

Burning Free: Sylvia Plath's Summer 1962 Bonfires and the Strange Case of the Surviving Christmas Card

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"found in Sylvia's handbag after her death"

– Aurelia Plath

Devon, England: Summer, 1962

It was a hellish summer for Sylvia Plath.¹

In the early summer of 1962 her husband of six years, the poet Ted Hughes, began an adulterous love affair with another man's wife; in July, a furious and unforgiving Plath discovered the affair. Shortly after her discovery of Hughes's infidelity, and with a rage fueled by her well-honed direct access to heightened emotion,² Plath created a succession of three retaliatory bonfires in the backyard of the thatch-roofed home she and Hughes shared with their two young children in Devon, England. In her violent trio of bonfires—one fire each to burn her own, her mother's, and Hughes's important and irreplaceable papers—a manic and vehement Plath incinerated sheaves upon sheaves—ultimately more than a thousand pages—of valuable paperwork and letters.^{3,4}

While Hughes was secreted away with his new lover Assia Wevill in London, an unknowing Plath had been covertly working on the manuscript that she had planned to be the sequel to her posthumously acclaimed 1963 novel *The Bell Jar*. According to Plath's mother, Aurelia Plath,⁵ who had read the drafts, the new semi-autobiographical manuscript "focused on a narrator who, after enduring severe hardship in her youth, returns to health when she enters into a nourishing and supportive marriage" (Alexander 286). In the face of Hughes's adultery, Plath felt both duped by her husband and mocked by the manuscript's Pollyannaish storyline; its naïvely

¹ In an October 25, 1962 letter to her brother, Warren Plath, Plath lamented on "[...] the hell of this [past 1962] summer" (*Letters Home* 476).

² "[Plath displayed] an overresponsiveness to daily experiences—a heightened reactivity to life's ups-and-downs [...]—that was the hallmark of her personality." Cooper, Brian. *Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum*.

³ "The appropriate DSM-IV diagnosis for [Plath's] major illness [is] bipolar II disorder." Cooper, Brian. *Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum*. Plath was displaying the manic phase of the disorder throughout the summer of 1962.

⁴ For more information on Plath's summer of 1962 and the bonfires, see Alexander 278-290.

⁵ Aurelia Plath will henceforth be referred to as "Mrs. Plath."

optimistic sentiments would have ached and burned for her like salt on a fresh wound. Plath angrily turned this manuscript to ash in the first of the three summer bonfires to burn.

The second fire of the summer saw the skies eat "upwards of a thousand" of the letters that her mother had written to her (Alexander 286). Plath's mother's letters to her, many of which were no doubt lengthy and written with great care, thought and time, spanned fifteen years of her life, beginning with the year that Plath left home for Smith College at age seventeen; to when she was twenty-two and moved to England to study at Cambridge University; to her 1956 marriage to, and subsequent two children with, Hughes; to the most recent letter sent to Plath in June.⁶

With her inadvertent confirmation of Hughes's affair on July 9, 1962, Plath was catapulted into the manic phase of the bipolar depression that would end her life (*Letters* 458). It perhaps became inevitable then that an enraged Plath would construct a third and final bonfire, this one purposed to wound her husband in the deliberate way that she knew would hurt him as a writer most: by destroying drafts of his poems as well as his correspondence (Alexander 286). Al Alvarez, a friend to both Plath and Hughes in the two years before Plath's death, writes in a September 14, 1999 *Guardian* article that Plath "took [Hughes's] manuscripts, mixed them with a debris of fingernail parings and dandruff from his desk, and burned them in a witch's ritual bonfire." Although Alvarez was ostensibly not present for the bonfires, we can assume that he learned the specific details of this particular bonfire firsthand from (a perhaps boasting) Plath, with whom he visited a handful of times in the months before her death. By the time the fire's last ruby ember had turned to a black fleck of ash, Plath had burnt countless of her husband's most important and cherished documents.

These three bonfires, conceived in anger and constructed from a desire for revenge, burned approximately eight months before Plath's suicide in London on February 11, 1963, aged 30. We can only imagine how Plath felt—desperate? emboldened?—as she wiped her hands clean of the soot and struggled to scrape the deep-seated dirt from beneath her fingernails; she had burnt and destroyed so much! However, as I would find out during my visit to Indiana University's Lilly Library, Plath had quite strangely spared one particular piece of

⁶ In the third week of June 1962 Mrs. Plath flew from her home in Wellesley, MA to Court Green for an extended summer holiday. Mrs. Plath returned to the States on August 4, 1962.

correspondence, among hundreds, from the bonfires: a Plath family Christmas card sent to her by her mother in December 1955.⁷

Finding the Letter and Recollecting Plath's Last Night

Forty-nine summers after Plath's troika of summer bonfires and while browsing the Sylvia Plath Materials inside the Lilly Library's air-conditioned Reading Room, I had the extraordinary experience of coming across the very letter that Plath had spared from the bonfires. This Christmas card, and more specifically the significance of the card (it is one of the very few remaining pieces of correspondence from Mrs. Plath to Plath and was peculiarly noted by Mrs. Plath to have been found postmortem in Plath's close possession), appears to remarkably have gone, so far as I can tell from my own research, largely overlooked by—if not downright unknown to—the plethora of Sylvia Plath's biographers and scholars.

But the strange case of the surviving card gets even more fascinating: tucked inconspicuously behind the Christmas card is a faded yellow notecard; a short comment, written in Mrs. Plath's hand, remarkably discloses that the Christmas card was found in Plath's handbag after her death. (Mrs. Plath's addendum was especially odd in that she rarely accompanied any of the Plath correspondence with an explanatory or contextual message.) This widely unknown information given by Mrs. Plath—advising us that Plath kept the Christmas card in her handbag, which we know Plath had handled that night—places the Christmas card in Plath's hands days, if not hours, before her death.

