

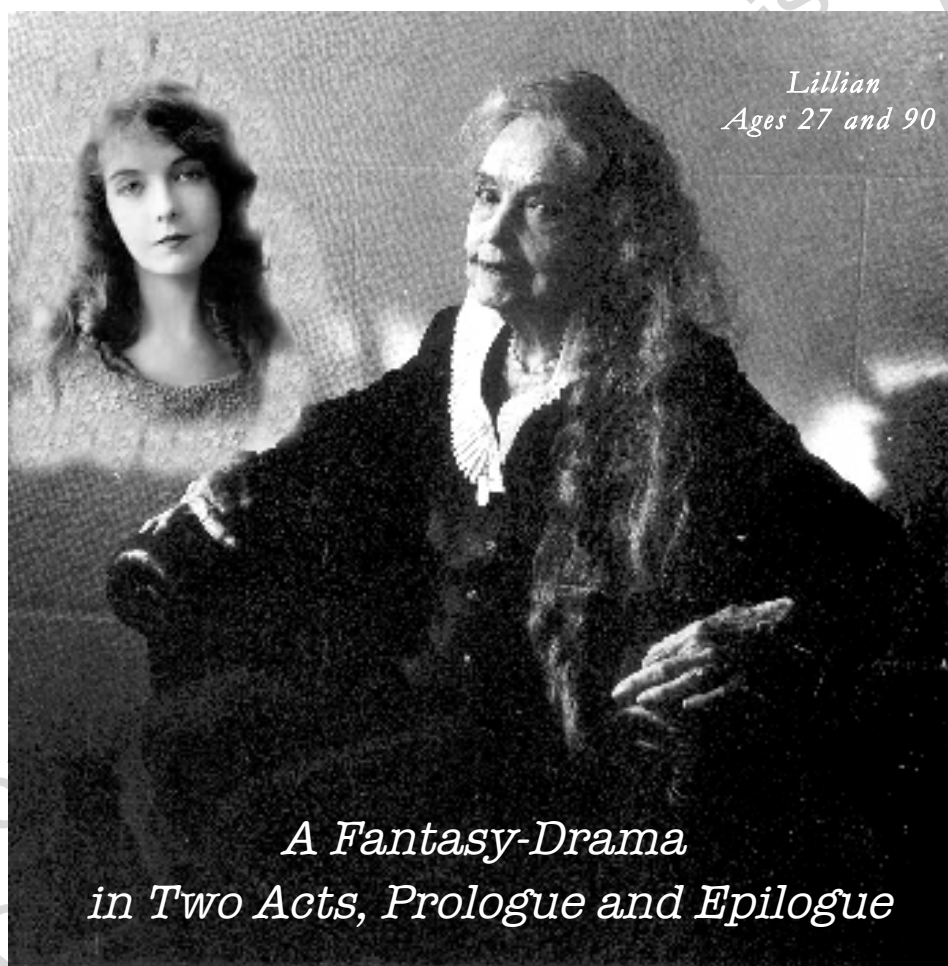
*“What other dungeon is so dark as one’s own heart?  
What jailer so inexorable as oneself?”*

--- Nathaniel Hawthorne

*“...This picture will remain always young.  
It will never be older than this particular day of June.”*

--- Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

## *The Secrets of Lillian Gish*



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# *The Secrets of Lillian Gish*

## Principal characters in order of appearance:

Robert “Bobby” Harron, a famous silent film star  
 Lillian Gish  
 Brendan Pavlik (later Brendan O’Mara), as aspiring actor  
 Paul and Maureen Pavlik, his parents  
 Daniel Pearson, an aspiring opera singer

## Synopsis

**Prologue.** *New York, 1920.* Silent film star Bobby Harron shoots himself. Friend and co-star Lillian Gish must break the news of Bobby’s death to his mother. She vows never to reveal it was a suicide.

**Act I.** *1972-1980.* Aspiring actor Brendan O’Mara jealously guards the secrets of his fantasy life and his real life. The fantasy: Brendan believes that he is the reincarnation of Bobby Harron. Brendan’s parents, Maureen and Paul, fear they have no control over their son’s wild imagination. To make his fantasy a reality, Brendan seeks out the 79-year-old Lillian Gish and tells her his secret. A bond is formed between the famous actress and the aspiring young actor. **(PLEASE SCROLL DOWN TO READ THIS SCENE.)**

*1980.* Brendan and Daniel Pearson, an aspiring opera singer, fall in love at first sight, but Brendan can’t accept being gay – or is it something bigger? He keeps Daniel and his parents from each other and harshly rejects Daniel.

