chaos of this project.

Gray's notebooks—he wrote in a variety of diaries, from marble composition books to spiral notebooks to date books (every page filled to the brim with notes running straight through the "Earnings & Withholding Tax" page)—range from 1967, when he was a twenty-five-year-old doing regional theater in Texas, to the days just before his death, at age sixty-two, in 2004. All told, Gray left behind more than five thousand pages of his private writing. While most of these books contain his day-to-day musings—alternately written in tilting cursive or loose capital letters—there are also notebooks he used specifically for his monologues. These typically contain a list of plot points, targets Gray wanted to hit while telling a story, with changes and adjustments made in red pen. On occasion, Gray also tried out ideas here before committing to them. One such book, for example, is labeled

“Mourning, Noon and Night” with the *u* in “Mourning” crossed out, offering a glimpse of the kind of revelatory fine-tuning he did with this monologue before he first performed it in 1999. There are also occasional intrusions of daily life: a babysitter’s number is scribbled across the top of one page and, on the bottom of another, a list of things Gray wanted to remember from a trip he’d taken into New York City from his home in Sag Harbor, Long Island.

Conversely, the “regular” diaries often include the first version of stories before they were transformed for a monologue, perhaps before even Gray knew that he would offer these details to an audience. Because the “performance notebooks” were more skeletal—they are largely made up of outlines and lists—I primarily drew from the day-to-day journals for this book. On the rare occasion that I did use something from the performance journals—when I found something that added an interesting glimpse into Gray’s artistic process—I made note of it.

In addition to giving me access to everything stored at Horowitz’s office, Russo offered many other crucial elements from Gray’s life such as letters and faxes he’d sent or saved, drawings, family photographs, publicity stills, reviews and press clippings for his shows, medical and psychiatric paperwork from the last years of his life, and an audiotape he recorded—the last one he ever made—a month prior to his death. I mostly used these materials to help me better understand Gray and to fully represent his life through his journals. When I did include material in the book other than the journals—quoting from a note on scrap paper or a letter exchange—the source is identified. Toward the end of his life, when Gray was physically and mentally compromised and did not write in his journals as frequently or as coherently, I relied more heavily on supplementary materials such as hospital records, letters from this time, and Gray’s last audio recording. When psychiatric records were not available, Russo provided me with names of hospitals and dates drawn from a timeline she kept at the end of Gray’s life. I also conducted many interviews with Gray’s family members, friends, and colleagues. I quote from these conversations throughout but do so more extensively in conjuring Gray’s last years.

My greatest challenge as an editor was to cull the entries and shape a history from the vast array of fascinating personal documentation Gray left behind. I read everything available to me and then set about trying to portray the story of Gray’s life while also abiding the gaps and idiosyncrasies of the journals. With the exception of 1977–1979, when Gray seemed to write every day, the diaries have varying breaks in time, though he didn’t tend to let more than a few weeks lapse before returning. There are a few intervals, nonetheless, when Gray disappeared for longer. The most striking example of this is from 1984: In the year when Gray was first touring *Swimming to Cambodia* and his solo career began its steep ascent, he left behind few entries, with almost no mention of his work.

Throughout his journals, Gray sometimes drew boxes around certain words and arrows pointing from one passage to another. He occasionally used other

modes of emphasis: underlining words or sentences or using question marks to indicate his loss of words to describe something. In the hope of reproducing the feeling of the original journals, I have left these intact where possible.

For the sake of a coherent account, I have included my own narration in italics throughout the book, mainly at the start of each decade and at the end of Gray's life, when his writing became more diffuse. There are also brief clarifications, in italics and brackets either beneath the date or within the entry, that aim to orient the reader when Gray refers to an event, person, or story that requires further explanation. At times, I note when something from the journals later found its way into one of Gray's monologues or when there is an interesting discrepancy between how he told a story in the journal and how he presented it later in a monologue. But I did not note every instance in which a piece of his life made its way into his art.

The narrative provided throughout is meant to place the entries in the broader context of Gray's life, though this is not a definitive biography, which has yet to be written. This book is devoted solely to Gray's point of view; I asked for others to provide not counter-perspectives but rather a more complete sense of the story.

There are certain insights—such as his feelings about his growing fame during that seminal year of 1984—that left this earth along with Gray and remain mysterious. Along these lines, LeCompte told me she possessed two of Gray's journals from their time together as a couple, but later said she was not able to find them. Thankfully, for the most part, Gray left behind such a large trove of his reflections—in interviews, monologues, recordings—I was able to find clues and passages to draw from in order to fill in the blanks. (Russo also gave me access to transcripts of everything in Gray's archive. A small number of entries in the book are drawn from these.) At times, I quote Gray himself; this material was gathered from the journals, letters, television interviews, and newspaper and magazine clippings as well as Gray's monologues or other forms of his writing, both published and not.

I have not noted where there are missing passages—either between entries or within them—as I found trying to mark these lapses with ellipses riddled the page with a bewildering code of disclosure. The ellipses that appear in the entries belong to Gray.