I happily admit that my initial thrill in finding this card was not an academic one; instead, the excitement the card held for me was that it (most likely) was one of the last things that Plath, my object of obsession of ten years, had held and seen. Holding the card—taking it up carefully between my thumb and forefinger, lightly tracing my fingers across the thin fifty-six year old delicate cardboard—and imagining that Plath had done the same—with emotions charging through her own fingertips, forty-eight years earlier—I felt closer than ever to Plath, as a fellow

⁷ Alexander erroneously recorded in *Rough Magic* that Plath burned "all" of the Aurelia Plath to Sylvia Plath correspondence (Alexander 286). In fact, through my email correspondence with Peter K. Steinberg, who emailed Smith College's Mortimer Rare Book Room, and my own email correspondence with The Lilly Library, Peter and I discovered that (at least) ten pieces of correspondence from Aurelia Plath to Sylvia Plath are known to exist. The Lilly Library holds the following six pieces of correspondence in Plath mss. II: [1938] (2); [1939] (2); [1946, 27 June] (postcard); [1955, Dec. 14.] (postcard). The Mortimer Rare Book Room holds the following four pieces of correspondence in their Sylvia Plath Collection: [1954, 13 Nov] (TLS, cc); [1959, 8 Dec] (telegram) to Plath and Hughes; [1962, Dec. 4] (signed typed aerogramme); [1962, 8 Dec] (TLS, 3p.).

human being, as the desperate woman who paced the floor of her hollow London flat, in the mid-winter's early-morning, contemplating suicide. With the card placed again flat on the table, I recalled the account recorded in Plath's biographies of her last night alive.

Plath had visited her downstairs neighbor, Trevor Thomas, around eleven o'clock the night before her very early-morning suicide (her time of death was placed at about five o'clock a.m.). In a stupor, she walked the stairs from her second floor flat down to Thomas's first floor door; Thomas, hearing her knocks, pulled open his door only to find a dazed, distant Plath. She asked Thomas for some postage for the letter she was determined to post that night, a request to which he offered to give her the stamps for free. She replied, still apparently in some kind of trance, "Oh, but I want to be right with my conscience before God," and insisted that she pay him in exchange for the stamps (Alexander 329-333). Standing at Thomas's door, Plath held in her hands her "small purse [handbag]"—the very same handbag that the Christmas card was found in after her death (according to Thomas's own testimony, Malcolm 198). Plath opened the bag, then, to retrieve the money, and thumbed around among the items in it—perhaps some lipstick, a wallet, a ring of jangling keys, *the Christmas card*—to put her hand on some loose change. Plath would have swept with her fingers then, rifling through her purse, this very Christmas card that I too brushed with my fingers as I picked it up and examined it.

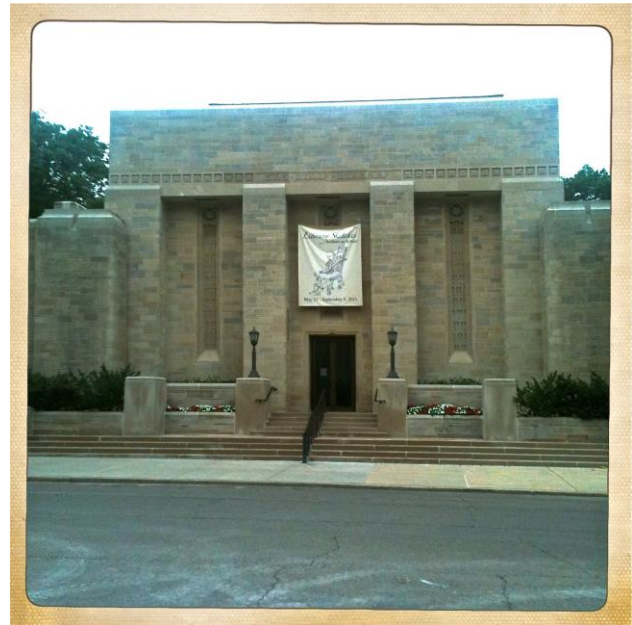
We will never know for certain why Plath saved this particular card nor what, exactly, motivated her to burn the letters from her mother; nonetheless, due to the card's rarity, the unsettling location in which it was found (Plath's handbag), and its unknown personal and special meaning to Plath, this Christmas card is ripe for discussion and poses some most interesting questions.

The Christmas card, which is nothing short of *stunning* due to its uniqueness in the canon of Plath miscellany, begets, for me, two electrifying questions: first, what motivations were present in the summer of 1962 to incite Plath to create the holocaust of a bonfire in which she burnt so many hundreds of the letters her mother had written to her? And second, if Plath had actually preserved this card by design, what was it about *this* card that set it apart from the hundreds of other letters from her mother and compelled her to save it? Based upon extensive evidence I have collected from both unpublished and published letters; books and essays on Plath; email correspondence with a Plath scholar; email correspondence with the two main

libraries housing Plath archives,⁸ and several visits to the Lilly Library, I will present my conclusions as regards the Christmas card's strange existence. As well, I will introduce this surviving Christmas card to the Plath research community at large by describing my own journey in making sense of the Christmas card, beginning with my discovery of it at the Lilly Library.

The Lilly Library; Bloomington, Indiana: August, 2011

The late-summer weather was flawless on the day of my visit to The Lilly Library: warmish, sunny, not a cloud in the sky. The T.V. weatherman's predicted rain had held off and I was itching to get down to work and do what I had come to the library to do: read as much of The Lilly's massive Plath Manuscript Collection as was possible to do in a day's worth of determined study. Because I knew that my time at the library was limited—the library's nine-to-five hours on Fridays meant that I had not a moment to waste—I had to be selective in how my time was spent; I had come to the library prepared, consequently, with a list of specific documents and files for the librarians to pull for me, the majority of which was Plath's correspondence.



