

One

THIS HAUNTING NAMELESS PAIN

When Sylvia Plath was a child, her mother would sit down at the family piano and play the ‘plaintive’ nineteenth-century German song ‘The Legend of the Lorelei’. The ballad – originally written by Clemens von Brentano in 1801 – tells the story of a beautiful sorceress, the Lore Lei, whose gaze prompts men to fall immediately in love with her. A bishop sends for the woman to be judged, but even he cannot resist her and the Lore Lei pleads with him to end her life. Instead of condemning her to death he pledges three knights to accompany the young woman to a nunnery, but on the way to the convent the group passes a steep rock on the east bank of the Rhine and the woman asks the knights if they would grant her permission to climb up to the viewpoint so as to see the majestic river for the last time. Once at the top of the precipice, the Lore Lei throws herself to her death.

The story proved so popular that it was rewritten by various authors during the nineteenth century, with the Lore Lei variously represented as a witch, a mermaid that lures sailors to their deaths, and a virgin with golden hair. The version that Plath heard as a child was Heinrich Heine’s 1823 poem ‘Die Lorelei’, which was set to music by Friedrich Silcher, and later translated by Mark Twain. It’s significant that Plath associated the legend with her early years; in July 1958, as she was composing her poem

‘Lorelei’, she outlined in her journal the appeal of the story: not only had it originated in Germany but it illustrated perfectly one of Plath’s recurring themes, that of the ‘death wish’.¹ She described how the Rhine sirens were her ‘Own Kin’² and indeed she came to see herself as a modern-day Lorelei, a sorceress who had the power to attract men with a flash of her intense eyes, a tortured soul whose only destiny was death by her own hand.

The song that echoed through the Plath household can also be used to interpret Sylvia’s childhood and the various problems it presents to a biographer:

I cannot divine what it meaneth,
This haunting nameless pain:
A tale of the bygone ages
Keeps brooding through my brain.³

By virtue of her mother’s obsessive curatorial zeal, we know a great deal about the facts of Plath’s early years – for instance Aurelia went so far as to document her daughter’s weight (noting it down at birth, two weeks, one month, six months, eight months, nine months, one year, eighteen months, two years, twenty-six and a half months, two years nine months and three years). Yet, despite this excess of information, there is an absence, a ‘haunting nameless pain’ that even Plath herself acknowledged. Reading the poet’s journals one gets the sense that she spent much of her adult life trying to make sense of what she described as ‘the complex mosaic of my childhood’;⁴ no matter how hard she looked, or how much she wrote, she was destined to fail. Determined to try to chronicle her experience in an attempt to impose some kind of order on the chaos that raged inside her, Sylvia often looked back on her childhood in the hope of finding the

answer to her problems. But, as she writes in her poem 'The Ghost's Leavetaking', she encountered nothing but a mass of unreadable hieroglyphs, unknowable beings that spoke in a lost language.⁵

Sylvia Plath was born at the Robinson Memorial Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts, at 2:10 p.m. on 27 October 1932, the first child of Otto Emil Plath and Aurelia Frances Schober. The couple had married on 4 January 1932 – he was forty-six, a professor of biology at Boston University, and she was a twenty-five-year-old former student of his whom he had met in 1929. In an unpublished letter, Aurelia – who had studied for a master's degree in English and German at Boston University's College of Practical Arts and Letters – described the encounter. 'I wanted to read the great German poem on which Wagner based his operas (some of them) called "Das Nibelungen Lied" . . .' she wrote. 'Well, I went to the head of the German department and asked if anyone taught this and was advised to take the course in Middle-High German which was taught, strangely enough, by a professor of biology [. . .] I was his [Otto Plath's] prize student, but he very properly did not ask me out socially until the day when I handed in my final examination to him, because in those days socializing between professors and students was forbidden. He was tall, rosy-cheeked, with the bluest eyes I have ever seen. I thought he was an awful poke, because every time he called on me to recite, he looked down at his shoes – never directly at me!⁶

Otto Plath – whom his daughter would later immortalise in her poem 'Daddy' – was born on 13 April 1885 in Grabow, Germany, a place to which Plath would refer in *The Bell Jar* as a 'manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia'.⁷ He was the eldest of six, the son of Ernestine Kottke and Theodore Platt, who had emigrated to America in 1901. 'He and his

family lived in the countryside, grew all their own fruit and vegetables,' Aurelia wrote to her grandson Nicholas Hughes. 'His father was a blacksmith and a very skilled mechanic – so skilled that when he came to the United States, he invented an improvement for the famous McCormick reaper, which was a harvesting machine.'⁸

