Sylvia Plath Ate My Brain

‘Oh Christ, I wish he just wouldn’t come back.’

My mother and I were sitting on the balcony of our flat and we heard the front door open and close quietly. My father had left on some errand. He did this, mostly returning with nothing to show for his absence, often having been gone for hours.

I was nearly sixteen when I lost my mother and thus I was of an age when such things are not easily digested. When you are so young, all trespasses are forgiven. You are innocent of the ways of grown men and women and as such your responses are necessarily filled with strong and unwieldy emotions.

Several times during my childhood she said inappropriate things to me. Several years before she left us, my mother made this remark—*You’re so beautiful, so very, very beautiful.* She said it with a sincere and frightening bitterness. I thought that only girls could be described thus and so this young mind, barely recognised today, was doubly provoked. Later, when I had my own, I realised all children must be seen as such, and loved because of it to survive.

It feels better, at this stage in my life, to refer to my parents by their first names. Now that they are both gone, Sheila and Don deserve to have these names back.

Anyway, my eleven year old self sat there on the balcony divan beside Sheila that day and her words froze me to the spot.

I loved Don. He was extremely quiet and as far as I knew never did a harmful thing to anybody. He certainly never laid a hand on me in anger, his touch rare but also comforting, often merely a hand to the back of my head or shoulder. One of my earliest memories was when, following an asthma attack, he carried me home from the

hospital—on the bus and all the way along the street to our apartment block. I remember his hand gently cradling my seven year old head on his shoulder, like a new-born.

Sheila was affectionate, but too much, as if to compensate for some lack in herself, rather than a genuine attempt at comfort. Her endearments consisted of a certain variety of selfishness.

'Come here,' she said on that Saturday afternoon. I moved close to her on the divan and she enfolded me in her arms. I hoped she wouldn't say anything else about Don.

'We should dance,' she said, getting up and holding out her hands, smiling widely.

'No mum, I don't want to.'

'Oh come on you poop, I'll put the radio on. We can close our eyes and pretend we are in the ballroom of the royal palace. You can be my dashing prince.'

'Mum…no.'

She looked at me, putting her hands on her hips. I always remember her being vivacious but also nervy and quixotic. Her mood darkened, she stared down at me with great intensity.

'Don't be like him, Eric.'

'I'm me,' I said. 'I don't want you to say that about Dad.'

'Who else am I going to tell—there is no-one else? You think I should tell the judge? She worked as a court stenographer. I would ask her sometimes about the cases she recorded but she said she had no recollection of any of them, and even if she did she was not permitted by law to discuss them.

'I don't know. I don't want you to say things like this…I…'

‘What? You want everything to be rosy, just utterly lovely all the time. Sweetness and light, that’s what you want, isn’t it?

‘No. I don’t know.’ I think I might have been close to tears out of frustration at not being able to articulate my sense of Don’s betrayal. She looked at me the way she always did when I was adding to her frustration, her head cocked to one side, her lips pressed together, her brow forming a thin frown and her beautiful dark eyes boring a hole in me. My mother was naturally very pretty. It wasn’t easy to dislike her. I suspect she retrospectively hated her capacity for cruelty but had an uncontrollable compulsion to be so.

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‘Breathe Eric, deep breaths.’

I felt the rubbing of her hand on my back. I was nine and had woken from a nightmare calling out and hyperventilating at the same time. I had my second severe attack of childhood asthma that night. The condition had been with me intermittently from age five. From my nineteenth year on, I was never bothered by it again, but that night I ended up in hospital, both my parents staring down at me, as a nurse fitted me with a breathing mask.

‘Go, I will see to this,’ Sheila said to my father, who always looked at a loss no matter what the circumstances.

‘But, perhaps I should…’

‘No, at least one of us has to go to work,’ she said. Don gently pushed the sweaty streaks of hair off my brow, staring at me for several minutes.

'Be strong…I love you boy,' Don said. I had the sense he was not only referring to my illness. He left me with my mother, against my breathless, unarticulated will.