(INTERMISSION)

**Act II.** *1982-1993.* Back in New York, Brendan and Daniel go their separate ways, trying to forget each other. Daniel meets kindly Jonathan Darden; they become a couple. Brendan becomes mysteriously ill. Foreseeing that his life might parallel Bobby Harron’s, Brendan begs Lillian to reveal the cause of Harron’s death, but Lillian reviles at the thought of his suicide. She instills Brendan with strength never to give up, but in her heart she knows he will die. Brendan, getting sicker, meets Daniel meet in the street. Daniel is unforgiving.

*1984:* Brendan collapses at the summer theater where he and Daniel met. The two try to find their way back to each other by letter, but Brendan, secretive to the end, does not reveal he is dying. Brendan watches Harron-Gish silent films obsessively; the screen engulfs him and he disappears into the film.

Acting as a spirit guide, the 90-year-old Lillian leads Maureen and Daniel to each other as they exchange letters. Jonathan distances himself when he learns of Daniel’s unresolved feelings for Brendan. Maureen and Paul introduce themselves to Daniel after an opera performance, and a bond is formed between Maureen and the former lover. After reading Brendan’s letter to Daniel, Maureen tells Daniel that Brendan loved him. Maureen says Brendan died of AIDS – but was it? Transition to:

**Epilogue.** *Winter 1993.* As Daniel and the parents drift off, Lillian – now a half-spirit at age 99 – prepares for her final exit. Brendan’s secrets have become part of her own, and she disappears into eternity, taking them with her. *End of work.*

**(PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ACT I, SCENE ii.)**

# The Secrets of Lillian Gish

## Act I, Scene ii

**Synopsis of scene: 16-year-old Brendan Pavlik (later Brendan O'Mara) steals the family car to go meet Lillian Gish. He tells her he believes he is the reincarnation of her silent film leading man, Bobby Harron, who died under mysterious circumstances in New York in 1920.**

Act I, sc. ii: The dressing room of a theater, Findlay College, Ohio, spring 1972

*(First meeting of Brendan and Lillian Gish. Simple dressing room, nothing too fancy. A floor bouquet of flowers to spruce up the room, a couch at one side. Makeup table with lights, a rotary phone, a glass pitcher with two glasses. The makeup table and lights will be used frequently throughout the opera in different configurations. Lillian, 79, dressed simply but elegantly, is lying upside down on a slanted board, the way she has every morning for the last 32 years. She is relaxing before her speech on the history of silent film, which will be followed by a luncheon. A knock at the door.)*

Voice of Lillian's manager, Tom Burkhardt

Miss Gish?

Lillian (without moving)

Yes, Tom?

Burkhardt (enters)

Your guest is here. The young man who wrote the letter.

Lillian

Of course. Show him in.

*(Burkhardt enters with Brendan.)*

Burkhardt

*(trying to make Brendan feel special)* This is Brendan O'Mara.

*(Brendan enters, shy, slender, handsome, wearing a jacket and tie, and carrying a slender bouquet of flowers. When he sees Lillian lying on the slanted board, he retreats a step.)*

Lillian

*(without moving)* That's fine, that's fine. Come in. I always receive my guests this way.

*(Burkhardt motions Brendan to go in.)*

Lillian

The same routine. Every day for thirty-two years. Sends the blood straight to your brain.

*(Lillian nimbly gets off the bench and straightens her dress or suit. When she sees Brendan she freezes for a moment, then catches herself. She checks Burkhardt.)*

It's the strangest thing. For a moment ... (She looks at Burkhardt, who checks Lillian. She dismisses the distraction and continues:)

*(Brendan can hardly refrain from jumping up and down).*

*(Beat.)* Oh, look at those lovely flowers. *(takes the flowers from Brendan)* Tom, would you put them in water, please.

*(Burkhardt smiles obligingly, crosses to Lillian, takes the flowers and exits.)*

So you're Brendan O' Mara. *(Beat.)* I'm so pleased to meet you.