In August 1900, Otto's grandfather, John – who had immigrated to Watertown, Wisconsin in 1885 – paid for passage for his grandson on the *Auguste Victoria*, which sailed from Hamburg to New York. Records show that the fifteen-year-old boy described himself as a 'bootmaker' and that he arrived in New York on 8 September. John had heard of Otto's brilliant academic record and had offered to pay his way through Northwestern College, Wisconsin, on the condition that his grandson enter the Lutheran ministry. 'The opportunity appeared dazzling,' said Aurelia. 'Not only would he have the higher education which in Germany would be unobtainable for a boy in his circumstances, but he would escape military service, the thought of which he dreaded, for he was already a confirmed pacifist.'⁹ In Manhattan, Otto lived for a year with an uncle who ran a liquor and food store. So determined was he to master English that he gained permission to audit classes in grade school – he could attend lessons but not take them for credit – and would sit at the back of the classroom, taking a large quantity of notes, making sure he practised his conversational skills with pupils and teachers alike. As soon as he felt comfortable with a level, he promoted himself to the next class; during the course of a year he managed to work his way through all eight grades and could speak English with no trace of a foreign accent. By 1903 Otto was living in Watertown, Wisconsin, where he had enrolled at the Northwestern Preparatory School, and after graduation in June 1906 he entered Northwestern

College, where he studied classical languages and where he stayed until 1910. 'The college was really a classic German Gymnasium,' recalls Max Gaebler, whose father, Hans, was a fellow student and close friend of Otto's. 'It was called a preparatory school and college, but the eight classes went by the old Latin names: sexta, quinta, quarta, tertia, unter und ober secunda, unter und ober prima. All instruction was in the German language.'¹⁰

Otto built up a glittering academic record – something that pleased his grandparents – but in his spare time became fascinated by the writings of Charles Darwin. 'Darwin had become his hero and when Otto entered the Lutheran seminary [. . .] he was shocked to find all Darwin's writings among the proscribed books.'¹¹ Otto tried his best to conform, but after a number of 'miserable months of agonizing doubt and self-evaluation' he made the decision to leave the seminary and abandon all plans to enter the ministry.¹² When he told his grandparents of his change of career – he now planned to become a teacher – he was informed, in no uncertain terms, that this was something he would have to do without their support. 'If he adhered to this infamous decision, he would no longer be a part of the family,' said Aurelia, 'his name would be stricken from the family Bible. And so it was done. He was on his own for the rest of his life.'¹³ Plath would rework this family history into her novel *The Bell Jar*, whose heroine, Esther, describes her father being a Lutheran living in Wisconsin before ending up a cynical atheist.¹⁴

Otto moved first to Seattle, where, in February 1911, he enrolled at the University of Washington; in June of the following year he received a Master of Arts degree. On 7 August 1912, in Spokane, Washington State, he married Lydia Clara Bartz, the twenty-three-year-old sister of his friend Rupert

Bartz, from Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Yet the marriage proved to be a disaster from the very beginning. As Aurelia wrote to her granddaughter Frieda:

In those days when literature was more circumspect and less realistic and there was no radio or television, it was possible (and, hard as it is for young people today to believe) for people to get married without knowing very much about marriage itself [. . .] Well, Lydia had been what was then termed ‘delicately raised’ and educated along very idealistic lines. She was not prepared for the physical side of marriage at all. So when she and Otto were married, the two found they had decidedly different attitudes (too bad they didn’t discuss all this before!) and the upshot was that Lydia left Otto after three weeks and returned to her family. The two people never saw each other again – ever!¹⁵

For the rest of her life, Lydia, who worked as a nurse, never remarried and she died, apparently without having said a word about either Otto or his famous daughter, in Eau Claire on 22 February 1988.

Otto carried his own secret with him to the grave. In October 1918, while living in Berkeley, California, Plath had been investigated by the FBI for suspected ‘pro-German’ leanings. The allegations had their root in Plath’s status as a registered ‘alien enemy’, the fact that he had not bought Liberty Bonds to help the war effort and his supposed antipathy towards America ‘on account [. . .] he lost a position teaching school in the State of Washington, and another position at the University of California.’ Although the recently released FBI files show that Plath was eventually cleared of any pro-German sympathies, the records reveal that the investigator regarded him as ‘a man who makes no friends and with whom no one is really well

acquainted' and someone possessed of a 'nervous and morbid disposition'.

Otto explained himself as best he could – he didn't buy Liberty Bonds because, at the time, he was \$1,400 in debt, 'on which he was paying 5 and 6% interest, and that he was attempting to earn a living and do work at the University at the same time and did not feel that he could afford to do so.' He told the agent that his grandparents had emigrated to America 'because of the better conditions here and that some things are rotten in Germany, but not all; that the German people and their character is not altogether rotten, but that they are misled.' The investigator also interviewed Plath's supervisor at Berkeley, who explained that Otto had not been given an assistantship at the university 'because he has not the personality that is required of an instructor [. . .] being very nervous and not able to interest students; second, because the Regents of the University have made a rule prohibiting the hiring of Germans on the faculty.' According to the source, 'whatever indiscreet remarks [the] subject has made at times is probably due to this brooding over the bad luck he is having making a living on account of his nationality.' In addition to his studies at the university, Otto was forced to work at the Lincoln market for several hours each day, and, in the evenings, he operated an elevator; his pay for both jobs was twenty cents an hour.^{15a}

Otto's work ethic was unremitting. After Berkeley, he attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (as an instructor in modern languages from 1915 to 1918). Between 1921 and 1925 he studied zoology at Harvard, which also employed him as an assistant in entomology, and in 1928 the university awarded him a doctorate in applied biology. By the time that he met Aurelia Schober in 1929, he had been an assistant professor of biology at Boston University for a year. The university also engaged him to teach a course in