One of the great pleasures of reading journals is to see the untidy origins both of the author's reflections and of his writing habits. As such, I felt a keen responsibility to keep these journals as close to their original form as possible. Gray, however, was dyslexic and made frequent misspellings and grammatical errors. Where there seemed to be a significant struggle for him to get a word right—such as a 1968 entry in which he wrote “now things are really difficult (great fears about ~~alchhol~~ ~~alcha~~ drinking I keep wanting to drink)”—or where the misuse of a word seemed to represent the way in which dyslexia actually heightened Gray's originality, I did not fix it. Similarly, I occasionally kept Gray's peculiar grammar and quirks of punctuation when they seemed to make their own statement about his creativity. That said, where the mistakes

were plainly mistakes, I made corrections; there were so many misspelled words throughout these pages that leaving them would have served as a distraction for the reader. If a word within an entry was not legible, I signified this with a blank line.

Gray also had a habit of crossing through his words and starting again, refashioning a thought midstream, as well as suddenly writing in ALL CAPITAL LETTERS, as if he'd just realized how short and urgent life really was. He also used erratic indentations throughout certain entries, perhaps to heighten their poetic impact. These all seemed to be conscious decisions on his part and helped to reveal something of his feelings and intentions as he wrote—I left them as they were.

Gray did not always date his journals. Where no date appears before an entry in the book, there was no date to be found in the diaries. Undated entries have been placed in correct chronological order to the best of my knowledge. Otherwise, I have, for consistency's sake, given the date—in as complete a form as possible—on the upper-left-hand side of each entry. I also kept Gray's own descriptions of the date when they offered further—and occasionally revealing—description, as in “April One April Fools Day. I'm the fool,” which he wrote in 1995. Gray also sometimes wrote in his journals twice in the same day. Under these circumstances, the two entries appear with the same date.

As one would expect from a journal, Gray frequently referred to people, institutions, and events by one name only and without description beyond the immediate entry. I was often able to track down full names and/or their roles in Gray's life and offer this information. When it was not possible to do so, however, I simply left the name with no further explanation. I also corrected the spelling of certain names. It is worth noting Gray misspelled even Kathie Russo's name—alternating between “Kathy” and “Kathie”—throughout the time they were together.

In a few places, I've changed the names of people in order to protect their privacy. In these cases, the name appears with an asterisk by it at its first mention.

Upon Gray's death, his legacy became Russo's responsibility, and the decision to publish these journals was hers alone. I am not sure, in relation to this project, that she always relished this role—acting as curator for Gray's eternal memory—but I think she felt it was an alternately consoling and necessary one to take on. This book not only allowed her to remain in the presence of Gray but also gave her a chance to participate in a work, the chronicling of her husband's life, that might have otherwise been taken up without her permission. She struggled at times with the decisions that went into making this book but was admirably willing to allow for the rawness of character that a person's journals invariably expose. Russo also endured seeing herself rendered by Gray, as flawed and criticized as any other of the intimates described here. She remained, as perhaps a wife of Spalding Gray must, unflinching. She did, nevertheless, request that certain entries be

removed out of sensitivity to her family. Her children had already suffered the very public suicide of their father, and, out of respect for them and Russo, these entries were removed from the final manuscript.

Such restrictions—the finite number of pages in which to express a life, the discovery that a piece of the whole is inaccessible, the protective instincts of family members—are the particular challenges of editing journals. And yet, despite these limits, it is my hope this book captures the exceptional scope and meaning of Gray’s remarkable life.

the sixties

SOMEWHERE THERE WAS A WAR going on and back in Rhode Island, my mother was having her second nervous breakdown. Perhaps she was having it because of the war. I couldn't stand being around her anymore. I didn't know what to do. I'd try to read to her from the Alan Watts book *Psychotherapy, East and West* but it didn't make sense to either of us. What she needed was something else no one could give. My father sent her to a psychiatrist but that didn't help because she was a Christian Scientist and didn't trust doctors so she wouldn't talk to him. But she did call her Christian Science practitioner and he gave her some phrase to repeat like, "God is all loving and I'm His perfect reflection." Then she'd hang up the phone and pace the living room while repeating that phrase over and over while tearing the hair out of the back of her head. There was a ratty bald spot there. Then, afraid that my father would catch her in that demented state and pack her off to yet another institution for more shock treatments, she'd begin to try to pull herself together by starting to make the evening meal. Mumbling to herself over the frozen peas, "Oh God, don't let him see me this way. Oh God, help me get through another day." I just watched it all like a very sad and confusing performance. A crazy show; I didn't know what else to do.

UNDATED

Spalding Gray—or “Spud,” as his family called him—was born in Providence, Rhode Island, on June 5, 1941. His mother, Margaret Elizabeth “Betty” Horton, was a homemaker, though she’d attended Rhode Island School of Design to study painting before dropping out to marry. His father, Rockwell Gray Sr., was first a credit manager and later the treasurer and secretary at Brown & Sharpe, a precision tool manufacturer, in North Kingstown, Rhode Island. As portrayed by all three of the Gray brothers, he was a distant and forbidding familial figure. Spalding Gray was the middle child of three sons: Rockwell Gray (“Rocky”), the eldest, was born in 1938, and Channing Gray (“Chan”) was the youngest, born in 1947.

