

Sylvia Plath and I

Linda Gates

I never met Sylvia Plath. She committed suicide in February 1963 almost a year to the day before I arrived in England, but somehow I always thought that if she hadn't died, we might have.

My arrival in England was the result a love affair with the poet and critic Al Alvarez when I was a young actress. He was on tour for the BBC interviewing American artists and intellectuals and one of his stops was the theatre where I worked, the San Francisco Actor's Workshop, which at the time generated a lot of interest on both sides of the Atlantic. After his initial interview with the Artistic Director Herbert Blau, Al was invited to a theatre party for the company, which is where we met.

Visiting English literary critics, was a new experience for me, but Al and I discovered a mutual love of poetry and recited a lot of it to each other that first evening. I believe he won me on our second date, by standing in the rain outside my door, reciting all of Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*. Although we knew each other a little over a week, he asked me to come to London to live with him. I was 23, madly in love, had never been abroad, hoped to be able to work as an actress in England and I said "Yes."

The morning after my arrival in England a couple of months later, my education in the differences in English life and American life began. Al was, of course, part of the London literary scene and knew everyone. That included the poet Ted Hughes and Assia Wevill, the woman with whom he had an affair that led to the break-up of his marriage to Sylvia Plath.

Al told me a lot about his friendship with Sylvia and Ted Hughes, and showed me typewritten copies of her new poems, which were from a BBC interview she did for the Third Programme a year before her death. That is how I read all, of what were to be the *Ariel* poems. He told me about her suicide just a year before, that she had been very talented, and that her first book of poems, *The Colossus*, had been published in England the year before she died. He said that she had also written a novel, *The Bell Jar*, which she published under a pseudonym. I, of course, had never heard of her, as she was unknown in the United States except for being published in a few poetry magazines.

As I read her poetry, I felt such sadness for her, an American in an English world, trying to fit in and left alone in a cold flat in the dead of winter to fend for herself with two small children. I could sympathize. Al's flat had no heat, beyond a small coal stove, the toilet was in an unheated garage, the bathroom had very little hot water, and while all the English people I met kept talking about England being a temperate climate, it was freezing. I immediately became ill with the cold, and soon became acquainted with that fixture of the British health system at the time, called "the mixture," which was liquid, brown and vile and prescribed for every ailment. Although Al was very sweet, and tried hard, it was really a man's world in those days. Women were referred to as "birds," and generally sat quietly and listened to the men talk.

Ted and Assia came over often, and quite frankly I didn't quite know what to make of them. It was clear that while Al and Ted were friends, Al didn't like Assia and ignored her. Assia bickered and nagged at Ted, who seemed to ignore her and talk to Al. As Assia was obviously excluded in conversation, as was I, she talked to me. Sylvia was never mentioned – ever.

Ted was a darkly handsome, brooding presence, who sang old Scottish ballads and could recite reams of poetry. I don't think I ever saw him smile. Assia was very beautiful in a dark sultry way and tried to be my best friend. I played the guitar and sang folk songs in those days, so Assia taught me a beautiful Israeli song that she said was based on the *Song of Solomon*, which she would sing with me after Ted sang his folk songs. She worked at J. Walter Thompson, and was always inviting me to have lunch with her, but somehow I never did.

After a few months, I was done. I had auditioned and was cast in a major role in "A Thousand Clowns" in The West End, but then found I couldn't take the role because I didn't have a work permit. Since the only way to get a work permit was to already be an established star, my future in the British theatre didn't look promising. The cold, loneliness, lack of heat and the grim outdoor toilet wore on me. I found that I wasn't cut out for the London literary life of nightly dinner parties, had no friends or life of my own and didn't want to spend the rest of my life wrapped in a bathrobe, lying in bed to keep warm, reading *Jude the Obscure*.

I thought often of Sylvia Plath, and how brave she had been to stick it out for so

long when she could have fled back to central heating, indoor toilets, men who took you seriously and a secure university appointment to pay the bills. Al and I sadly parted. I loved him dearly, as I always have and still do, but needed to make my own way. Happily we are still friends.

Did I think Sylvia Plath would become "Sylvia Plath"? No, that was due first to Al Alvarez's best selling book on suicide *The Savage God*, in which he wrote of their friendship, her poetry and introduced her to a wide audience. Mainly, I think the credit goes to Ted Hughes. There is an old Scottish ballad that Ted used to sing called *The Three Ravens*, it ends:

*God send every gentle man,
Such hawks, such hounds, and such a Leman.*

Ted told me that "Leman" meant true love. Well, he made sure that *Ariel* was published, shepherded her other work into publication, and saw to it that she was recognized as the great poet she was. Whatever his failings, I believe he was her "Leman."