Middle-High German – and on the last day of class, while nervously playing with a pen on his desk, he asked his favourite student whether she would like to join him as his guest at the country home of another professor and his wife. That weekend Otto told Aurelia about his brief marriage and informed her that were he ‘to form a serious relationship with a young woman now, of course he would obtain a divorce.’¹⁶ He also told her of his love of bees, a passion that had its roots in his boyhood in Grabow. ‘Having repeatedly observed the activities of a neighboring bee-keeper, I thought it might be possible to transfer bumblebee colonies to artificial domiciles, and thus have honey available at all times,’ Otto wrote. ‘The method employed in “transplanting” these colonies was rather crude, and so it happened that I was sometimes severely punished by the more vindictive species.’¹⁷

Otto’s interest in bees grew into a scientific obsession, and by the time he had met Aurelia he had collected a mass of data gathered from years of study. As soon as the couple married – in Carson City, Nevada, on 4 January 1932, the same day that Plath divorced his first wife, Lydia – their lives were taken over by Otto’s work on his book *Bumblebees and Their Ways*, which was based on his doctoral thesis. ‘During the first year of our married life all had to be given up for THE BOOK,’ Aurelia wrote years later.¹⁸ Although Otto acknowledged the help of his new wife – writing in the preface of ‘the service of my wife, Aurelia S. Plath, who has aided me greatly in editing the manuscript and proofreading’ – from reading certain sections of the resulting 1934 book it looks as though Aurelia’s influence extended beyond the secretarial. The first chapter opens with the words: ‘If one takes a walk on a clear, sunny day in middle April, when the first willows are in bloom, one may often see young bumblebee queens eagerly sipping nectar from the catkins. It is a delightful thing to pause and watch these queens,

clad in their costumes of rich velvet, their wings not yet torn by the long foraging flights which they will be obliged to take later.¹⁹

Aurelia had, after all, always wanted to be writer, but, as she told one interviewer, 'I didn't feel that I could expose my children to the uncertainty of a writer's success or failure.'²⁰ Aurelia was born into a hardworking, immigrant family – her father, Franz Schober, was an Austrian who grew up in Bad Aussee, near Salzburg, and who sailed from Bremen on the *Kronprinz Wilhelm*, arriving in America in March 1903, while her Vienna-born mother, Aurelia Grunwald (later Greenwood), arrived in the United States a year later. The couple married in Boston in July 1905 and on 26 April of the following year their daughter, whom they named Aurelia Frances, was born.

Sylvia's mother grew up by the ocean, at 892 Shirley Street, Point Shirley, in a household that spoke German: although Frank (as he now called himself) had spent two years in England, where he had worked as a waiter, the family communicated using their mother tongue. Aurelia often felt isolated at school, as she later related in the introduction to *Letters Home*: 'The two words I heard most frequently were "Shut up!", so when I went home at the end of the school day and met my father, I answered his greeting proudly and loudly with "Shut up!" I still remember how his face reddened.' Frank took his daughter across his knee and spanked her, only for her to plead, '*Aber was bedeutet das, Papa?*' ('What does that mean, Papa?') When Frank realised that Aurelia did not understand the words that she had used he hugged her and asked her to forgive him; 'from that time on we always spoke English,' she said.²¹ Years later Plath would write that her grandparents always spoke with a heavy accent, saying 'cholly' for 'jolly' and 'ven' instead of 'when'.²² Growing up in the Italian-Irish neighbourhood of Winthrop, Aurelia often suffered prejudice,

especially during the years of the First World War. She was often called 'spy-face' and one day she was pushed off the steps of the school bus by another child while the driver kept his eyes straight ahead and drove away.

As a child, Aurelia – like her daughter after her – found her escape in reading, working her way through Louisa May Alcott, Horatio Alger, Harold Bell Wright, Gene Stratton-Porter and every romantic historical novel she found in her local library, before moving on, at high school, to the novels of Scott, Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot, Jane Austen, the Brontës, Hardy, Hawthorne, Melville and Henry James and the poetry of Emily Dickinson. 'I lived in a dream world,' said Aurelia, 'a book tucked under every mattress of the beds it was my chore to make up daily; a book in the bathroom hamper, and the family's stock answer to "What's RiRi [my nickname] doing?" was "Oh, she's reading *again*.'"²³ In the summer after graduating from high school, she took a full-time job with an insurance company, typing letters for eight hours a day, which she later described as a 'grim experience', something that she vowed 'no child of mine would ever have to endure'.²⁴ She had always dreamed of going to Wellesley College, but such an expensive education was out of her reach 'as my parents could not afford to send me there and as I knew nothing about scholarships then – which perhaps I could have won, for I was second in my graduating class'.²⁵ Instead, in 1924 Aurelia enrolled on the two-year course at Boston University's College of Practical Arts and Letters, helping with expenses by taking a series of part-time jobs. After this, she took another two-year course that would enable her to qualify as a high-school teacher of English and German.

In 1925, when she was nineteen, Aurelia fell in love – not with Otto, but another, unnamed man, an engineer and artist, whom she met in her junior year. 'I recall the thrill, the

excitement and wonder of becoming the most important person in another's life,' she wrote to her granddaughter Frieda in 1978.