This was my fifth visit to The Lilly Library in as many years, driving each time from my home in Columbus, Ohio to Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana; I had found that, on every visit, what interested me most was Plath's unpublished correspondence. In 1975 Mrs. Plath published a book of the letters Plath had written to her, which she titled *Letters Home: Correspondence: 1950-1963*. As sizeable as this book is (502 pages), and with as many letters as it includes, it is a drop in the bucket compared to the cornucopia of unpublished correspondence held at The Lilly. The library's sizeable collection of unpublished letters, which includes letters both to and from Plath, continually fascinates me because with each new letter I am able to

⁸ The two main libraries to house Plath's archives are Smith College's The Mortimer Rare Book Room and Indiana University's The Lilly Library.



construct for myself an even fuller, more dynamic image of Plath than one can attain from biographies or essays alone.⁹ The thousands of unpublished letters allow for Plath herself, as well as her correspondents, to breathe air into, to inflate and conflate, the one-dimensional figure of Plath created in biographies.¹⁰

I am neither a critic nor an academic but, rather, an admirer of Plath's poetry as well as an interested party in the ever-unfolding story of her tragic life. My interest, which is purely for pleasure and has evolved over the years into a serious, dedicated hobby, is most invigorated when I find a piece of information that is new-to-me about Plath at the Lilly's archives. I am often asked why I visit the archives of a dead person I never knew and yet, still, after all these years of visiting and attempting to cobble together some sort of rational answer, I stumble in my answer—I am not sure exactly *what* it is that draws me to the archives; I just know that being there somehow makes me happy.



⁹ Gail Crowther and Peter K. Steinberg created an excellent depiction of what one can find in archival research: "We can see the day-to-day life of a writer, the manuscripts, the drafts, the rejections, the triumphs, and the odd and curious glimpses into a domestic life running parallel to the writer's life" ("These Ghostly Archives" 183).

¹⁰ Due to strict and narrow copyright laws fashioned by the Plath Estate, a limited figure has been formed of Plath. Plath's correspondence at the Lilly Library is the property of the Plath estate which is notorious for limiting publication of its materials; there is, however, an abundance of unpublished correspondence available for in-library use.



In the early morning of my day spent at The Lilly Library, sitting inside the squat library's Reading Room set in the back of the building, I observed the awakening college campus through the cavernous room's four lanky rectangular windows, all of which are strung in unison vertically from floor to ceiling; the daybreak's sunlight slunk around and between the limbs and leaves of the campus's signature sprinkling of Sycamore trees. That peculiar to post-dawn rose color shot in through the quartet of immense windows to where I sat at a rectangular dining-room table sized version of an elementary school desk. To my immediate left, on an old rolling metal side-table, rested a folder-sized dark emerald-green box stuffed brimming full with aged ugly-gray files containing Sylvia Plath's correspondence from the year 1955. Spread out open in front of me on the table was the particular folder containing Plath's November and December 1955 correspondence.

As I idly flipped through the December correspondence, I stopped hard at a simply- and sparsely- decorated 1955 Christmas card that had a handwritten letter on the back dated at the

top, in Mrs. Plath's familiar hand, "December 14, 1955." *But had not Plath burnt all of her letters from her mother?* I peered closely but I could find no logical reason for why Plath would not have burned this particular card—even upon my second, closer inspection, there did not seem to be anything special about it: it looked like a pleasant, plain family Christmas card with a nice photograph of Plath and her brother, Warren Plath, on the front and a fairly blasé letter from her mother on the back.



Besides the way the white background of the Christmas card has faded a bit from its original starchy-white quality to a duller one due to age, the card itself remains in near-pristine condition. On the front left-hand side of the card is the relatively large black and white photograph of Plath and Warren Plath. Underneath the photograph, in Mrs. Plath's black-penned autograph, is the tender phrase: "Home/ and/ The two I love Best!" On the upper right-hand part of the card, printed in a curly italic font, the card bears a friendly "Merry Christmas!" Underneath the holiday greeting, encircled largely by the second *s* in "Christmas," is printed the year "1955"; Mrs. Plath has written in the word "Mother" under the "1955" and, on the bottom

right corner, she has added the notation "\$ Enc." The card measures 5½" wide by 4½" tall with tiny scalloped edges running round the entire length. It appeared that Mrs. Plath had this Christmas card printed up in order that she could send out, *en masse*, greetings for the 1955 holiday season to family and friends alike.

Clearly, Plath had taken care of the card, presenting as it does today without any bent edges or folds; yet the card does have three transparent smudges: one on the lower left hand corner where Mrs. Plath had written her sweet caption about home and her two children whom she "loves best," and two more small smears on the back.¹¹

December 14, 1955

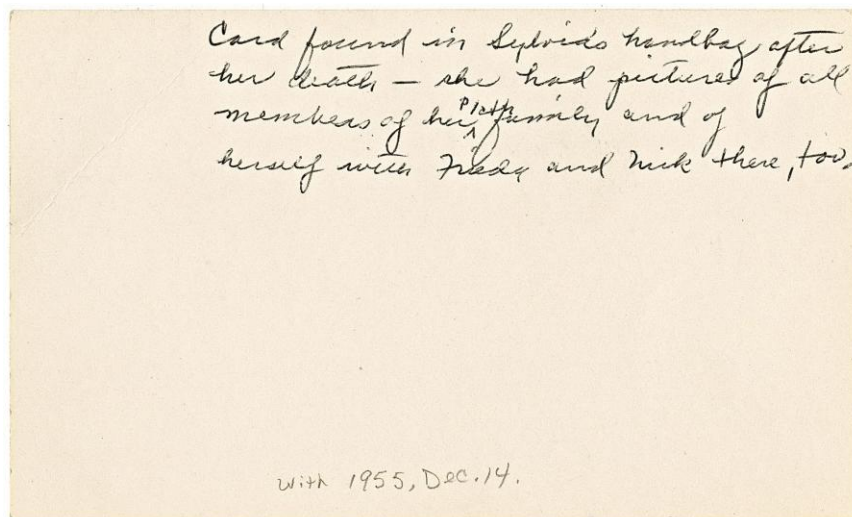
Dearest Livvy - Just now I read your Christmas letter - written when you received your stocking. It warmed us all. I am glad you opened the box and that your very own stocking brightens your English fireplace. Now you can eat all the filled & Linget-torte cookies you wish and no one will scold! I know that you have received a complete batch! I am glad that you will manage to visit Maclary's family, too; for certainly he has been a loyal friend. How interesting to compare the Wobber household and the Lythgoes. I am imagining the latter family as well-to-do and aristocratic. I understand what you mean by the warmth of Jewish people -- when I taught in Brookline High, I was so warmly welcomed into Jewish homes. I told you, I am sure, that my Jewish students petitioned the Nat'l Board of their sorority to permit me to become their sponsor. The request was denied, but gave me joy nevertheless. I am planning to enclose \$10 - in this note and send this registered mail -- if that is permissible, if not, I'll send it ~~under~~ ^{under} another cover. Please purchase something in Paris for yourself as a gift from me. . . or use it for a special treat there. Some day when your daughter is in Paris for Christmas - away for the first time on that day - you will understand completely all I feel as I truthfully say - "I rejoice in your having a Paris-for-the-first-time Christmas." We all miss you terribly, Darling, but we are happy for and with you at the same time. God bless you. Stay well! Love - Mother

