



The Other Plath

by Florence King

When the expatriate American poet Sylvia Plath gassed herself in her London flat in February 1963, Betty Friedan was anticipating the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* later that year. The confluence of these two events was the first trickle in that river of no return known as the Women's Movement, for Plath, trying to write while saddled with two toddlers and estranged from her philandering husband, died in the name of Having It All.

She has since become feminism's foremost martyr. Feminist pilgrims to her Yorkshire grave have hacked her married name off four tombstones, and Robin Morgan, editor of *Ms.*, has devised a sacrificial rite for Plath's husband, Ted Hughes, now Poet Laureate of England. She wants to dismember him, stuff "that weapon" in his mouth, sew up his lips, and then "we women [will] blow out his brains." Bliss it is to be buried here and there in Westminster Abbey. Two excellent new biographies bring dispassionate yet sympathetic masculine points of view to this long-running passion play,¹ but nothing can disguise the fact that Sylvia Plath was the Brat of Endor.

The compulsive erudition that destroyed her nerves seems to have run in the family. Her German-immigrant father was a forbidding Herr Doktor figure, an entomologist

¹*The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, by Ronald Hayman. Birch Lane Press, 235 pp., \$19.95. *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath*, by Paul Alexander. Viking, 402 pp., \$24.95.

Florence King's new book *With Charity Toward None: A Fond Look at Misanthropy* (St. Martin's Press), will be published in February.

and an authority on bees, as well as a linguist who taught modern languages at Boston University, where he met Sylvia's mother, a first-generation German-American who so worshipped the written word that she claimed Baby Sylvia tried to talk at eight weeks.

As a child Sylvia read, wrote, drew, painted, danced, played the piano, and kept a maniacally thorough diary, using the entries as goads to remind herself to read more books, take more courses, get more A's, win more prizes and medals, write more stories and poems. The more she excelled, the more she expected of herself; the more she expected of herself, the more she had to excel.

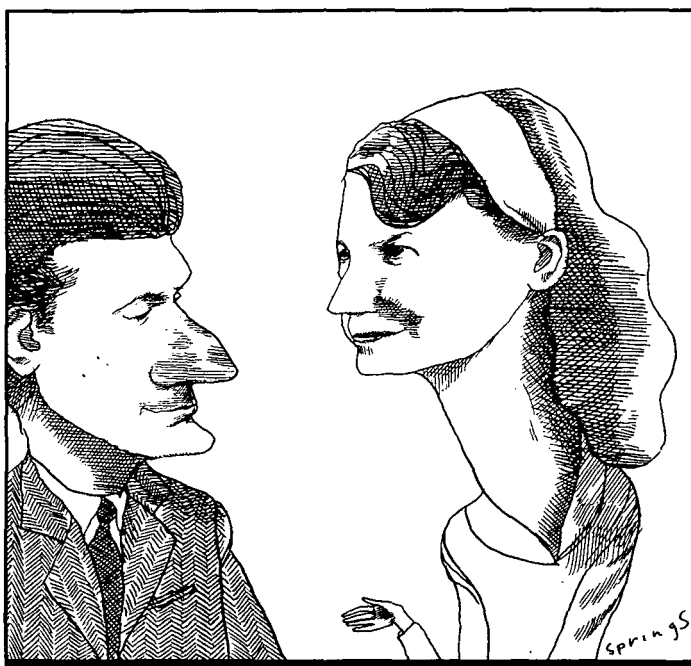
When her father died when she was eight, she demanded her mother sign a paper promising never to remarry. Mother signed, thereafter devoting herself to her precocious daughter's education with such uncomplaining self-sacrifice that Sylvia was driven to rack up an endless array of intellectual triumphs to justify her mother's

struggles and hold guilt at bay. In high school she sold a story to *Seventeen* and poems to the *Christian Science Monitor*, but she lived in dread of her free-lance writer's rejection slips, the eternal student in her seeing each one as a failing grade.

Her mother had moved to Wellesley so Sylvia could attend the prestigious girls' college on a town scholarship and live at home, but Sylvia insisted on the even more prestigious Smith. Her tuition was covered by two scholarships, one endowed by novelist Olive Higgins Prouty, author of *Now, Voyager* and *Stella Dallas*, who was to treat Plath like a mother. Meanwhile, her real mother took a second job to pay her board bill.

At Smith she sold poems to *Harper's*, won the *Mademoiselle* fiction prize, and in June 1953 received the coveted *Mademoiselle* guest editorship that triggered her first nervous breakdown. Many Plath partisans prefer to believe that her sensitive nerves were shattered by the execution of the Rosenbergs at Sing-Sing while she was in New York, but the real cause of her collapse was less flattering. A lifelong teacher's pet, she was thrust suddenly into the non-academic working world, a minion at the beck and call of tough-minded New York publishing pros concerned with getting out a magazine. Instead of being praised and pampered, she was criticized and made to rewrite one of her pieces four times. She responded like a true intellectual, making supercilious remarks about the "drudgery" and "detail" of offices and crying when asked to work overtime.