For the first time, I felt transfigured, beautiful; all was possible. Indeed [. . .] for a time, it was almost impossible for me to concentrate on anything else – that beloved face appeared between me and anything I was trying to read or study. I felt I spilled joy from every pore; the whole world and everyone in it were beautiful. We shared it all then – for a little over two years – the music, the arts, books, our ideas on every possible subject, the earth, the sky, the sea; our hopes and dreams for ourselves and each other.

Then, in 1927, her lover was sent on a work project to Brazil and from there to Russia – 'and we never met again,' wrote Aurelia. '(I don't want to recall the hurt that remained in lessening degrees until your mother was born.) However, the memory of that exhilarating joy is still precious to recall; it changed my thinking, therefore, my life in many ways.'²⁶

It was in this rather dejected state that Aurelia met Otto, a man whom she admired for his brilliant mind rather than the warmth of his personality. From the autumn of 1930 onwards the couple spent an increasing amount of time together, hiking in the Blue Hills and walking through the Arnold Arboretum and the Fells Reservation. Together they mapped out their future together: a family of at least two children and a book that they could work on together, which they provisionally entitled *The Evolution of Parental Care in the Animal Kingdom*. While waiting for Otto's divorce to come through, Aurelia took a job teaching English and German at Brookline High School but, after their marriage in January 1932, she yielded to her husband's wish that she retire from work to take on the role of

housewife. By all accounts, Otto was something of a tyrant in the home. When he was writing a chapter on insect societies for the 1935 book *A Handbook of Social Psychology* he worked in the dining room of their apartment at 24 Prince Street, Jamaica Plain. The table served as his desk while the sideboard became a depository for the seventy reference books that he regularly needed to consult and he forbade Aurelia from moving a single paper or book. 'I drew a plan of the arrangement and managed to have friends in occasionally for dinner the one evening a week that my husband gave a course at Harvard night school, always replacing every item correctly before his return,' she said.²⁷

A stickler for order and a lover of logic, Otto rather admired the regimented nature of insect societies; human nature was rather messy in comparison. He did his best to rule his household according to his strict requirements, edicts that Aurelia found difficult to live with. At the end of their first year of marriage she realised that if she wanted her children to grow up in a peaceful home she would have to become more 'submissive', although this was against her nature. As a result, Otto took on the role of '*der Herr des Hauses*' ('head of the house') and Aurelia often had to remain silent.²⁸ Aurelia – who was intelligent and imaginative, but obviously intellectually and creatively repressed – needed a project, something that could contain and channel her energies. The birth of her daughter Sylvia in October 1932 presented her with the perfect opportunity: the chance to document and shape the growth of another human being. The budding writer now came into her own.

'Most theories of development assume that *mothers don't write, they are written,*' observes academic Anita Helle, Sylvia's cousin. 'Yet in Aurelia Plath we have quite the opposite case, a mother whose energies so readily transformed themselves into verbal expression that *she writes her daughter*, frames her rites of passage

with verbal rituals, colonizes her world with words. One only has to recall that at the family dinner table, Aurelia and Sylvia Plath buried messages to each other under the table napkins, in order to understand how female attachment appeared quite literally as subrosal, subtextual language within the family system.²⁹

Trained by Otto in the methodology of scientific classification, Aurelia began to record, in minute detail, the key moments of her daughter's life in a baby book. 'The record of Sylvia Plath by her "mummy",' reads the inscription in Aurelia's neat handwriting on the inside of the book. At birth, Sylvia measured 22 inches; at six months, 28 inches; at eight months, 29 inches; at sixteen months she was 32.5 inches and at two years she stood 36.5 inches. Aurelia regularly snipped off locks of Sylvia's hair and kept them preserved: in the archive at the Lilly Library, Indiana, one can see not only the lock taken on Plath's first birthday, but also samples from 1938 and 1941, a tress from 1942 and a couple of light-brown braids that today are wrapped in white muslin, together with an accompanying note from Aurelia that reads, 'At the age of 12 yrs 10 m S's braids were cut.'³⁰ At six weeks, Sylvia imitated vowel sounds; at eight weeks she could say 'ga' and 'goo'; at six months she would utter 'gully gully' whenever Aurelia offered her a bottle – an echo of the words 'goody goody', which she would say to her daughter when giving her milk. At eight months, Sylvia could say the words 'mama', 'dada' and 'bye bye' and, Aurelia noted, the little girl took delight in the world around her, particularly birds, squirrels, chipmunks, automobiles and other babies. 'She wants to touch other babies and stretches out her arms to them, shouting with excitement,' her mother said. In September 1933, Aurelia observed that one day when the rag man passed down the street her daughter shouted out 'ags', an imitation of the word 'rags'; on 1 November, the one-year-old

girl said the phrases ‘I tee’ (‘I see’), ‘haw’ (for ‘hot’) and ‘ba’ (her shorthand for ‘bath’); while on 19 December Sylvia shouted out the word, ‘Daddy’, which Aurelia commented was ‘said specially when someone shakes the furnace.’³¹ At the end of the baby book, Aurelia listed Sylvia’s ‘sayings and antics’, observing that on 3 February 1934, ‘When placed on the pottie, she immediately calls out – “Aw-done! Aw-done!” (She fibs already!).’³²