*(She extends her hand. Brendan practically faints from the thrill. He shakes hands with Lillian. Another beat. Brendan is tongue-tied.)*

So you're an Ohio boy. I'm from Massillon. And fancy, you're from Lorain.

*(Brendan can hardly believe she has remembered this from his letter.)*

And you want to be an actor.

*(Brendan finally finds the way to speak.)*

Brendan

Yes, Miss Gish.

Lillian

Well, "the actor's life for me." *(another beat.)* You don't have to be shy. I'm just a girl from Ohio.

*(Brendan beams. Another beat.)*

Did your parents drive you down? *(Nothing.)* Did you take the bus?

*(Brendan beams and walks around the room, pleased that he has made Lillian guess how he got there. Lillian takes a mock-scolding tone.)*

Are you old enough to drive?

*(Brendan dancing around the room. Lillian realizes there is more here than meets the eye.)*

Brendan, how did you get here?

Brendan

I drove.

Lillian

How old are you? Do you have a license?

Brendan

*(very proud of himself)* I stole the car.

Lillian

*(beat.)* Oh dear, oh dear. That's terrible. *(Beat. starts for the phone on the makeup table.)* We'd better call your parents.

Brendan

No, please, Miss Gish!

Lillian

They'll be worried sick!

Brendan

Please, Miss Gish!

Lillian

I won't have it any other way.

*(Beat. Brendan knows she means business.)*

Stole the car! Indeed!

*(Lillian crosses to the phone at the makeup table, Picks it up.)* Hello, this is Lillian Gish. I need an outside line. You can bill the call to me. *(turning to Brendan)* What's the number?

Brendan *(fixed on Lillian)*

Two one six, nine o five, one nine two o.

Lillian

*(Lillian dials and waits.)*

Brendan

*(sheepishly)* My parents' name is Pavlik. Pee ay vee el eye kay.

Lillian

Pavlik?

Brendan

I took my mother's name. O'Mara.

Lillian

*(Beat. Louder)* Hello, Mrs. Pavlik? *(Beat.)* This is Lillian Gish. *(Beat.)* Yes, the real Lillian Gish. *(Beat.)* Yes, I'm Lillian Gish. Brendan is here with me. *(Beat.)* Yes at Findlay College. I don't quite know how he got here, but we'll get him home somehow. *(Beat.)* The car was missing? Well, I feel just terrible. *(Beat.)* No, I couldn't possibly – *(Beat.)* You're sure? "He had his heart set on it." *(Beat.)* Well .. well... I feel just awful about this. *(beat.)* You're sure? *(Beat.)* Yes, I hope to meet you, too, sometime. You have a most unusual son. *(Beat.)* You're entirely welcome. *(Hangs up. Looks at Brendan critically but not unkindly.)*

Lillian

Now what's all this about?

*(Lillian still looking at him critically. She shakes her head.)*

Brendan

My parents can't change me. I'm too much for them.

Lillian

Do they love you?

Brendan

*(His voice chokes)* Of course they do.

Lillian

*(Beat.)* This visit means so much to you.

Brendan

More than anything in the world.

Lillian

It can't be that important.

Brendan

You have no idea, Miss Gish.

Lillian

But why?

*(Brendan dancing around the room again. Finally comes to a stop at the other side of the room.)*

I'm sorry...I don't understand...

Brendan  
Don't you recognize me? (*Two beats.*)

Lillian  
I'm sorry.....

Brendan  
Don't you recognize me, Miss Lillian?

Lillian  
Recognize you....?

Brendan  
Don't you know me? [Beat.] I'm Bobby!  
*(nothing from Lillian)*

*(laughs)* Bobby! Bobby Harron!

*(Lillian still looking at Brendan. Starts to chuckle, in order to cover up her discomfort. Several beats pass.)*

Lillian  
Bobby... Bobby Harron. Well... I've heard a lot in my time....

Brendan  
You're not angry, Miss Gish? Are you?

Lillian  
You're Bobby Harron ...

Brendan  
Of course I am!

Lillian  
*(stumbling around to keep her equilibrium)* Angry?.... no...why... it's very charming.... I... you think....

Brendan  
I'd hate for you to be angry. First the car, and now ---

Lillian  
The car....well ... childish prank ... No... dear boy... ... it's fine.... I'm not angry.. *(she sits on the couch, trying to find her sangfroid)*

Brendan

Oh, thank goodness...