The family lived in a renovated nineteenth-century farmhouse in Barrington, Rhode Island, an upper-middle-class suburb of Providence, where Gray’s mother herself had grown up. There were no liquor stores, no movie theaters—it was “a lily-white town,” as described by Channing.

“It was a lovely, peaceful, safe, aesthetically appealing environment,” Gray’s older brother Rockwell recalled, “with a yacht club where we went swimming in the summer and where Spalding learned to sail even before high school.”

Gray’s father’s mother, Gram Gray, as she was called, lived with the family as well. Gray’s mother’s parents lived down the street. Gray was close to his grandparents—with the exception of his father’s father, who left when Rockwell senior was a boy—and made an effort throughout life to maintain close relationships with them; family intimacy was important to him despite his sense that it was nearly impossible to achieve.

Gray’s mother, a petite and attractive woman with a pixie haircut, was a Christian Scientist. She held the religion’s belief that people could heal themselves by prayer and the belief that illness was “error,” a false construct of the material—as opposed to the spiritual—world. Throughout his childhood, Gray was rarely sent to see doctors. More often, his mother called Christian Science practitioners and asked them to pray for her son to get better. Once, when he was fourteen, Gray passed out next to a radiator in the bathroom. When he woke, he lifted his arm and saw, as he later described it, “this dripping-rare, red roast beef third degree burn.” He ran to his mother, who advised him to put some soap and gauze on it, dear, and “know the truth.”

Despite her fierce conviction that illness could be avoided by denying its reality, Gray’s mother struggled with her own emotional health, suffering her first nervous breakdown when she was thirty-six years old; Gray was ten. As a boy, Gray would hear her, as he told it in a CBS television interview in 1999, “shrieking, crying out to Jesus, in distress, like she was being attacked.” Gray’s father never spoke of his wife’s episodes—he was conservative by nature, and there was little professional or cultural knowledge of mental illness in America at the time. “No one would say ‘Is that your mother?’ ” Gray said, describing his experience of listening to his mother’s screams coming from elsewhere in the house. “It was like a ghost.”

Over the years, Gray’s mother spent time in various psychiatric institutions. After her first breakdown in 1951, she was sent for several weeks, as Rockwell remembered it, to a Christian Science home in New Jersey to recover. Later, when

Gray was fourteen years old, his mother told him that Jesus had come down on a shaft of sunlight into the living room and touched her hands and she felt better.

After a second major breakdown, fifteen years later, she went to Butler Hospital, a private institution in Providence, where she received electroconvulsive therapy. “After she had her shock treatments—I think she went a couple of times—she would come back feeling better,” Channing, the only son who lived at home during this period, said. “I remember one time when she came back saying how great it was to be alive again. But it was only a few weeks before she went back into a depression.”

Still, there was always great affection between Gray and his mother. Betty may have been a religious fanatic with a turbulent emotional life, but she was also the life of the party, “a cutup and a hot tamale,” as her son Rockwell described her. She could be funny, ebullient, outrageous.

And she understood her middle son’s particular talent. “Spalding began to elaborate very colorful stories quite early,” Gray’s older brother explained. “The grown-ups pooh-poohed it: ‘Oh, Spuddy, he’s always making up stories.’ My father always treated it like silly business. But my mother was interested because she had a rebel streak herself.” Gray frequently spoke of the intensity of his relationship with his mother in his monologues and in interviews. “Mom and I dated right up through college,” he often joked about their attachment to each other.

And yet his mother was also the one on whom Gray later hung his romantic troubles, concluding that her devouring need, particularly during her breakdowns, obliterated his sense of self and his ability to make a lasting connection with a woman. He also blamed his distant father for instilling in him a sense of longing. In a 1991 recording of one of his therapy sessions, Gray complained too that his father had “indoctrinated” him into drinking, by the example he set with his “controlled alcoholism.” Like his father, Gray turned to alcohol to enliven daily life, but his relationship with it was more combative. “Drink was a land to my father,” Gray once wrote on a scrap of paper, “but produced the emotions in me I saw in Mom.” In holding on to these claims, even cherishing them, Gray remained, in large part, his parents’ child—their sad, yearning boy—throughout his life.

At fifteen, Gray was sent to Fryeburg Academy, a boarding school in Maine, in an attempt to bring his grades up and straighten him out. Gray was dyslexic—though, in 1956, he was simply considered slow. He had never been a good student, failing most of his classes at the public school in Barrington while wandering about with a group of wayward local boys who drank too much. But things changed for him at Fryeburg. His grades improved, he became captain of the soccer team, and in his final year there he discovered acting. As a senior, he was cast in *The Curious Savage*, a play written by John Patrick that takes place in a mental hospital.

“The character I was trying out for had delusions of grandeur. Not only did he believe he was Hannibal; he thought he could play the violin, but he couldn’t,” Gray recalled in his 1980 monologue *A Personal History of the American Theater*. “When I read [for the audition], I read relentlessly, the way I perceived the text, one word at a time. And I got the role because they thought that I was doing this really effective reading.” Gray even credited this play with giving him his