To Richard, too.
my money

¹¹ Please see Appendix 1 for the full transcript of Aurelia Plath's December 14, 1955 letter to Sylvia Plath.

Turning the postcard over so that it was vertical, I saw that she (Mrs. Plath) had composed, in tiny longhand, a lengthy letter utilizing the card's entire length and width. Taking up the entire creamy white space of the Christmas card's back side, Mrs. Plath's penned letter to her daughter begins by expressing pleasure that Plath has received the Christmas stocking sent from home (Wellesley, Massachusetts) to hang on her own fireplace in her dormitory room at Cambridge University. The letter ends on a sentimental note: Mrs. Plath writes how pleased she is that Plath is celebrating "a Paris-for-the-first-time Christmas." She adds that she is enclosing ten dollars and asks that Plath use it to purchase something in Paris as a gift for herself. Mrs. Plath writes next, heartbreakingly, that she knows Plath will feel the same way when *her* own daughter also celebrates Christmas in Paris for the first time—tragically, Plath would never know this same feeling, as she died when her daughter was just two years old.

Following directly behind the Christmas card in the file folder lies a scrappy looking, unlined notecard with the inscription "with 1955 Dec. 14 [Plath family Christmas card]" written in pencil across the bottom. The notecard is five inches wide by three inches tall and bears only one sentence. Mrs. Plath, in her recognizable spidery-thin handwriting, has written, stunningly: "Found in Sylvia's handbag after her death—she had pictures of all members of her Plath family and of herself with Frieda and Nick there, too." Note well: Plath did not have, according to Mrs. Plath, any photographs of her husband, Ted Hughes, in the collection of photographs she maintained in her handbag at the time of her death.



This thrilling finding offers so many extraordinary points and questions to consider: *Plath had saved the card from the bonfires! (But why?) Plath treasured this card! (But what was it about the card that was so special?) And, with shivers down my spine, Plath may have held this very card in her last hours! (O what a peanut-cruncher, am I.)*

Columbus, Ohio: Winter, 2012

Several months had passed since I found the 1955 Plath family Christmas card at The Lilly Library; it was mid-January and the questions that arose for me in the archives had been churning away in my head for nearly five months. The two main areas of my piqued interest lay first, in the bonfires: why did Plath burn her mother's letters to her? And, second, the peculiarity of the Christmas card itself: why had Plath not burnt this card, too, in the bonfires? I was captivated and curious—too curious, in fact, to let the matter drop.

And so, in an effort to nudge out from history the card's special meaning to Plath, and to ascertain if this surviving letter was, actually, unknown to Plath scholars, I decided to send an email detailing my finding of the Christmas card to Peter K. Steinberg, a fellow Plath admirer and scholar; Peter, who owns and edits both an extensive informational website and blog on Plath¹² read my email and "practically fell off his desk chair" with excitement. He quickly replied and wrote that he regarded the Christmas card as very special and rare; indeed, until now he had never known of its existence. And, like me, Peter was eager to learn more about the card.

But first, to verify that it was indeed scantily known, if not totally unknown, in Plath circles, Peter emailed another Plath scholar, one who is particularly familiar with her correspondence; the scholar, David Trinidad, whose area of expertise is in Plath's correspondence from the summer of 1959 and 1961-1963, wrote back that he did not have any knowledge of this card's existence, either, as it was before his time period of focus.

With these inquiries behind me, I could be fairly certain now that I had found an unknown piece of surviving correspondence from Mrs. Plath to Plath, which was particularly special because it had been found in her handbag under morbid conditions. Moving forward now

¹² Peter K. Steinberg's websites about Plath can be accessed on the internet at: <http://www.sylviaiplath.info/> and <http://sylviaiplathinfo.blogspot.com>.

in my informal investigation to understand the Christmas card better, and with Peter's help and the aid of research documents, archives, and the assistance of obliging librarians, I set off, a detective, to uncover more about the Christmas card.

My single major abiding curiosity about the Christmas card was why Plath cherished the card so much that she saved it from the fires (and cherish it she seems to have done, given that she kept it so close to her in her handbag; my fair female readers will know that a woman often stows her most precious photographs for safekeeping and swift access in her handbag, as Plath seems to have done with the card. Also, for having been stored in her handbag, the card was in remarkably good condition, indicating that she cared for it as though it were indeed precious). However, I needed first to examine the factors involved in the Plath mother-daughter relationship that would have—could have—provoked Plath to act so callously and so violently towards her mother that she would burn all but a handful of her mother's letters.¹³

Why Did Plath Burn Her Letters From Her Mother?

In order to plumb Plath's relationship with her mother deeper than I had already done in my ten years of study, I turned this time with a more discerning eye to *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*—for Plath's own account of her life-long strife with her mother. After reading through the length of Plath's *Journals* once more, I concluded that there were two particular reasons that stood out among many for her instigation of the bonfire: firstly, Plath was so angry and exasperated with her mother that she finally exploded in a firecracker of rage and hostility, as manifested by the bonfires; and, secondly, by using the bonfires as tools of destruction, Plath was able to both metaphorically and literally annihilate her past as it had been entombed in the letters. Of course the reasons for Plath's bonfires may not have been quite so simple—one's motivations are rarely black-and-white, but for the purpose of this paper I shall keep my theories straightforward.