Sheila's eyes followed him out of the ward. 'You will have to save yourself Eric. I can't, and nor can he.'

She stayed the night—they brought a cot in for her to sleep beside me. My hospital bed was higher and I remember reaching down with my hand. Eventually she took it, holding it until I fell into a fitful sleep.

Even now, ambivalence is the enduring characteristic of my relationship with Sheila. I see the act of her leaving us as one of pure selfishness, an act from which it was impossible to ever extract forgiveness.

It's not comforting to think of Sheila. I want to believe, given time, her brittle and tenuous place in the world might have transformed into a consistent ease with us. I remembered coming home from the hospital the next day, my less alarming breaths wheezing in and out. Neither Sheila nor I had slept much during the night. We just lolled exhausted and dozing on the sofa. Nevertheless, the mild and familiar tension circulated in the air between us, even though Don was safely at work.

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One day after school, Sheila appeared in my room, telling me she was leaving me and Don. She sat on my bed and took my hands in hers.

'Eric, people don't change much really, but unfortunately times do. Your father and I…I need to get away, get some distance.'

I didn't realise then, she had been in the process of leaving for some time. I think I sensed that something was going on. Subliminally aware of an unravelling, I

tuned into the sharp murmurs, punctuated by the bang of a plate or the fall of a bottle. There were the remorseful looks, whenever I entered a space where the sour gloom of disharmony lingered. To my young mind, Sheila and Don's unhappiness clung to everything, seeming to carry a certain smell after a while. They attempted to fend off my questions and I recoiled from my own interpretation regarding the state of things. I survived this period with a desperate hope their pain would recede and appeasement would eventually intervene.

When the day came for her to go, she stood at our apartment door gripping a suitcase and an armful of clothes on hangers. Don and I stood as witnesses to a form of disarray I had never before seen. Her physical beauty, always a source of pride, seemed to have evaporated. Before us was an unhappy middle-aged woman with uncombed hair, her skin blotchy and dressed in rumpled clothing. She dropped her luggage at the door and hugged me. I was tall and remember bending. Despite my disappointment in her, I couldn't help but fold into her tight embrace.

She kissed me wetly on the cheek and took a long look at both me and her husband. We stood there like two incompetent workmen—the foreman, having shown us what we had to do and, uncertain as to our abilities, was now leaving us to get on with it.

'Sheila please don't—,' Don said, his final appeal all but devoid of hope. Of course, we didn't know it would be the last time I'd lay eyes on her.

I realised later that leaving me to the custody of my father was a calculated move. I was to be the guard at the little window of his loneliness, a clever device. I was determined not to cry. Sheila had a certain way of looking at me and she employed it while saying good-bye that final time. It was a searching expression, trying, as was I, to figure out what sort of man I was to be. Once she said it was

disappointing I rarely smiled, even as a baby. This seemed to concern her to an unnecessary degree in my opinion, as if it was a failing on her part that she hadn't made me happy.

The thing is, I wasn't unhappy—I simply didn't smile much. Still don't. My wife—one of the few who was not disconcerted by it—accepts the thin smudge on my lips as a smile. She never says, as my first wife did more than once: *Eric, I never know what you're thinking with that expression*, as if it was imperative that the contents of my mind should be on display at all times. We humans so irritate each other, it's puzzling why we choose to cohabit at all. I have often wondered if there were people who had entirely self-contained and indivisible lives and if it was possible to become such a person.

On the day I watched Sheila disappear into the lift, I followed Don back inside our flat. He entered the kitchen and pulled a bottle of wine from the cupboard. Before he opened it, he bowed his head and I watched his trembling shoulders. It seemed necessary to delay the privations of my own misery. Don was a gentle but largely ineffectual man and much later it occurred to me he may have failed to live up to some early promise on which Sheila had predicated her decision to marry him.