It’s obvious from reading Aurelia’s notes that Sylvia was a child bathed in love. For her first birthday, her parents presented her with a cake; and after the little makeshift party Aurelia noted in the baby book that ‘her daddy and I agree that the whole world doesn’t hold another one-year-old as wonderful and so sweet – at least it doesn’t for us!’³³ One gets the impression that Otto was also able to gain pleasure from his daughter’s development from a scientific perspective: when Sylvia was six months old he held her against a rope that was attached to a bamboo shade and, as Aurelia writes, ‘he was delighted by the fact that her feet grasped the rope in the same manner as her hands – to him proof of man’s evolutionary process as well as the gradual loss of flexibility when man started to wear shoes and used his feet only for walking.’³⁴

In the winter of 1934 to 1935, when Aurelia was pregnant with her second child, she told Sylvia that soon she would have a brother or sister, a Warren or an Evelyn, and that she would need to call on her daughter to help prepare for the new arrival. One day, when Sylvia leant her head against Aurelia’s stomach, she heard the baby moving. ‘I can *hear* him!’ she cried out. ‘He is saying, “Hó da! Hó da!” That means “I *love* you! I *love* you!”’³⁵ The week before the birth Aurelia took her daughter to stay at her parents’ house, not leaving until 27 April, the day of the delivery. Apparently, when Sylvia was informed that she now had a baby brother, she pulled a face and said, pointedly,

'I wanted an Evelyn, *not* a Warren.'³⁶ In her autobiographical essay 'Ocean 1212-W' – named after her grandparents' telephone number – Plath writes that Warren's appearance resulted in a kind of existential crisis: before his birth, Sylvia had believed that she had enjoyed a 'beautiful fusion' with the world; now she felt separated, no longer special.³⁷ Yet, from Aurelia's perspective, Sylvia's childhood was overwhelmingly 'laughter-shared';³⁸ indeed, the girl's original sense of humour was evident at a young age. One day in October 1935, after a doctor had treated Aurelia for an abscess on her breast, Sylvia said, 'You're a good Mummy, you are! You know what I'm going to give you? Two new breasts – without holes in them!'³⁹

Aurelia found nursing her new baby difficult because whenever she brought Warren towards her breast Sylvia wanted to crawl up into her mother's lap. 'Fortunately, around this time she discovered the alphabet from the capital letters on packaged goods on the pantry shelves,' said Aurelia.⁴⁰ From the beginning of her development, Sylvia – or Sivvy, as her family called her – came to associate words as a substitute for love. Each time when Aurelia took up Warren to nurse him, Sylvia would grab a newspaper, sit on the floor in front of her mother and proceed to pick out the capital letters. 'I read and sang to them [her children] for hours and hours,' said Aurelia, 'and I encouraged them from their very first steps to be aware of all things about them – shades of color, shadows, colors within shadows – to have a painter's eye as well as a writer's eye.'⁴¹ Plath identified with the physicality of words to such an extent that she often wished, as she says in *The Bell Jar*, that she could return to the womblike space of the printed page.⁴² Later, Plath would recall the memory of her mother reading to her Matthew Arnold's poem 'The Forsaken Mermaid': 'Sand-strewn caverns, cool and deep,/Where the winds are all

asleep . . .’ and seeing the gooseflesh rise on her skin. ‘I did not know what made it,’ she wrote. ‘I was not cold. Had a ghost passed over me? No, it was the poetry [. . .] I had fallen into a new way of being happy.’⁴³ When Sylvia was eight and a half years old she wrote a letter to the *Boston Sunday Herald*, enclosing a poem about her impressions of a warm summer night. The editor was so impressed by her four-line stanza that the newspaper published it.⁴⁴

Aurelia remembered one occasion – Sylvia was about eight years old – when she took the two children down to the beach to watch the spectacle of the new moon. ‘I carried my son and she stood by my side,’ she said. ‘And she more or less drew away, stood apart and gazed at the moon. And then quietly I heard her start to say very slowly,

The moon is a lock of witch’s hair
Tawny and golden and red.
And the night winds pause and stare at the
Strand from a witch’s head.⁴⁵

In 1936, a year after Warren was born, Otto began to suffer from ill health. He started to lose weight, was wracked by an awful cough, plagued by sinusitis – an ailment that would affect Sylvia throughout her life – and seemed constantly irritable and short-tempered. During that hot summer, Aurelia took herself and her two children to live with her parents at their home in Point Shirley, and in the autumn the family made the decision to move from their cramped apartment to a more spacious seven-room house at 92 Johnson Avenue, Winthrop, situated three miles from the Schobers. ‘My husband was failing in health and that was the real main reason [for the move] and I wanted to be near my parents,’ Aurelia said later. ‘We loved the shore, we loved the house and I hoped, of course, that he’d recover.’⁴⁶

Otto had had a friend who had died from lung cancer and he feared that he too was suffering from the disease. 'He told me that he had diagnosed his own case and that he would never submit to surgery,' said Aurelia.⁴⁷ Although Aurelia tried to persuade her husband to seek medical attention, whenever the subject was mentioned he became consumed by 'explosive outbursts of anger'.⁴⁸ Aurelia did all she could to protect Sylvia and Warren, keeping the children upstairs away from the wrath of Otto, who spent the majority of his time in his large study. Otto also suffered from spasms in his legs, which would cause him to moan in pain, and when he returned from work he was invariably exhausted and on edge. Later Plath would write in her journal of how Otto became ill the second he married Aurelia and the extent to which her mother loathed her husband.⁴⁹

At the time, however, Sylvia enjoyed what she described as an idyllic childhood. In the spring of 1937 she became fast friends with four-year-old Ruth Freeman, who had moved to nearby Somerset Terrace, Winthrop, with her parents, William and Marion, and her elder brother, David.