Burning the Letters as an Expression of Hostility Against Her Mother

¹³ To view the poem Plath wrote about her summer 1962 bonfires, please refer to "Burning the Letters," *Collected Poems* 204-205.

Scholars and admirers of Plath are the fortunate beneficiaries of her *Journals'* many personal revelations; her hefty *Journals* are ripe with autobiographical material comprising her feelings on subjects as varied as her observations on war, her affinity for Virginia Woolf, and her frustrations at the receipt of dozens of editors' rejection letters. More significantly, the journal entries from 1958 also contain detailed accounts of the insights that she came to in therapy about her difficult relationship with her mother. A particular journal entry I found that best illuminated Plath's feelings towards her mother was written on Friday, December 12, 1958 (*Journals* 429-438). This entry helps to explain how Plath used the bonfire as an expression of hostility against her mother.

Beginning in the latter part of 1958, and following several of the therapy sessions she underwent with her trusted psychiatrist Dr. Ruth Beuscher, Plath would sit down at her typewriter and record for her journal her psychological work as she processed it. During the course of her therapy, and writing concurrently in her journal, Plath examined the always complex, often oppressive, relationship she and her mother shared. In this entry Plath especially explores the anger that she felt towards her mother and the experiences from which the resentment had emanated.¹⁴ It was on this day that Plath, sitting at her desk in her cramped Boston apartment, typed the following for her journal: "Who am I angry at? Myself. No, not yourself. Who is it? It is my mother" (*Journals* 437). Plath then elucidates the problems in the mother-daughter relationship by devoting nine pages of her *Journals* to the recitation of a litany of explanations for her merciless hostility towards her mother (429-438).

With the grateful release of tension that comes from a freeing epiphany, Plath was able to uncover in therapy, and consequently in her journal, this momentous and poignant revelation: her firm belief that she "hates" her mother (*Journals* 429). In therapy Plath was able to express, discuss, and explore the ferocious feelings she had about her mother; she recorded in her journal her pleased relief that she felt "much freed" after her sessions with Dr. Beuscher. In fact, Plath felt "freed" due to the fact that the doctor gave Plath "permission" to share in therapy the hostile and taboo feelings that she dredged up about her mother (*Journals* 437, 429). Dr. Beuscher's permission for Plath to be honest in therapy inspired her to practice emotional honesty outside of

¹⁴ For the purpose of this paper, I will not go into the finer details of Plath's relationship with her mother, other than to say that Plath justified her anger at her mother in a variety of ways. For more information on the Plath mother-daughter relationship, please see the Plath biographies listed in the Works Cited.

therapy, too: employing the useful function of extemporaneous writing in her journal, she rehearsed expressing her authentic feelings. Unrestrained now, Plath let flow and describes her mother in this entry as alternatively a "killer," an "enemy," "deadly as a cobra," and a "walking vampire" (*Journals* 433, 429).

But before Plath delves subterranean in her journal and uncovers grim memories and motives for her hatred, she exercises her characteristic sharp, droll humor (perhaps as a mechanism to loosen up her automatic daughterly defenses); to wit, she describes a hypothetical conversation she imagines she might have with Dr. Beuscher in the future, should she ever doubt again her freedom to hate her mother. "Doctor," she would ask, "can I still go on hating my mother?" Dr. Beuscher, in turn, would reaffirm for Plath that she can "'hate her hate her hate her.'" "'Thank you doctor, I sure do hate her'" (*Journals* 429).

Plath then creates a list in her journal, with each successive line delineating another pressing worry of hers, and titles it "Main Questions" (*Journals* 437). Tellingly, the very first point on the list is "What to do with hate for mother." (Other worries include: "What to do for money & where to live: practical./ What to do with fear of writing: why fear? Fear of not being a success?") Plath has no firm answers that satisfy her; the best she can do is ask of herself if she could ever imagine loving her mother again; she determines, "I don't imagine time will make me love her." She realizes though that even if she cannot love her, she can at least feel sympathy for her mother's difficult life. "I can pity her: she's had a lousy life [...] But that is only pity. Not love" (*Journals* 429).

Plath's wrath towards her mother dated back (at least) five years from the time of this journal entry to 1953 when she was twenty and made her first serious suicide attempt. Plath's anger was so inflamed at the time that she even contemplated killing her mother (although how seriously she actually considered doing this we do not, and probably never will, know). Writing as a mature twenty-five year old in her journal about her state of mind in the days surrounding the suicide attempt, Plath confesses that she had considered strangling her mother ("and [I] thought what a luxury it would be to kill her, to strangle her skinny veined throat"); but, she writes, she was instead "too nice for murder" (*Journals* 433). (*Too nice for murder*, indeed!) In the event, instead of killing, or strangling, her mother, Plath turned her outward anger (homicidal) inwards towards herself (suicidal) and tried to kill herself instead: "How thoughtful,

do unto yourself as you'd do unto others. I'd kill her, so I killed myself" (*Journals* 433). On August 25, 1953 Plath attempted suicide; she was found alive three days later.

Plath made an especially ominous declaration in her December 12, 1958, journal entry. In this entry she unwittingly foreshadowed the motivations for her summer of 1962 trilogy of bonfires: she wrote presciently that it made her "feel good as hell to express" her anger and hostility (*Journals* 429). It took her three and a half years but finally, in the summer of 1962, Plath was able to fully "express" this anger and hostility—which had turned into an aggressive rage that burned inside of her for release (*Journals* 429). One can only imagine (or, maybe not) Plath's manic sense of bliss and liberation, the way she felt "good as hell" as she wickedly burnt her mother's letters (*Journals* 429).

By the time of her death in 1963, Plath's emotional Molotov cocktail, consisting of (among other strongly antagonistic feelings) her anger and hatred towards her mother, was only *one* of the reasons that she created the bonfire in which she burnt her mother's letters. In the following section I will discuss the second motivation Plath may have had for burning the letters from her mother.

Burning the Letters as a Literal and Metaphorical Annihilation of the Past

"Eventually she would yearn to kill her false self so that her real one might burn free of it" (Stevenson 23).

