

The Lazarus Years

Sylvia  
Virginia  
Otto/Leonard  
Ted

*1939- Primrose Hill—London—Regent's Canal.*

*A young girl skips down the canal with a massive lollipop. She stops suddenly when she runs into a woman in her 40s carrying a bunch of flowers staring down at her. She looks up at her, licks her lollipop and continues skipping.*

VIRGINIA

Are you Otto's daughter?

*Sylvia nods.*

VIRGINIA

The good doctor.

SYLVIA

Herr Doktor.

VIRGINIA

And they let you go out alone?

SYLVIA

They don't know I'm here.

VIRGINIA

I won't tell.

SYLVIA

Thank you.

VIRGINIA

What's your name?

SYLVIA

Sylvia.

VIRGINIA

Hello Sylvia.

Who are you? SYLVIA

My name's Virginia. I write books. VIRGINIA

I want to write books. SYLVIA

Don't. VIRGINIA

What? SYLVIA

Don't write books. VIRGINIA

I want to. SYLVIA

It's a grave mistake. VIRGINIA

I'm six. SYLVIA

So? VIRGINIA

I don't know what a grave mistake is. SYLVIA

You will. VIRGINIA

When? SYLVIA

When you start writing, most likely. VIRGINIA

Would you like some of my lollipop? SYLVIA

VIRGINIA

No thank you.

SYLVIA

It's scrumptious.

VIRGINIA

I don't eat sugar.

SYLVIA

I don't like this country.

VIRGINIA

No, me neither.

*Otto Plath enters. He is carrying a doctor's bag.*

OTTO

Sylvia?

SYLVIA

Oh no.

OTTO

You aren't supposed to be on the canal, what if you fell in?

VIRGINIA

Oh she's perfectly safe, Doctor.

OTTO

Mrs Woolf!

VIRGINIA

Good day.

OTTO

What a pleasure to run into you today.

VIRGINIA

I've just met Sylvia. She's a delight and a half.

OTTO

Isn't she?

VIRGINIA

Indeed.

SYLVIA

Daddy, I'm going to run home.

OTTO

Wait for me.

VIRGINIA

Off you go.

OTTO

Off we go.

SYLVIA

Good bye.

OTTO

Goodbye!

VIRGINIA

I'll see you soon.

*Otto and Sylvia depart, hand in hand. Virginia stands still, staring after them. She takes a few stones out of her pockets, placing them on the ground. She tries to stack them, but they fall. She tries to stack them again. They fall. Ted enters. They nod at one another. It is now 1955, but he is talking to Virginia.*

TED

And so I said to her, "Austrian? Really? It's my least favorite country. And I've been to most of them." And her doe-eyed expression just got me. Topsy-turvy, brain spinning, I'm gone. I feel like a Gershwin song. And not in a good way. The prettiest girl I've ever seen. And smart. So smart. At Cambridge. Impossibly brilliant. Staggeringly beautiful. She moves me to write poetry. Bad poetry. Poetry I can't show to people, or submit to the literary journal. It's that's embarrassing.

*Sylvia enters. She's an adult now. She's carrying books. Ted snaps into reality of Sylvia.*

TED

Sylvia!

SYLVIA

Ted.

TED

I hoped I would see you here.

SYLVIA

I live here.

TED

I know. That's why I hoped I'd see you here.

SYLVIA

You're curious.

TED

I've been called that before.

SYLVIA

Have you?

TED

Do you fancy a picnic?

SYLVIA

I'm awfully tired. And I have all this reading to do.

TED

Of course. The reading.

SYLVIA

But maybe tomorrow?

TED

I'm busy tomorrow.

SYLVIA

Oh.

TED

Wednesday?

SYLVIA

I told Miriam I'd go to that Darwin lecture.

TED

Maybe it's not meant to be.

SYLVIA

Maybe.

I'll see you around sometime.

TED

I'm sure.

SYLVIA

Take care.

TED

And you.

SYLVIA

Goodbye.

TED

Goodbye.

SYLVIA

*Sylvia exits with her books.*

That didn't go the way I wanted.