He was oblivious to my misery, so consumed was he by his own. Watching Don that day, it was made abundantly clear to me that my life had been almost entirely unencumbered by experience—a failing I very much wished to rectify. When he had poured his second glass of wine, I felt able to escape. Lying down on my bed I wept for so long and so comprehensively, my pillow was soaked through. Not yet sixteen, it was still barely okay for me to cry.

The following morning, Don knocked and then entered my room, which incidentally, never made any sense to me—why would you knock and then enter

without an invitation to do so? He sat on the edge of my bed. I was turned to the wall and he placed a hand on my shoulder. There was no talk. What could be said? After a while he left, leaving the door ajar.

We had lunch together. It was assumed that I wasn't going to school that day, or the next, and then it was the weekend. The obligatory phone call was somehow ridiculous, so we hadn't bothered. In any case the school had not bothered either, perhaps grateful for even the briefest absence of one of its least predictable constituents.

My friend Tom came over and I told him what happened. 'Your Dad reckons you should go for a ride, get some air,' he said. Air—my father's solution; I suppose it was what he did when he went out on his mysterious errands. I stared out the window and filled Tom in on what I knew of the disaster that had become my parents' relationship. He listened attentively, looking to one side, knowing eye contact, or even a friendly hug of commiseration was not appropriate. It's not what you did. You just shut up, you listened and then you got on with it. These days, of course, there are far too many hugs.

'Bugger of a thing,' Tom said, more than once—the quiet, respectful repetition, his only contribution.

Eventually we went for a ride on our bikes down to the bus terminal. The place was deserted on Sunday afternoon; we circled for half an hour around the terminal and then sat idly for a while on the tarmac, our rusty old bikes lying forlornly beside us. It was summer and even the flies were listless.

'Bugger this,' I said, 'let's go to the milk bar, that new pinnie's waiting for us and I'm going to beat you this time.'

'Ha! Not bloody likely Eric.' Tom and I scrabbled for our bikes and hit the road like there was no tomorrow.

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Coroners believe that suicide is a death without suspicion. I think it's entirely suspicious—suspicious is virtually all it is. Albert Camus wrote—*There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide.* He was clearly suspicious. It is an ineffable conundrum filled with questions and the only people who can truly provide proof of its validity are dead and wilfully so.

Sheila had driven into a tree somewhere between Victoria and South Australia. She'd chosen to travel to her home state via the back roads, traversing long stretches of highway through endless wheat fields. The coroner's report indicated that without evidence to the contrary we must accept it was sheer bad luck she had collided with the only tree for miles in any direction.

Several months later, Don lost his job. He said the event had transpired under somewhat of a cloud. I was more than a little worried about what would become of us, pestering him to reveal what had happened at work and determine how best we might salvage the situation. Sheila's leaving and then her sudden death had placed such a deep wound in Don that our roles were in a process of reversal. He eventually clarified the circumstances of his sacking when one night I came across him sitting in the living room. He was giving a bottle of hard liquor a serious nudge and looked pale, physically sick. With the soporific air of the perpetually defeated, he told me what had happened.

He worked in the office of an engineering firm and his job was to requisition the manufacture of steel tubing to be later turned into muffler pipes for the car industry. The company was expensively tooled up to press steel and bend pipes to very specific patterns, as the chassis design of every car model was pretty much unique. For instance, the factory might receive an order to bend five hundred muffler connector pipes, complete with resonators and tail-pipes to fit the chassis of a current sedan. Over a period of several months Don, in the depths of his grief, requisitioned pipes for a multitude of non-existent vehicles. The result was an unintended cost to the company in excess of thirty thousand dollars, a lot of money in those days.

His boss called him into his office, directing his attention to the requisition slips and then the car manufacturer's orders. He was then presented with a graph to indicate his excessive handiwork, the disparity marked in red—a colour to be met with unmitigated terror in his line of work. It seemed, once the initial mistake was made, it grew exponentially into a perfect storm.