Clearly, Plath was furious with her mother and burning her letters would have been seriously wounding; but what if that particular motivation was just one of the arrows in Plath's quiver that summer? An alternative theory has Plath burning the letters not so much as an act of revenge against her mother as an act of, as Stevenson says, burning free of—or, annihilating—her past with Hughes.

Letters are "fossils of feeling" which create a present-day artifact of a mood and time passed (Malcolm 110). They create a historical record and relic of what once was and are often, years after having been transcribed, no longer representative of one's new maturity, growth, and attitudes. Letters are an ongoing conversation between two people—the letter written in reply echoes points made in the originating letter, thereby including reminders of the letter to which it is in response.

Likewise, as ripostes to Plath's own pre-affair letters to her, which included joyful accounts of her marriage to Hughes, Mrs. Plath's pre-affair letters too would contain references to the (then) happy marriage. Reading Mrs. Plath's letters would be nothing but a painful reminder for Plath of her past; moreover, Mrs. Plath's rejoinder letters would be embarrassing for Plath, on reexamination, as if she (Plath) had written them herself. As such, they became mortifying reflections of her naïve and poor choice of judgment in trusting that Hughes would put aside his youthful ways when he married her. Plainly put, Mrs. Plath's letters would have reminded Plath, agonizingly, of her former faith in, and love for, Hughes.

Her mother's letters were broadly representative of her life as it once was, not as it was in the winter of 1963. Plath desired that this evidence of her past with Hughes—the letters themselves and the sentiments contained therein—be destroyed and, by creating a funeral pyre to burn the evidence away, she had utilized an age-old method of destroying unwanted letters and other tangible memories: destruction by fire. Thus, in her bid to metaphorically annihilate her past, she literally annihilated the letters—by bonfire. In order to psychologically move beyond her painful past, Plath rid herself of the past's evidence literally (by burning the letters) and metaphorically (by destroying the letters' sentiments).

Watching the bonfire full of her mother's letters burn, while the winds scattered ash wildly in her long, loose dark hair, I imagine Plath feeling, finally, triumphant and squared with the world—or, at least, with her mother.

Why Did Plath Spare the Christmas Card from the Bonfires?

Now that I was finally armed with the background information on some of Plath's possible motivations behind the bonfires, I could advance on to my most needling curiosity: What did Plath treasure so much about *this* Christmas card that she would spare it from the bonfires?

Several email bull sessions between Peter and me gave way to our considering and debating three separate hypotheses: first, and the theory to which I was initially partial, was that Plath had saved the card unintentionally—it was misplaced and therefore she could not burn it; second, Plath had saved the Christmas card for romantic, sentimental reasons: the letter from her mother reminded her of a time in her life which she remembered fondly (Plath spent that Christmas of 1955 in Paris with a boyfriend); and the third theory, of which Peter was the first to

suggest, was that Plath had saved the card for the purpose of retaining its image of herself with her much-loved younger brother, Warren Plath.

My earliest impression and the one that I explored first—that Plath had saved the Christmas card accidentally—was based on the premise that Plath may have found the card only *after* she created the bonfires, perhaps when she was packing up her house to move to London in the fall of 1962; indeed, she may have even forgotten that she had the Christmas card. But the notion of Plath being so sloppy is doubtful for such an organized woman and disciplined saver. In fact, as Peter relayed to me, Plath was *so* determined and resolute about her demolition that, according to a letter from Hughes to Ian Hamilton, she even destroyed all but a couple of her photographs of herself—in addition to the summer bonfires in which she burnt her manuscript, Hughes's papers and the letters from her mother.¹⁵ (Hughes's letter does not indicate when Plath destroyed the photographs.) Plath was clearly in a mind that summer to abolish in totality all that she wanted to, and that is exactly what she did. I had to dismiss out of hand, then, the theory that the card had averted the bonfires purely by accident, simply because the idea that Plath would overlook that particular card would be out of her meticulous character and manic determination that summer. Plath methodically burnt, and likewise methodically saved, all of the correspondence that she had intended.

That Plath saved the card for sentimental reasons was only a bit more likely than my initial impression. It was in December 1955, a week before setting off for a trip to France, that Plath received the family Christmas card from her mother. The epistle written to her by her mother on the back of the card, referencing this Christmas trip to Paris, may have reminded Plath, in early 1963, of both where she had been and how she had been feeling when she received it: getting ready to leave for a three week vacation in France and passionately in love. On winter break from Cambridge, where she had received a Fulbright Scholarship to study, Plath planned to spend December 20th to January 9th in France.¹⁶ In Paris, Plath was reunited with her Yale boyfriend and great love, Richard Sassoon.¹⁷ The two lovers had a romantic time exploring France and sightseeing together. I imagined an older, wearier, Plath, who was despairing and

¹⁵ Hughes, Ted. Letter to Ian Hamilton. 1963. ALS. The Review Manuscripts collection in Rare Books and Special Collections. Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, Illinois. Box 6, folder 67.

¹⁶ For more information about Plath's December 1955 to January 1956 trip to France, please see Alexander 171-174.

¹⁷ Sassoon wrote to Plath in 1955, "I do not believe I shall ever love another woman so heartedly, so deeply, so happily, so sadly, so confidently, so desperately, so fully, as my love for you has been" (Alexander 162).

lonely, holding the Christmas card in her hand, in the freezing, biting cold of the British February of 1963, and it evoking for her fond memories of an enchanting trip and simpler times—both of which she may have ached for.¹⁸ In time, however, I had to abandon this theory due to the fact that Plath would not have rescued this card for the sole purpose of retaining memories of this trip; in fact, Plath had a written account of this trip in her journal for any reminiscing she cared to do.¹⁹ Sentimentality alone, for the time and place that the Christmas card represented to her, would not have been reason enough on Plath's agenda to encourage her keep hold of the card.

After rejecting the first two theories, it did not take me long to see the good sense of Peter's opinion that Plath retained this Christmas card for the simple fact that it contained the photograph of her with her brother, and only sibling, Warren Plath. In considering this theory, I reviewed what was known about her relationship with her brother; additionally, I carried out a short review of literature on sibling-relationships.