TED

*Ted exits, following after her in a hurry. Virginia enters. There are bombs falling. We're in London during the Blitz.*

VIRGINIA

Through the window, I see the bombs falling and the bodies splayed across the road and I wish Leonard would take me to Lewes so we can live in peace. This city is too painful to see in the darkness of war. I mean, it's too painful to see this city in the darkness of war. Where is my mind going? The noise is changing my ability to think and write. I want to leave. I must leave. Leonard! Leonard!!

*Leonard enters.*

What?

LEONARD

I am dying here.

VIRGINIA

You very well may.

LEONARD

I don't want to.

VIRGINIA

LEONARD  
What can I do?

VIRGINIA  
Let's go to the country. We can write there and be happy away from the bombs.

LEONARD  
I can't leave London now.

VIRGINIA  
My mind is on fire.

LEONARD  
I know.

VIRGINIA  
I will never forget these horrible sounds. The screeching and the sirens. The sirens and the screaming.

LEONARD  
I could send you ahead of me.

VIRGINIA  
You'd have me go alone?

LEONARD  
I'd send a servant or two.

VIRGINIA  
Thank you.

LEONARD  
Your well-being is important to me.

VIRGINIA  
I know.

LEONARD  
Pack your things and we'll arrange for your departure.

VIRGINIA  
Thank you.

LEONARD  
And the war will be over swiftly.

I'm not an idiot.

VIRGINIA

I know you aren't.

LEONARD

I know the war's not going well.

VIRGINIA

Of course.

LEONARD

*Silence.*

I'll start packing.

VIRGINIA

Yes, good.

LEONARD

*Virginia exits. Leonard watches her leave. Ted enters.*

LEONARD  
If I had known I was sending Virginia off to her death, I wouldn't have agreed to the trip to Lewes. I thought that it was safer to have her in the country where war wasn't her constant companion. But this madness wasn't going anywhere. Nor was it staying in London. The madness was in her mind. And followed her to the country.

TED  
Sylvia couldn't evade me for much longer. Or perhaps, she decided to pursue me. Either way. We were inseparable for much of April. She loved listening to my writing. For good reason, of course.

*Sylvia enters. She's holding a pen.*

I wrote something yesterday.

SYLVIA

Good.

TED

I shouldn't have.

SYLVIA

TED

Can I read it?

SYLVIA

Oh, no.

TED

I'd love to.

SYLVIA

You wouldn't like it.

TED

Why not?

SYLVIA

It's about you.

TED

Good things?

SYLVIA

Not entirely.

TED

Then I should read it.

SYLVIA

No.

TED

I'll critique it.

SYLVIA

No!

TED

Then why did you tell me you wrote it?

SYLVIA

I had to...

TED

You shouldn't feel bad about this.

SYLVIA

But I do.

You need to write. TED

I don't. SYLVIA

If you're writing, you need to write. TED

I'm going to burn it. SYLVIA

No! TED

It's the only way to honor Virginia Woolf. SYLVIA

Forget about her! TED

She had advice for me. SYLVIA

She threw herself into a river and drowned. TED

I know. SYLVIA

Why would you listen to her advice? TED

Because it was for me. SYLVIA

You're crazy. TED

I know. SYLVIA

Let me read your poem. TED

No! SYLVIA

*Sylvia runs away.*

LEONARD

Virginia never cared for cultivating younger talent. She feared the competition. But she also thought she was giving helpful advice. She honestly didn't think that women should subject themselves to a writing life. She knew how unhappy she was and thought maybe if she weren't a writer, she would be happier. I always thought she was right. That these poor women were just making themselves worse by constantly feeling a need to express their unhappiness. Delving into the misery and exploring it and expanding it. I told her to take her own advice. But, of course, she didn't. We never do.

*Ted looks at Leonard quizzically. Walking towards him. Virginia enters.*

TED

Leonard Woolf?

LEONARD

Yes.

TED

Ted Hughes.

LEONARD

Oh, hello.

TED

I'm a big fan of yours.

LEONARD

Poor you.

TED

It's an honor to meet you.

LEONARD

No, no.

TED

I've always admired you.

LEONARD

And your work... I find it very exciting.

TED

Really? What have you read?

LEONARD

I'm terrible with titles.

TED

Ah.

LEONARD

But, all of it was very very good.

TED

Thank you.

LEONARD

Moving, powerful.

*Silence.*

LEONARD

Have we met before?

TED

I think I would remember.

LEONARD

You seem very...