Before the boss had become aware of the situation, the workshop foreman, with whom Don had a friendly acquaintance, became alarmed at the ever filling racks of pipe and put in his own requisition. He needed more racks to be installed to cope with the fabulous turnover. Don told me, just prior to the company realising the extent of the disaster, he and the foreman had sat in the local pub one Friday afternoon talking shop. I pictured Don crouched over his beer with his characteristic melancholy detachment. His companion enthusiastically spoke of his plan to request a pay-rise on the strength of the boost in profits the company was now enjoying.

Despite his gloomy outlook on life, Don did have a cheeky sense of humour sometimes. The foreman had sustained, some years before, an injury to his leg which

left him with a slight limp. Don always referred to the man as *The Limpenproletariat*. I never fully understood this until much later, when I myself had browsed through Marx.

To our surprise the catastrophe didn't rule out a letter of reference from his former employer. Perhaps they felt the many years of unblemished service prior, warranted the letter or they had been made aware of our recent bereavement. Don showed the reference to me—its five little lines, such a study of testimonial restraint that between the greeting and the sign-off, it could have passed for a rather clever haiku. Nevertheless, I believe he carried with him a deep embarrassment and sense of responsibility regarding the loss of his job.

For my part, from the beginning of Don's story to its ignoble end, I had a barely contained a desire to laugh. It seemed to me a comedy of errors. I controlled myself for fear of making him feel worse than he already did. I suppose I must have assumed he would fail to see the joke. I wondered at the time, what would become of me if, for whatever reason, he was also to do himself in. I tried not to think too closely about the possibility that my own presence could be the only barrier to its fulfilment. In retrospect, I think Don had much more resilience than it appeared. Perhaps he may have been able to find it in himself to see the funny side of the incident and if I'd alerted him to it, there might have been a point of departure from his misery—probably not, but it's a comfort to think so.

During this difficult time I discovered what a mortgage was and how critical such a thing was to maintaining a roof over our heads. At one point, a nice woman came to inspect us, with a view to our eligibility for financial assistance. We did our best to look like responsible people, having temporarily fallen on hard times.

I was reading a lot of poetry for school and considered mentioning that an obscure, recently discovered germ known as the Plath virus had entered our sorry

lives. This virus made it imperative that Don stay at home for the continuous observance of my tenuous grasp on sanity. I imagined myself explaining carefully how the virus was eating my brain, resulting in end of life ideation, a term I'd recently picked up. It was just as well my youthful silliness didn't get an airing, as what little credibility we had might have been squandered. In any case, just as we were starting discussions about foreclosure with our terribly helpful bank, Don got another job.

On reflection, my parents seemed to me unreliable ushers for my entry into the vagaries of my subsequent life. Don's near somnolent progress through his own life disabled his one parental duty— to show his son who to be. Nevertheless I loved him and felt a need to protect him in some way, although, at that age, I could have hardly had the wherewithal to do so.

It occurs to me now that my feelings for Sheila were somewhat more complex to be simply characterised by the word *love.* It certainly was the case that my relationship with her can be more readily filtered through the long arc of her absence, than her troubled sojourn among the living. She was a ghost floating somewhere above and beyond my adulthood, an elongated pause in the deep folds of my memory, so much so that I took her words about human constancy—*people don't change much really, but unfortunately times do*—as a model of all substance, of all things.

The notion that I could at some point dig out of this trench of sadness devolved into an emblem of a forgotten land—an artefact discovered and categorized as a curiosity and then placed carefully in a drawer for later inspection, and perhaps repair. I don't think I was ever entirely mended. I know for certain Don wasn't. But then, all of this is rather melodramatic—waxing lyrical of a troubled childhood—when, in the world at large, such a thing is commonplace to the brink of tedium.

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I suppose I did have a fixed point of sorts in the shape of my English teacher, Ms Hawthorne. I had fallen in love with her in a way that only a certain kind of boy can. She was so bright and shiny, with her summer dresses and John Lennon spectacles, her long, tanned legs and her marvellous intellect. I suspect now, she saw not a callow boy in mourning, drawn to her as a moth to flame, but a mind into which she could pour the riches of literature—to cultivate an imagination. And of course, I was a more than willing participant in her venture.