'One day, our mothers were out walking to the beach with their children when they met and from that moment onwards we spent hundreds and hundreds of hours together,' says Ruth. 'Sylvia's house was on the water and I was half a block from it. Her home was a typical New England house, and I lived there for several months because my mother became seriously ill with what then was called a nervous breakdown; now, I know that my mother suffered from bipolar disorder, but nobody defined it in those terms back then. Sylvia and I would go down to the ocean early in the morning with a picnic lunch and when the tide went out we would play on the mudflats, where we would dig for clams. I remember that Otto would go to the beach each day too – he was not a terribly pleasant man. He

used to sunbathe and would always say that he was storing up his health for the winter. I remember that if I ever went back to Sylvia's house I would have to be extremely quiet – there was an atmosphere, it was all very controlled – and I realized that the household was run on very Germanic lines. Both of us went to the nearby Sunshine School, a private nursery school, and although our parents had to pay for it I'm sure it was very reasonable as nobody really had any money in those days. It was a nice, cheery place, like its name suggests. When people ask whether Sylvia was depressed as a child I can only say that she wasn't: from what I saw Sylvia was a bright, fun person.⁵⁰

Aurelia converted the largest bedroom into a playroom for the children. Each night Sylvia and Warren would have their supper sitting at a small maple table by a large window, after which they would amuse themselves while Aurelia and Otto had dinner. For half an hour before bed the children would be allowed downstairs, during which time Sylvia might dance for her father – who was usually lying prostrate on the living-room couch – or Warren might show his father the drawings he had done during the day. Sylvia lived, she later said, in a fantastical world populated by fairies, imps and spirits,⁵¹ and her imagination was so vivid that she dreamt fully-formed narratives in Technicolor.⁵² Her mother read to her poems by Eugene Field, A. A. Milne and Robert Louis Stevenson, practically everything from the children's anthology *Sung Under the Silver Umbrella*, Dr Seuss' *Horton Hatches an Egg* and Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, and she also invented a number of stories that featured Warren's favourite teddy bear, Mixie Blackshort, a character that makes an appearance in Plath's poem 'The Disquieting Muses'.

Sylvia and Warren enjoyed a close but at times competitive relationship. Aurelia recalled that her daughter would 'monopolize' the lunch-table conversation after school and would often

try to dazzle and outsmart her younger brother with her ever-expanding vocabulary.⁵³ Warren tried to emulate Sylvia's already heightened sense of creativity: when he was only two and a half he dreamed up a series of stories called 'The Other Side of the Moon', the first tale of which began: 'On the other side of the moon, where I was *nine* years old and lived before I met you, Mother.'⁵⁴

Later in life, Plath would write in her journal of a memory from her childhood involving 'the feast, the beast, and the jelly-bean.'⁵⁵ According to Warren's daughter, Susan Plath Winston, when 'he and Sylvia were quite young and still living in Winthrop, they would get a little spooked – or at least pretend to be spooked – when it was time for them to walk up the darkened staircase to their rooms to get ready for bed. On one such occasion, when Sylvia asked Warren what he thought they would find at the top of the stairs, my father [Warren] replied, "A feast. . . and a beast. . . and a jellybean!" A fit of giggles reportedly ensued, and the saying became family lore.'⁵⁶ Occasionally Sylvia bullied Warren – she fought with him, threw tin soldiers at his head and once she accidentally cut his neck with a flick of the blade on her ice skate. She grew up resentful of the fact that Warren, by the mere fact of his maleness, could shape a life for himself without all the constrictions and conventionalities that circumscribed a young woman's independence and growth. In her journal, Plath would write of the sibling rivalry that existed between her and Warren and how this was symbolic of the larger battle she had to fight with men for independence and recognition.⁵⁷ When Plath was an adult she became fascinated by Freud, and in her own copy of the Modern Library edition of *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* she underlined the section dealing with the relationship between brothers and sisters: 'I do not know why we presuppose that it must be a loving one,

since examples of enmity among adult brothers and sisters are frequent [. . .] Children at this time of life are capable of jealousy that is perfectly evident and extremely intense.⁵⁸

As a child, Sylvia developed an irrational fear of bobby pins and buttons to such an extent that one day when she heard a woman, bending over a baby carriage, comment on the infant's button nose, the girl ran away screaming.⁵⁹ When Sylvia was in high school she wrote an essay entitled 'Childhood Fears', in which she described the fright she felt when her mother produced the vacuum cleaner, and the sense of delicious terror shared between her and her friend Ruth Freeman when the other girl stayed overnight in her bed. One night, unable to sleep, Ruth told Sylvia that she was sure she could see a gorilla standing in front of the closet door; in the morning, the 'gorilla' was revealed to be nothing more than an old coat flung over the door, but the image stayed with Plath and later, in an unpublished poem, 'The Desperate Hours', she wrote of the memory. In 'Childhood Fears' Sylvia also described her terror of subways – the feeling that she might stand too close to the edge of the platform and either fall or get pushed into the path of an oncoming train – as well as the thought that a burglar might have stolen into her room and be hiding in a closet or cupboard.