TED

I have a bone to pick actually.

LEONARD

Oh?

TED

Your wife.

LEONARD

Virginia.

TED

Yes, Virginia told my wife Sylvia that she should never become a writer. But I think she truly has a gift for writing.

LEONARD

Virginia did not inspire others to write. It was not part of her mission.

TED

Nor should it have been, but Sylvia was very impressionable at the time and...

LEONARD

What do you propose I do?

TED

I... don't know.

LEONARD

Should you come up with something, here's my card.

TED

Oh, thank you.

LEONARD

A true pleasure to meet you Mr Hughes.

TED

And you.

*Leonard exits. Ted screams. Sylvia enters, with paper.*

SYLVIA

Darling?

TED

Sylvia.

SYLVIA

Are you alright?

TED

Yes.

SYLVIA

Are you sure?

TED

I met Leonard Woolf today. At the club.

SYLVIA

You met Leonard Woolf?

TED

He was very nice. And he thinks you should write, if that's what you want to do.

SYLVIA  
You told him?

TED  
I thought he might have some insight.

SYLVIA  
Insight?

TED  
As to why his wife might have said what she did.

SYLVIA  
Mortifying.

TED  
You're overreacting.

SYLVIA  
No more.

TED  
No more what?

SYLVIA  
No more poetry.

TED  
For me?

SYLVIA  
For me.

TED  
Fine.

SYLVIA  
Fine?

TED  
If you don't want to write anymore, fine.

SYLVIA  
Really?

TED

Yes. It's fine.

SYLVIA

Thank you.

TED

I'm going to go to my study.

SYLVIA

Of course.

TED

Give little Nick a kiss for me.

SYLVIA

Yes.

*Ted exits.*

SYLVIA

I consumed your books like they were steak sandwiches. Blood dripping down my face, mustard dabbed at the corners of my mouth, bread stuck between my teeth. It wasn't until I was older that I understood what you were writing about. And why you were writing. And at that point it was too late. I had nothing to write about then. I had emptied myself of thought.

VIRGINIA

Stones in my pockets. A pencil in my hair.

*Leonard enters.*

LEONARD

I hoped I could stop her.

VIRGINIA

He wanted to be rid of me.

LEONARD

I didn't.

VIRGINIA

It's ok.

*Virginia exits.*

SYLVIA

It's a pleasure to meet you.

LEONARD  
Your husband used to tell me so much about you.

SYLVIA  
Oh?

LEONARD  
As a girl you met my wife.

SYLVIA  
I did.

LEONARD  
She was very impressionable.

SYLVIA  
Yes. She told me she never ate sugar.

LEONARD  
That's true.

SYLVIA  
I love sugar.

LEONARD  
So do I.

SYLVIA  
Do you miss her?

LEONARD  
Occasionally.

SYLVIA  
Sometimes I miss Ted.

LEONARD  
I read about him in the paper. I'm so sorry for your loss.

SYLVIA  
Thank you.

LEONARD  
He seemed like a deeply emotional soul.

SYLVIA

He was a poet.

LEONARD

Yes.

SYLVIA

Writers can be unstable.

LEONARD

As we've seen.

SYLVIA

Yes.

*Ted enters.*

LEONARD

Do you have time for a cup of tea?

SYLVIA

I do.

LEONARD

I'll find the waiter.

*Leonard exits.*

SYLVIA

In 1963, my husband hung himself and I was made executor of his estate. I've been going through his journals and unpublished work, determining what to do with it all. What to do with something that's unfinished. Expose it to the world? Allow it to be criticized and analyzed? Or let it sit, as he left them, in a drawer, under his black sweaters. As if I never found them. Scholars will say one thing, but only I will decide.

TED

Perhaps I hadn't thought it through. Leaving Sylvia, the children, my work. Maybe my work was finished. It was as far as I could get with it. Enough. My youth, recorded for the world. My passion, my anger, my wife.

SYLVIA

I won't publish it.

TED

You can.

SYLVIA

You wouldn't have wanted me to.

TED

I do!

SYLVIA

I'll leave it here. In the drawer. For someone else to find.

*Leonard and Virginia enter. It is 2009. Sylvia is old.*

SYLVIA

Herr God, Herr Lucifer  
Beware  
Beware.

Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air.

*End of play.*