'You make some interesting points, Eric. I wonder though, whether you might have misunderstood Hughes—what he was trying to say, I mean.'

She was standing at her desk with my essay in her hand. I noticed some serious red biro activity. Her spectacles were perched precariously on the tip of her nose and her lovely eyes peered at me over the top of them. I always felt a compulsion to gently remove them and then kiss her passionately like a movie star—Paul Newman in *Cool Hand Luke* was the archetypical non-conformist and a big hit at the time.

I thought I'd had the measure of Hughes and was quite proud of my efforts, feeling sure Ms Hawthorne would concur. It was an unexpected disappointment to find her now criticising my labours.

'I don't understand. I spent a lot of time reading and re-reading the poems, looking for the themes. I mean, I looked at the syntax and logic as well, as you told us. I followed the syllabus notes,' I said, a mildly frustrated tone in evidence.

'Remember, I also said the syllabus is a guide. Use both intuition and imagination—in much the same way as a poet might.' Her eyes blinked and she offered me an encouraging smile, with me imagining it into one of adoring devotion.

‘The examiners will be looking for that, you know. They want to see you exercise your imagination. Put yourself in Hughes’ place—try to feel what he is feeling. Did you read any criticism of Hughes, biographical notes perhaps?’

‘No.’

‘So, you know nothing of his life, and should I venture, his loves—one in particular?

‘No.’

‘Mmmm. You know Eric, an astute reader is searching for something indefinable. You could liken it to an allusive stream running beneath the surface, beyond the words on the page. I suppose you could say that about quite a lot of art. Anyway, I think this is a crucial point, don’t you?’

‘I guess.’ At the same time as I was inwardly resisting her criticism, I was mesmerized by her quiet and considered voice, the cadence of which, in my view, was nothing less than the condensation of poetry itself. It’s remarkable what a boy is capable of dreaming up. I was thoroughly and ludicrously smitten. Now I realise she made a fair bit of sense.

‘*Birthday Letters* are love poems. Just because he uses the terminology of battle on occasion doesn’t mean they are about war, as you have mentioned on more than one occasion. Yes, he was a soldier in World War Two, but these poems are about lost love—unrequited love, really. I suspect, even though they are mostly about his wife Sylvia Plath, who had committed suicide.’

Perhaps I misunderstood some of what she was saying. All I could do was watch the curve of her mouth and listen to the refined notes in her voice as she spoke.

‘This book has been described by some people as Hughes presenting a false moral justification of his role in his wife’s death. I don’t agree. There are many kinds

of love—much of which is not necessarily prescribed. Perhaps that is why we have poetry. I think Hughes is trying belatedly to say the things through verse, what he was unable to fix in his mind at the time of Plath's death.'

'Right, so he loved her but still wanted to get away from her,' I said.

'Yes, he found his wife impossible to live with, and he left her—I suspect for his own sanity, she said.' Unimaginable in a union of Ms Hawthorne and myself, I silently augured. 'He abandoned Plath and their children. He then took up with another woman—sounds positively horrible, doesn't it?'

'Yes…yes, it does.' I felt my stomach catapulting.

'Eric, are you alright?'

'Aha,' I said. I wished there was a bed I could lie down on and hear the rest—to be utterly present so as not to miss one word. I tried to control my breathing, knowing from experience, that it helped.

'Good people do things that are morally reprehensible all the time, so it could be argued that Hughes, in writing these poems, was asking forgiveness. He died a few months after the book's publication.'

She paused, looking at me, her slight smile playing at her lips.

'Do you think if my mother had read these poems, she could have worked out a way to keep living?' I regretted it the minute I said it. What a fucking goose!

'Oh, Eric…oh dear, I'm so sorry…I…'

She leaned across her desk towards me. Before I could utter anything else so quintessentially stupid, I moved out of her reach and rushed toward the classroom door.

End.