To get even, she threw all her clothes out the window of her hotel. Returning home in a borrowed dress, she learned that



she had been turned down for a short-story seminar at Harvard Summer School. Devastated by this fresh diminishment and terrified that she had "lost her creativity," she plunged into a heavy reading program to re-establish her scholarly bona fides. When she found she could not finish James Joyce's *Ulysses*, she panicked. Fearing that she was losing her mind, she devoured the works of Freud and Jung and diagnosed herself as a schizophrenic with an inferiority complex, an Electra complex, and penis envy.

When she sliced at her legs with a razor blade "to see if I had the nerve," her mother took her to a public hospital where she was given electroshock treatments. Shortly thereafter she disappeared. After a three-day manhunt involving Boy Scouts, bloodhounds, American Legionnaires, and confusing headlines—SMITH GIRL MISSING FROM WELLESLEY—she was found in her own home, in the basement crawl space where she had hidden after taking forty sleeping pills that nearly killed her.

Olive Higgins Prouty paid the medical bills and found Sylvia a sympathetic female psychiatrist—just what she didn't need. With a new teacher figure to impress, she was thrust back into her frenzied mode. Now she became a shrink's pet, intent on having the best anxieties, the neatest dreams, the sharpest memories; striving for straight A's in penis envy, gold stars in schizophrenia, and the Electra Complex honor roll. The handwriting was on the wall and it said Phi Beta Kaput.

If Plath's story is ever turned into a country music song, it should be called "Mothers, Don't Let Your Daughters Grow Up to Win Fulbrights." After graduating from Smith she went to Cambridge and met Ted Hughes, an unwashed English intellectual in the fullness of his gummy socks, "a big, dark, hunky boy, the only one huge enough for me," the rangy Plath confided to her diary. She loved the "virile, deep, banging poems" he wrote (one was called "Fallgrief's Girlfriends"); he was "a breaker of things and people" with "a voice like the thunder of God." That very night they "made love like giants" even though Hughes lived in a renovated chicken coop, and Plath wrote a sickie poem about being stalked by a panther.

She boasted in a letter to Mrs. Prouty about Hughes's thrilling way of "bashing people around," but her patroness was unimpressed. "He sounds too much like Dylan Thomas for me to think he would make a satisfactory husband and father," Prouty warned, but Plath paid no heed. Hughes, a Yorkshireman, probably remind-

ed her of Heathcliff; reading *Wuthering Heights* has destroyed more women than the cholera.

Once married, she turned her perfectionism on the housewifely arts, struggling to keep their sooty flat clean while the gamey Hughes, who did not bathe for three weeks during their honeymoon, dropped dandruff and nose-pickings along with poetic pearls. When his first book was published the following year, Plath wrote her mother: "I am more happy than if it was my book published! I am so happy *his* book is accepted *first*." She also said she wanted him to be acknowledged as the better poet. That's what distaff egomaniacs sound like when they're trying to be feminine. For all her insecurities, Plath was the kind of American woman who gets a lock on femininity by saying, in effect: "Listen, buster, I'm giving you five minutes to dominate me, and if I'm not dominated by then you're going to be in big trouble."

As further evidence of her femininity, she intended to have "a batch of brilliant healthy children." Seven, to be exact, since Ted, who dabbled in witchcraft, believed that the seventh child was significant. She had never given any evidence of even liking children, but she insisted that childbirth

was "closer to the bone" than sex or marriage, and that being "mountainous-pregnant" was her favorite state. The feminist agenda can but benefit when an erudite woman says things like this. Plath's ultimate conundrum makes a perfect argument for day care, but her real reason for loving pregnancy has been overlooked by her feminist devotees as well as her two new male biographers: *the academic year runs nine months*.

She had a daughter and a son in quick succession, both home births aided by Ted, who hypnotized her to ease the pain. He also hypnotized her to cure her insomnia and relax her "razor-shaved" nerves, but her anxiety attacks and rages mounted. "A kind of macabre marathon for all concerned" was the way a hostess described a weekend with her. She burned the contents of Ted's desk in a backyard bonfire, reciting an incantation as she danced around the flames, then wrote a poem called "Burning the Letters." When his mistress called, she ripped the phone out of the wall and wrote "The Black Telephone's Off at the Root." Meanwhile, she was writing her novel, *The Bell Jar*, about her collegiate nervous breakdown. Instead of writing about what she did, she did what she wanted to write

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about. Truly creative people don't operate this way, and perhaps, deep down, she knew it.