*(Lillian suddenly passes out and rolls off the couch.)*

Brendan

Oh, Miss Gish! Miss Gish! Oh, my God! *(He kneels on the floor beside her and cradles her in his arms.)* Miss Gish!

*(He picks up his hand to slap her lightly, in order to make her come to, but checks himself, panting and moaning. He puts her down and crosses to the door to call for help.)*

Lillian

*(without moving, in a faint voice)* No! Don't call for help. There'll be a ruckus, and they'll throw you out. Here, just help me up. I'm all right.

*(Brendan runs back to her and helps her up.)*

Brendan

I'm so sorry, Miss Gish.

Lillian

*(regaining some strength)* It's not your fault.

Brendan

I'd never do anything to hurt you....

*(She shakes her head as if to say, "I know that," pats his hand to calm him down. He sits next to her on the couch.)*

Brendan

Can I get you some water?

Lillian

That would be nice.

*(She points to the pitcher and glass on the makeup table. Brendan hurries to the table and pours a glass of water, hurries back to Lillian and hands it to her. She takes a drink and hands it back to him.)*

That's better. *(She looks at him directly).* Don't worry, I'm fine. If I can survive up to now, I can survive this.

*(she picks herself up and sits upright, looks at Brendan:)*

Acting lesson number one: "Never show weakness." Lesson number two: "If you do, don't get caught."



*(Brendan fixated on her. She points to the glass in his hand.)*

More please.

*(Brendan brings the glass back to Lillian.)*

Now where did all this come from? This "Bobby" business?

*(Brendan lights up again.)*

Brendan *(pouring it out like a confession)*

I've known since I was ten years old. I saw "Birth of a Nation" and I knew. I felt his body inside mine.

Lillian

Oh dear, oh dear...

Brendan

And the more I watched, the more I was sure. Six years have passed, and I know it's true.

Lillian

Brendan, you're a lovely boy – and a little devil – but these things don't happen in life --

Brendan

--And our phone number? It's the same.

Lillian

The same as what?

Brendan

Nine o five, one nine two o. September fifth, nineteen twenty. The date of Bobby's death.

*(Beat.)*

Lillian

*(trying to distance herself from the mystery)* Oh my oh my. Coincidence....

Brendan

The name of Bobby's last film. *(Pause.)* You see, I know it's true.

Lillian

Oh dear, oh dear...

*(Lillian turns back to Brendan. A knock at the door.)*

Tom Burkhardt's voice

Miss Gish? They're almost ready for you.

(Pause. Lillian rapt in thought.)

Burkhardt's voice  
Miss Gish? Are you all right? (Pause.) Miss Gish -- ?

*(Tom opens the door.)*

Lillian  
*(Suddenly regaining her sangfroid, interrupts Burkhardt. Loud:)*

Yes, Tom, of course I'm all right. Tell them to set another place on the dais. (turns to Brendan, still aloud) Next to me.

*(Brendan beams. He can hardly believe it.)*

Tom's  
Yes, Miss Gish. Do you need any help?

Lillian *(looking at Brendan)*

No, Brendan will help me. I'm fine, Tom. Tell them I'm ready. *(exit Tom.) (to Brendan) Just a moment. (she crosses to the mirror. Opens purse lying on the makeup table and powders herself.) No one will ever know. (she crosses back to Brendan) Now what am I going to do with you?*

Brendan  
I don't know, Miss Gish.

Lillian  
I've never met anyone like you.

Brendan  
Oh yes you have, Miss Gish.

*(Lillian crosses to him, looks at him deeply, then away. Half to herself:)*

Lillian  
It's the strangest thing.... *(several beats. Turns to Brendan)* Are you ready?

*(Brendan so excited again he cannot speak. She gives him her arm)*

Brendan  
*(struggling to get the words out)* This is the greatest day of my life.

Lillian  
*(trying to expurgate the weirdness of the meeting)* That's very sweet of you.  
(Beat.) But...what happened here today...that's our little secret....

Brendan

"...our little secret...."

*(he takes her arm and they exit. The sound of applause. VO: "And now, Findlay College is proud to welcome the legendary Lillian Gish, and The History of Silent Film." More applause. Blackout.)*

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