

## Living In the Mind of a Perfectionist: A Plath-ological Memoir

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I am not Sylvia Plath. But I fear maybe we have more in common than not. I am not a writer, but I force myself to do it anyway. And for this particular piece, I am really pulling it out.

I always have something to say--always. Most times, people cannot get me to shut up and many times when I am really putting it on, I can feel that I suck out my listener's energy. And when I am really passionate about something, no matter how fleeting, the world can barely handle me. But there is darkness in my life that lives right under the surface. It has always been there. It rears its Devil-horned head now and again, manifesting itself into many different psychoses.

This piece is not an "I am so much like Sylvia, I think I am her reincarnate piece." I loathe those stories. People seem to forget that Sylvia was just, like the rest of us, simply a human. What she did was to confront those demons some of us struggle with by giving them names. What this paper is about is my struggle with my emotional "Plathology." Funny, right? Pathology, Plathology....get it? Obviously you do.

1993

I was thirteen and starting high school. That summer, a bell jar had descended upon me like no other time. We were in Rockport, Massachusetts for a vacation, my mother brother and I, and something was wrong. I felt numb and empty. I couldn't focus. With the start of my freshman year of high school looming right around the corner, I was paralyzed with fear. I have a photo of myself, at the rocks near Rowe Point, my eyes look sad and my face white. And I thought I had looked pretty. The sick, sour air underneath the now famous bell jar had swallowed me up, before I had even had time to realize it.

Later that year, I was hospitalized for depression. After two days, I managed to convince myself, my parents, and the staff that this was no place for me. I was too intelligent, too put together, to be with these people. But looking back, I was supposed to be there.

September 22, 2007 10:15am

Except from a journal entry:

"My mind is racing and numb all at once. I feel very close to the edge of reason and sanity, like one push would be all that I needed to give up all hope and effort I put into each day. What is wrong with me? Usually I can think that I want something I can work for to keep me motivated and to give me a reason to get out of bed. All I want to do is sleep, but no matter how much I sleep, nothing changes. At work as a Customer Service Coordinator for a large packaging company, I almost panic when I think about making it until 5pm. Lunch hours and cigarette breaks scare me too. I have no idea what to do with myself and free time. I am so afraid of starting any new project, like cleaning the house—which it needs, paying bills, etc. I miss my husband and my dogs, but then when I am with them, it is still not good enough to take away the ache. I still have the sadness, even when I am with them. What will I do tonight? Mike will be looking for a tux for my brother's wedding. How can I make it until bed time? Should I drink champagne so that I can at least try to relax? I have to—finish laundry, clean the kitchen floor, pay the car bill, and Dr. Corcoran bills, mail Taryn's wedding response, clean upstairs, littler pan, vacuuming. Oh God. It's only 10:38am. What am I going to do? I want the world to fade away, leaving only me so that I can sleep for a very long time.

Should I join the gym and exercise my depression away? Ha! I would have to get up at least an hour or earlier to get there, plus pack my work clothes and shower toiletries the night before just to get there in the morning. Everyone is typing away on their keyboards. Busy. Should I check the fax machine? I feel so guilt for being tired because I can't give people what they need. I always feel so disorganized."

2009

Meet my friend. Johnny Panic.

Well, things hadn't gotten any better over the past two years. Actually they have gotten worse. My depression had broken into panic and anxiety that caused more depression. Apparently, I had always struggled with Johnny Panic as Sylvia had, but until she "introduced" me to him, I never knew what to call this entity that had taken control over my life.

I never really identified with Plath's short story Johnny Panic, but in her journals he was there, evident, as if I were typing the words myself on an old, Royal typewriter:

"Paralysis again. How I waste my days. I feel a terrific blocking and chilling go through me like anesthesia. I wonder, will I ever be rid of Johnny Panic?" (*Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 522).

Johnny sometimes is a nice person; at least he seems to be at first. He gives me a burst of energy and I find myself doing things I have needed or wanted to do for a while. But usually, he is an evil force. And below, is an event that I have never spoken about, but Johnny was there, he was a witness. "When Jonny Panic sits on my heart, I can't be witty, or original, or creative" (523).

Driving to a Christmas party at my brother's house one Saturday evening, Johnny landed on my heart and began his normal fluttering. He kept asking me questions:

"How are you going to get through another week at work, mentally paralyzed?"

"How are you going to handle your term paper for your Managerial Marketing class?"

"How are you going to lose all the weight you need to, you fat shit?"

"Can you do this? Can you live this way? Can you continue to live this life?"

"You're stupid; you're a fake, a sham. Everyone will see."

As much as I tried to shut him up, I couldn't. I answered him, every question-with possibilities and potential solutions--- "I'll take a week off work, and get my paper done."