Ronald Hayman and Paul Alexander tell substantially the same story and both tell it well, though Hayman's attempt to fold summaries of the poems into his ongoing narrative (Ted Hughes holds all the copyrights and refuses permission to quote) occasionally leads him into florid waters, e.g.:

The suggestion of superhuman size—residue from the dream and the earlier poem—emerges in the idea that his toe, as big as a seal, is in San Francisco while his head is in the Atlantic, and, with a fond affectation of contempt, she compares him with the devil by saying he has a cleft in his chin instead of his foot.

Alexander's book is more evocative of time and place and more dramatically effective. His most macabre story concerns Sylvia's final gas bill, which must have been rather large. Ted's mistress forwarded it to a third party, writing on it: "She was your friend. You pay it."

He probes deeper into Ted's occultism, and proffers an ominous theory held by several of Plath's friends:

After years of being repeatedly hypnotized by Ted and acting on his posthypnotic suggestions, Sylvia was highly sensitive to any signal—conscious or unconscious—that she perceived him to be sending. Several times during the fall she had told her mother that Ted wanted her to kill herself; if she believed this, it might have propelled her on some new and purposeful path of action [that night].

Alexander also includes a highly significant 1950s cameo: the guest speaker at Plath's 1955 Smith graduation was Adlai Stevenson, who told the class that their highest goal should be a "creative marriage."

As contemporaries of Plath can attest, *creative* was the leading buzzword of the decade, used incessantly by everyone from manufacturers of Paint by the Numbers to employers advertising for female office clerks ("Seek creative miss to file architectural plans"). "Being creative" was a perfect excuse for majoring in English, an airy-fairy way of saying you liked to read, and an ideal rationale for free-floating discontent and unfocused rebellion.

Creative's twin was *intense*, a code

word for superiority used by intellectual snobs who wanted to recuse themselves from American egalitarianism without doing anything illiberal. The creative 'n' intense set tended to make a fetish of being high-strung, the theory being that nerves are to aristocrats what splinters are to carpenters. Their favorite reading was pop-Freudian paperbacks like *The Fifty-Minute*

Hour, and they never met a complex they didn't like.

When they gathered in their basement apartments to deplore Eisenhower conformity, there was an Oedipus on every rattan rug and an Electra in every butterfly chair. This aspect of the fifties, rather than the feminine mystique, may have produced the "unique" Sylvia Plath. □

BEN STEIN'S DIARY



The Sad Society

by Benjamin J. Stein

Thursday

If you have a lemon, make lemonade. I was lying on my bed, "wrestling" with my son, the world's handsomest boy, Tommy. "Wrestling" means that he waits until I'm not looking, then he jumps on my knees or my chest or my head as hard as he can and then screams with delight when I cry out in pain. According to his rules, I'm not allowed to fend him off or grab him when he lands on me.

Anyway, I was "wrestling" with Tommy when I picked up a copy of the *New York Times* and read an item that really laid me low. A big studio here and a big star here are making a black version of a famous movie from the late 1930s. The reason I went into shock was that I had written an outline of such a movie two years ago. I had sent it to the star in question via my agent. He had read it, supposedly, or someone who worked for him, and after much thought it had been turned down. Then I had written a piece in the *L.A. Times* suggesting this movie in late 1989. No one had bought it. Now, bang, a big studio is making it. With the guy I pitched it to who said no.

Plus, the scriptwriter-producer is a long-time friend, or so I thought when I talked to him about it a year ago. Damn it all. More grist for the lawyers' mill. Endless. I am so

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sick of getting taken I can't stand it. This whole town is nothing but a nest of gypsies and thieves.

Stoked with rage like Mount Pinatubo, I went off to Universal to read for a part in a new drama show. Now, this is where the lemon/lemonade comes in. The role I was reading for was not a comic role. It was a serious role of a vicious, angry trial lawyer suing a doctor. Before I read about the movie, I could not possibly have hoped to get the part. But after I read it, I was so angry that I paced the hallway outside the casting room seething with aggression like a righteously offended Perry Mason. I kept saying that famous line from *Blade Runner* to myself. "I want more life, f---er!" which is what robot Rutger Hauer says when he meets the scientist/industrialist who "created" him and then doomed him to an early death.

Next to me on a couch sat a skinny, beautiful, but worried woman who was also auditioning. She had every mark of the beast upon her: Silver jewelry. A ring on her thumb (which is like a neon sign flashing in hundred-foot letters—"I am a child—I am a spoiled child—I am a very spoiled child"). Hair in comically long braid. Floor-length cotton skirt. (Now sign flashes in a different color to "I am dangerously angry.")

The woman, whose name was, incredi-