Plath, as a child, as a woman and as a poet, was constantly in search of an overarching metaphor that would perfectly capture her strange complexity. In her journal she wrote of the 'potently rich sea of my subconscious', and often associated its murky origins with the dark ocean floor of her childhood, a place that she felt she needed to return to if she ever wanted to find success as a writer. It's intriguing that Plath came to associate her father with the sea, casting and recasting him in her poetry as a Neptune-like character who served as a 'father-sea-god muse'.⁶⁰ Her poem 'Full Fathom Five' – a reference to Ariel's song in

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* – describes her ambiguous relationship with this powerful man-turned-myth, a white-haired figure who surfaces from deep within Plath's subconscious to haunt her. The poem ends with Sylvia's recollection of her father's 'shelled' bed and a suggestion that she would rather drown than share his 'murderous' air.⁶¹

Plath was fascinated by Hawthorne's short story 'Rappaccini's Daughter', a tale of a young scholar, Giovanni Guasconti, who, while in Padua, is entranced by the sight of a beautiful young woman, Beatrice Rappaccini, who tends a garden full of exotic plants. During the course of the story, Guasconti learns that Beatrice, with whom he falls in love, is the subject of a scientific experiment overseen by her father. She has the power, in the words of Signor Rappaccini, 'to be as terrible as thou art beautiful,': having been brought up on poisons her presence is so deadly it can kill. The image is an apt metaphor for Plath's view of her relationship with her own father: she too felt as though she had been poisoned by Otto, or at least left contaminated by a fantasy version of him. Otto haunts Plath's work like a corpse that refuses to sink, making ghostly appearances in poems such as 'Lament', 'On the Decline of Oracles', 'Electra on Azalea Path', 'The Beekeeper's Daughter', 'The Colossus', 'Little Fugue', 'Berck-Plage', 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus'.

In the short story 'Among the Bumblebees' – which had the original title of 'The Two Gods of Alice Denway' – Plath wrote that Otto was a 'giant of a man', a personification of the glories and power of nature itself.⁶² In the story, Alice – a barely fictionalised Sylvia – is her father's favourite, his 'pet'. Ever since she was small she could remember people telling her how much she resembled her daddy; Warren, who was often sickly, took after their mother's side of the family. 'Alice's father feared nothing,' Plath wrote. One day, in August 1937, when Winthrop

was hit by a dramatic summer storm, Otto taught his daughter to sing the ‘Thunder Song’, the lyrics of which are preserved in the Smith College archive:

Thor is angry
Thor is angry
Boom boom boom
We don’t care
We don’t care
Boom boom boom.⁶³

Plath took the incident straight from life and used the lyrics of the song first in the story – she wrote of how her father’s voice drowned out the thunder⁶⁴ – and again in her 1957 poem ‘The Disquieting Muses’. In the story, Plath also relates Otto’s talent for handling bees: as a little girl she remembered being amazed that her father could hold a bee in his hand, close his fist and not be stung. One summer, however, her father fell ill and he could no longer take his daughter outside to play with the bees. Plath describes a poignant last scene between father and daughter: although the girl repeatedly says ‘father, father’ the ill man does not respond to her calls and she turns from him feeling lost and betrayed. The story ends with a comment about the girl’s future, how there would never be another man to compare to her father, a man who had walked with her, ‘proud and arrogant among the bumblebees.’⁶⁵

One morning in mid-August 1940 Otto stubbed his little toe against the base of his bureau while rushing out of his study on the way to summer school. Later that day he returned home limping, and when Aurelia asked him to take off his shoes and socks it was obvious that his problem was serious: ‘the toes were black and red streaks ran up his ankle.’⁶⁶ Aurelia called the doctor who, after taking blood and urine samples, diagnosed

that he had diabetes mellitus. 'From that day on life was an alternation of hope and fear; crises were interspersed with amazing recoveries only to give way to crises again,' said Aurelia.⁶⁷ Otto developed pneumonia and had to be admitted to Winthrop Hospital, where he stayed for two weeks. On his return to Johnson Avenue, Aurelia arranged for Warren to go and stay with his grandparents; Sylvia remained at home, where the nurse who attended Otto tried to involve the girl in her father's care – an old uniform was used to fashion a nurse's outfit for Sylvia and she was given duties such as bringing her father fruit or cool drinks. On the nurse's first day off, Otto suggested to his wife that she take Sylvia out for an hour; after all, he had everything he needed on the table by his bed. After an hour at the beach, Aurelia dropped by the Freemans' house, where Sylvia stayed for supper, but on her return to Johnson Avenue she discovered Otto lying prostrate on the staircase. 'He had left his bed to go downstairs into the garden to look at his flowers,' recalled Aurelia.⁶⁸ She dragged him back to his bed, and repeatedly tried calling the doctor who could not be reached. That night Otto developed a fever, and at one point, as Aurelia was sponging his face, he took hold of her hands and said to her, 'God knows, why have I been so cussed!' In her head, Aurelia said to herself, 'All this needn't have happened; it needn't have happened.'⁶⁹