Sylvia Plath and Her "Perfect Love"

Unfortunately, there is not particularly much known about the Plath children's sibling relationship beyond the basics, which Plath's biographers seem to have covered well;²⁰ as well, there is scant known about Warren Plath himself at all, beyond what is documented in the biographies of his sister.²¹ In my pursuit to piece together a rough sketch of the dynamics in their sibling relationship, I turned to Plath's letters to her brother in *Letters Home* as well as her *Journals*. In addition, to get a sense of what psychiatric theory reveals, I found one particularly pertinent article published in *The Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Whitney Stach's "Sister Sister: Interpreting Intimacy in Sibling Relationships," whose Review of Literature contains an excellent evaluation of sibling dynamics. In order to understand why Plath felt the way she did for her brother, I applied the analyses from the article to the relationship between the Plath siblings.

¹⁸ See Plath's unpublished letter to her mother, December 12, 1955, Plath mss. II, Lilly Library. In this Christmas letter Plath writes to her mother that, in Paris, she will be as happy as possible.

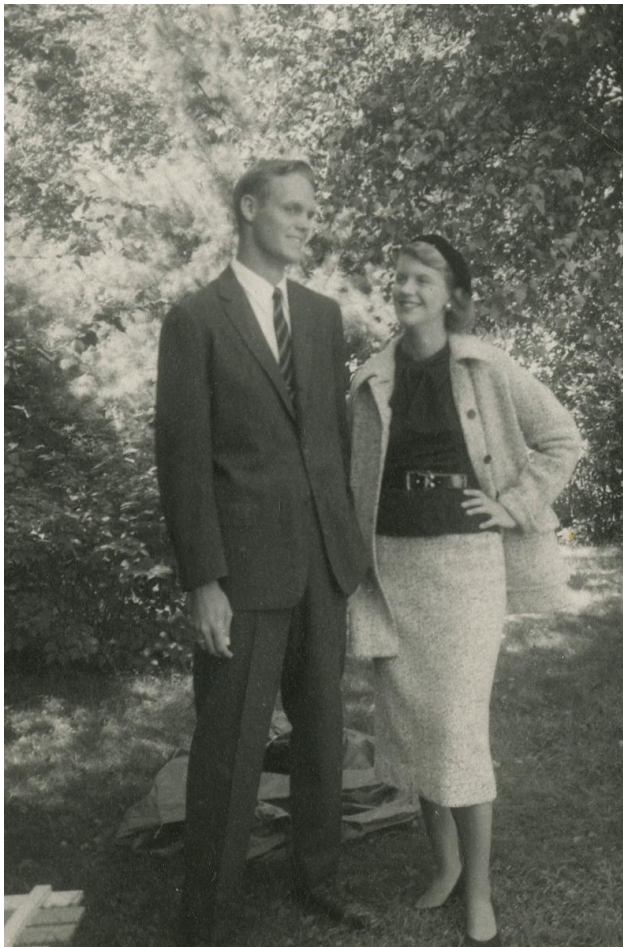
¹⁹ To read Plath's journals in which she wrote about her Dec. 1955-Jan 1956 Paris, France trip, see *Journals* 547–551.

²⁰ The biographies I used for my research were: *Rough Magic*, *Bitter Fame*, and *Lover of Unreason*, respectively. See Works Cited for more information on these biographies.

²¹ Warren Plath has never been interviewed, nor has he written any memoirs.

Stach quotes P. Noller & M. Fitzpatrick as having found that "[s]ibling relationships can be quite important in later life and their shared early life seems to provide the basis for continued interaction" (2). Born exactly two and a half years after Plath, Warren Plath squabbled with his older sister, as siblings are wont to do; it was when Warren Plath left home for Exeter and Harvard, and Plath attended Smith, however, that they began to share a mature, warm correspondence. In time, they became loyal allies and equals (Stevenson 9). Stach quoted a study by V.H. Bedford which found that a person's sibling-relationship is often the longest lasting, most constant relationship that a person will have in his or her life (2). This was certainly true for Plath and her brother to the last, as we will see.

Writing in her journal at the age of 22 in February of 1956, Plath had this to say about her brother: "The only perfect love I have is for my brother. Because I cannot love him physically, I



shall always love him" (*Journals* 200). Plath waxed poetically on what Floyd, as quoted in Stach, wrote plainly: "Friendships are often transitory and context-specific, marital unions fail nearly as often as they succeed, and relationships with parents or children wax and wane as other commitments interfere" (2). Plath, having run through such relationships (friendships that had dwindled by time and distance; a marital union that had all but ended; and an adult relationship with her mother which turbulently "waxed and waned"), was left with only her brother to whom she could turn. Sibling relationships, as Plath declared, make up the one "perfect" relationship that a person will have in his or her life.

Plath could never have had a familial non-physical "perfect" love with her father, as she had with her brother, because he was dead (Otto Plath, Plath's father, died when she was eight years old); similarly, Plath could not have

had this kind of sustainable "perfect" male love with her husband, because their relationship was one of lovers (therefore "imperfect" and subject to not lasting for "always," according to Plath's interpretation of the "perfect love" theory).

In "Sister Sister," S.A. Myers is quoted as stating that "siblings forge communication relationships with one another that are unlike any other relationship" (2). Plath was able to share a relationship with her brother that was especially unlike that which she had with her mother; their relationship became one in which, through correspondence, Plath could be honest about her deepest thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, because their correspondence was stilted, Plath could not share this same type of honest relationship with her mother.

I recognized that this dichotomy, which especially illustrates Plath's close, confidant-like relationship with Warren Plath, occurred principally in Plath's correspondence with her brother and mother in her last months. Plath was able to write honestly to her brother, whereas she often sent her mother "honey-sweet" reassuring letters (*Journals* 430). An excellent example of the dichotomy occurs in mid-October 1962. On October 16 Plath wrote to her mother, "I am writing with my old fever of 101 degrees [... but] *I am all right*" [*Letters*' italics] while the truth came out in an 18 October letter to her brother: "I did not tell mother I almost [recently] died from influenza" (*Letters* 469, 472). Another example of Plath's "honey-sweet" sentiments directed towards her mother occurs in early February 1963; Plath wrote to her mother, only seven days before she committed suicide, "I have been feeling a bit grim" (*Letters* 498). We do not know what, if anything, Plath wrote to her brother in February of the year she died (none are included in *Letters Home*), but we can be sure that she would not have described herself to him as feeling only "a bit grim;" Plath would have shared with her brother the truth of her dire situation, as she had throughout her adult life.

