

We Should Meet in Another Life, we Should Meet in Air, me and you

Anonymous

I first met Sylvia in High School. She was the female Nietzsche for intellectual tenth grade girls in black who knew Ayn Rand is bullshit. Somehow I stumbled on *The Bell Jar*. Not sure how it happened. I grew up in Massachusetts, 40 miles from McLean. My mother had me in therapy from the time I was four. By the time I was 15 she was threatening to send me to McLean, but I knew she was bullshitting because we were poor and McLean was for famous rich people. Every time she told me I was going there, I'd glare beneath thick purple bangs and a halo of kohl eyeliner and snarl: "Great! Do it! And find out if they charge extra for *leather* restraints!"

But really, I was scared. Sylvia was beside me, electrodes on her skull. I knew we couldn't afford McLean, and poor peoples' asylums were even more barbaric. As a 15-year old aspiring writer, there weren't many options for female role models. I could grow up to be Woolf or Plath: a pocket full of rocks or a mouthful of gas. Seal the room or surrender to the waves.

Waiting for a friend's mom to pick me up after play practice, snow and rock salt clumping in my combat boots, shivering in my un-insulated leather jacket, the boy I had a crush on came over and asked; "What're you reading?" I was reading *The Bell Jar*. The part where she gets sick after eating bad seafood. There was nothing wrong then, but I'd read it before and knew what came after. By then I also knew her reputation. Dead for three decades and she still had a reputation. It was like a dirty little secret: admitting that's what I was reading was equivalent to admitting I wanted to kill myself. But I didn't want to. I slammed the book shut & shoved it in my backpack. "Nothing."

I didn't say hello again until grad school. Beneath the safety, the umbrella of academia, I was able to deconstruct *The Colossus* and *Lady Lazarus*. I could appreciate her technically. Linguistically. Distantly. I read her journals and read her hope, her beauty, her turmoil and sadness. I'd lived much more by then, and my identification and affinity with her was uncanny at moments. My professor said my insights were inspiring.

While discussing *The Bell Jar* in class, a classmate said it was weird, messed up, sick, that she slept in the same bed as her mother. I wanted to tell her it wasn't; my parents slept in the next room with only a curtain separating us. We only had one bathroom, so we'd knock to announce ourselves before walking in. Our house only had two doors: to the basement and bathroom; but such was the layout of the Cape Cod cottage. I wanted to tell my classmate: "It's not weird if you grow up with it being normal."

But I didn't say anything. I dug my nails into my hands, then gnawed my thumbs until they bled. While everyone was talking about how crazy she was, I mentioned her ear for language ("Route Wan-Tweny-Ate!") her complexity, her eye and ear for description. I wanted to rescue her.

I write this fueled by feeble candlelight and strong vodka. Two days before this essay's deadline, I have no power because of Hurricane Isaac. I guess I work best under pressure. I wish I could say more about Sylvia, but the battery's dying . . . so the last thing I *will* say: yesterday before it went dark, I was looking through her unabridged journals and collected poems. Underlining and dog-earing passages. My husband asked what I was doing. I told him and read "Lesbos" and "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor" aloud as he sat beside me with a stunned face: "Woah . . . I had no idea . . . " he said.

And I think that gets to the heart of Sylvia: no matter how much I identify with her and try to understand her through her writing, I still have no idea who she really was; thinking so would be presumptuous. Sometimes I like to think about who she would've been if she'd held on. I see her as a hippie gypsy throwing tarot cards on Haight Street, sketching street performers in a Mondrian dress in Camden Market, but again, I have no idea. I've met several women about her age; creative, independent women who lived hard lives and came out beautiful and stronger for it. I like to think she'd be one of them. She could've lived on nothing with two small children. It would've been rough, but she could've had it all.