The next day, the doctor arrived with a specialist, Dr Harvey Loder, from the New England Deaconess Hospital, who informed Aurelia that in order to save Otto's life he would have to amputate the leg. As Aurelia handed the doctor his hat he turned to her and said, 'How could such a brilliant man be so stupid?' The operation was carried out on 12 October, and the couple started to make plans for the future. The president of Boston University, where Otto worked, wrote him a note that read, 'We'd rather have you back at your desk

with one leg than any other man with two.⁷⁰ Aurelia also took it upon herself to break the news of the operation to her two children: while Warren seemed to accept the news quietly, Sylvia said, ‘When he buys shoes, will he have to buy a *pair*, Mummy?’⁷¹ After the amputation, however, Otto fell into a depression; the operation had, to some extent, already sucked the life out of him and on 5 November 1940, while asleep in the hospital, he suffered an embolism and died. He was fifty-five years old.

Aurelia decided to wait until the morning to tell the children of their father’s death. She went first to Warren, who was still sleeping in his room, gently woke him and told him that Daddy’s sufferings were at an end and that he was now at rest. ‘Oh, Mummy, I’m so glad *you* are young and healthy!’ he said. The reaction from Sylvia, who was awake and reading, was rather different. After hearing the news, the girl, who had just turned eight, turned to her mother and said, ‘I’ll never speak to God again!’⁷² According to Aurelia, Sylvia ‘had been praying every night that her father would be well and would come home. She loved his praise – at that time she was beginning piano lessons and she would play for him and he would tap her on the head and praise her.’⁷³

The next day, Sylvia returned from school and handed her mother a piece of paper that read, ‘I PROMISE NEVER TO MARRY AGAIN.’ Ruth Freeman remembers what had happened that day at school. ‘The kids had been mean to her and told her that she was going to have a stepfather,’ she says. ‘Sylvia stopped by at my house on the way home, she was crying, and my mother assured her that would not happen. Later, at Sylvia’s home, she handed her mother that note, and forced her to sign it while we were sitting at the dining-room table. From that point on, Sylvia kept that note folded up in the back of her diary. I’m sure Sylvia thought that she had resolved

her issues by making her mother sign that bit of paper, but of course it didn't resolve anything. The Otto she wrote about later was not a daddy she ever really knew – that figure was very much a fantasy.⁷⁴

Later, after time spent in therapy, Plath would write in her journal about this traumatic time, blaming her mother for what she saw as the 'murder' of her father. She outlined how she hated Aurelia because of her lack of tenderness for Otto. Of course, he was something of a tyrant, she added, but she did not miss him any the less. Why had Aurelia married a relatively old man? "Damn her eyes," she wrote.⁷⁵ From her point of view, Aurelia did everything in her power to love and protect her two young children. She decided not to let them attend Otto's funeral – something Plath would use later to rail against her mother – and tried not to let her children see her cry, which was interpreted by Sylvia as indifference. After her husband's death, Aurelia became the family's sole breadwinner because Otto, like Aurelia's father before him, had lost a great deal of money on the stockmarket.⁷⁶

In January 1941 Aurelia secured a job as a teaching substitute at Braintree High School, earning \$25 a week for teaching three classes of German and two of Spanish a day. She left home at 5:30 each morning, and left the care of Sylvia and Warren to her parents. At the end of that spring term she managed to get another job, at the junior high school in Winthrop, which would start in September, but she soon found the heavy workload too much. The combination of full-time teaching, plus the extra responsibility of looking after the school's finances, left her exhausted and suffering from the first symptoms of a duodenal ulcer, a condition that would flare up at particularly stressful moments for the rest of her life. Sylvia would later feel resentful of what she saw as her mother's attitude of noble martyrdom, writing in her journal of how her

mother had to work around the clock and how she had to scrimp and save. While Aurelia had to make do with the same old clothes, she was proud to be able to buy new outfits for Sylvia and Warren. It was Aurelia's mission, wrote her daughter, to give her children the things that she had never been able to enjoy herself.⁷⁷

Later in life, Plath would become fascinated by the work of Carl Jung, particularly his book *The Development of Personality*. 'In every adult there lurks a child – an eternal child, something that is always becoming, is never completed, and calls for unceasing care, attention and education,' she wrote, transcribing from the book. 'There is no human horror or fairground freak that has not lain in the womb of a loving mother,' she continued. As she read the section on parental expectations and self-sacrifice, Plath must have felt an uncanny sense that the Swiss psychiatrist was writing about her own family. It was, stated Jung, wrong for parents to try to shape a child's personality; the worst thing they could do, he said, was to try to 'do their best' for their offspring, 'living only for them'. This ideal 'effectively prevents the parents from doing anything about their own development and allows them to thrust their "best" down their children's throats. This so-called "best" turns out to be the very things the parents have most badly neglected in themselves. In this way the children are goaded on to achieve their parents' most dismal failures, and are loaded with ambitions that are never fulfilled. Such methods and ideals only engender educational monstrosities.'⁷⁸