Johnny just scoffed at every possible solution. "You have no vacation time you stupid baby. You can't take time off."

"Well then, I'll call in sick."

"But you're not sick, he retorted. They'll see right through you."

And then I thought of it. My plan. I was going to shut Johnny up once and for all.

Later on that evening, I had already decided I was going to do it. It was dark, and the roads were very icy. A pretty good setup for what I had planned. As I was driving down route 107 North in Deerfield on my way home from the family party, I did it. I sped up and cranked the wheel of the car in the direction of a telephone poll. And as I launched up a snow bank and into the poll, the satisfying crunch of the front end told me that I had done some serious damage—enough to take myself out of the game of life, at least for a week. I called 911. I wasn't hurt. I was numb. How can you wake up from not feeling? I wanted to feel again. Anything but the panic that had descended upon me would have been a better alternative.

I got my week off from "life" as I "convalesced" at home with a nice assortment of pain medications and lots of sleep. People sent me flowers, orchids I remember especially. They thrived under my black thumb. They lasted for months. But pretty soon, it was back to reality and the reality was that I needed help. Desperately. An appointment at Massachusetts General Hospital apparently was what was needed, according to my mother, who was no stranger to Johnny either. The doctor promptly put me on the highest dose of Fluoxetine and sent me on my way. Within six months, I was "normal" again.

But why? Why are the mind paralysis and the bell jar and Johnny Panic in my life? And why was it in Sylvia's? My personal conclusion is that it is caused by a pathological type of perfectionism. Being a perfectionist is usually looked at as a badge of valor or sign of someone who is pristine and....perfect. But there are different types of perfectionists and many different extremes. The pathological ones, usually with a little help from Johnny, unravel.

I learned at an early age, that the only way to get the attention of my parents, peers, and teachers was to achieve. To compete. To excel. I did this through my studies, music, art. Anything I touched had to be done well and I wanted high praise for it all.

But there are two problems to perfectionism that can ruin a person, as it has almost ruined me:

1. No matter how much you achieve and no matter how much attention and praise you receive for aforementioned achievements—it is never, ever enough.

"As if the old god of love I hunted by winning prizes in childhood had grown more mammoth and unsatiable still. Must stop this" (518).

2. Starting anything, anything at all is paralyzing because underneath it all, you know it has to be done perfectly. Since the rational part of our brain tells us that this perfect realm is not achievable, we can't start at all. Instead we sit; hands eyes and mouths bound shut, unable to begin. In my mind, I have already failed before I had even tried.

2010

I turned thirty. I became pregnant and had my daughter, Isabella. And yet I was still unfulfilled. Johnny Panic had come back during my gestational period in the form of actual panic attacks. Being off antidepressant and anti-anxiety medications due to pregnancy further facilitated his reign over me.

Mornings I would wake up in sheer panic, dizzy from fear. Sick to my stomach and crying—I didn't know how I would make it through another day. I figured when my daughter was born, things would go back to normal--but they didn't.

My newborn daughter had colic, and I had postpartum depression. The two of us were quite a pair. It seemed as though she had met Johnny too. The inconsolable screaming at night paralyzed me with a primal almost animal type of fear. I was afraid of everything because I wanted perfection and once again it eluded me. I wanted to be a perfect mother, but how could I be perfect when my daughter clearly disagreed. In my warped mind, I was the cause of all her pain and anguish. I had sunk to a new low where I had not been before and it was killing me.

2011-2012

Healing has now begun. I had returned to work from a long maternity leave desperate for the comfort and warmth of my co-workers. The job which once scared me terribly was now a haven

from a screaming child. I began to let go and see myself for what I was: a woman, a mother, a daughter, a wife, a friend. With help from my doctors and a great therapist, I began to see the other side of life where things didn't have to be so perfect all the time. I began to forgive myself for my faults.

I see so many similarities in what Plath went through and my own experiences as a high achiever, a woman and a mother. During all the hardest, darkest times, she gave me comfort. Reading her journals, her poems and stories remind me that I am not the first to suffer through paralyzing fear. It was her words that gave me a voice and the ability to validate my feelings:

"What horrifies me most is the idea of being useless: well-educated, brilliantly promising, and fading out into an indifferent middle-age. Instead of working at writing, I freeze in dreams, unable to take disillusion of rejections" (524).

Today, I am doing well. My daughter has grown out of the colic and into a precocious little toddler who insists on wearing her fake pearls and my shoes around the house. I see myself in her, the me who was whole before Johnny Panic and his paralysis came into my life. The confident, intense, beautiful little girl I once was and still am, I can see in my daughter—she is the one thing I did...perfectly.

## Works Cited

Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor Books, 2000. Print.