People often turn to their siblings "to help fill personal needs, including companionship, comfort, affection, friendship, and intimacy" (Stach 2). Likewise, Plath turned to her brother particularly towards the end of her life when she knew that she could count on him. In fact, Warren Plath was so much her "loyal ally" in the subsequent months after Hughes left her, that he was even ready to "uproot [his and his new wife's] lives" to come to England to stay with Plath in her roughest days (Stevenson 9; *Letters* 476). Plath wrote to her brother in October 1962 that she "often thought" of him and had a photograph of him sitting on her desk so that she could

remember him while she worked in the fall of 1962 on the verses that would become the celebrated *Ariel* poems (*Letters* 467, 476).

The photograph of her brother on the Christmas card radiates with the one true love, the "perfect" love, of Plath's life. Plath spared the Christmas card from the bonfire because of the photograph and, more importantly, the sentiment of love for her brother that it represented to her. In her final days she kept the card close to her by stowing it safely in her handbag where she could turn to it whenever she wanted, wherever she was—whether she was out and about shopping or inside her flat, lonely. Plath could look at that old black and white photograph of her with her brother and know that, of all the people—men, especially—in her life, he would not leave her (like her father) and he would not betray her (like Hughes). Regrettably, time and fate conspired to create a tragic vortex in which Plath was alone, depressed and suicidal in London on February 11, 1963, after having written to Warren Plath in October 1962 that she no longer needed him to come to London to stay with her (*Letters* 476).²²

Consequently, and ever so sadly, Warren Plath's ensuing trip to London was to attend his sister's funeral, and not to rescue or assist her through her terrible depression—as he had been willing to do. Yehuda and Negev, authors of *Lover of Unreason*, a biography of Hughes' mistress Assia Wevill, write that, while Mrs. Plath was too ill to attend, Warren Plath and his wife Margaret Plath flew to London for Plath's funeral. Notably, Hughes "let the young couple stay in Sylvia's flat" (116). In an email interview via Peter K. Steinberg with Warren Plath's daughter Susan Plath Winston,²³ who took our questions (mine and Peter's) to her father, it is Warren Plath's best recollection that it was his wife, Margaret Plath, who was most likely the conduit in bringing the Christmas card from Plath's London flat back to Mrs. Plath in the States. Mrs. Plath then made the decision to include this remarkable piece of surviving correspondence in The Lilly Library's Sylvia Plath Materials archival collection; as well, she chose to include with the Christmas card her addendum on the yellow notecard, which stated that Plath had the card in her handbag when she died.

²² Plath wrote to her brother on October 25, 1962: "Just a short letter to say how immensely grateful I was to feel you both so thoroughly behind me that you would consider uprooting your lives for our [Plath and the children's] sake! Thank goodness, it won't be in any way advisable or necessary" (*Letters* 476).

²³ Email correspondence with Peter K. Steinberg, who received via email the answers to our questions for Susan Plath Winston and her father, Warren Plath.

Ultimately I came to the conclusion, after my wide-ranging research, that Plath had saved the Christmas card sent to her by her mother in December of 1955 not by accident; nor had she saved it because she was sentimental about her trip to France. Rather, Plath saved and cherished the Christmas card because it contained a photograph of her brother, Warren Plath.

Columbus, Ohio: Present Day, Spring 2012

I have now spent nearly two seasons of my life closely studying Plath. As I write, I am about to turn thirty-one, the first year that Plath did not live to see; I have outlived her by eight months. Often, during these last months, I have thought and felt how sorry I am that Plath never lived to thirty-one, as I have somehow done. In my research and concurrent journey, I have come to know Plath more as a real person, distraught that this stranger did not survive; and I was especially upset that she had to endure what she did towards the end of her life—a difficult relationship with her mother and a philandering husband.

Through the course of my research since last autumn, I have posed many questions about the Christmas card and finally concluded three major points: first, Plath was furious as hell the summer of 1962; second, Plath's anger drove her to literally burn her mother's letters and metaphorically burn her past; and third, most significantly, it was by no accident that Plath spared the 1955 Plath family Christmas card from the fires. Indeed, Plath spared the 1955 Plath Family Christmas card for the purpose of remembering the brother whom she so cherished and loved, Warren Plath.

Appendix 1: Transcript of Aurelia Plath's December 14, 1955 letter to Sylvia Plath.

December 14, 1955

Dearest Sivvy - Just now I read your Christmas letter, written when you received your stocking. It warmed us all. I am glad you opened the box and that your very own stocking brightens your English fireplace. Now, you can eat all the filled Linzer-torte cookies you wish and no one will scold! Know that you have received a complete batch. ¶ I am glad that you will manage to visit Mallory's family, too; for certainly he has been a loyal friend. How interesting to compare the Wobber household and the Lythgoe one. I am imagining the latter family as well- to-do and aristocratic. I understand what you mean by the warmth of Jewish people -- when I taught in Brookline High, I was so warmly welcome into Jewish homes. I told you, I am sure, that my Jewish students petitioned the Nat'l Board of their sorority to permit me to become their sponsor. ‡ The request was denied, but gave me joy nevertheless.

I am planning to enclose \$10 - in this note and send this registered mail -- if that is permissible, if not, I'll send it ~~another~~ under another cover. Please purchase something in Paris for yourself as a gift from me... or use it for a special treat there.

Some day when your daughter is in Paris for Christmas - away for the first time on that Day - you will understand completely all I feel as I truthfully say - "I rejoice in your having a Paris-for-the-first-time Christmas. We all miss you terribly, Darling, but we are happy for you with you at the same time."

God bless you. Stay well! Love - Mother.

[up side of postcard] Merry Xmas to Richard, too!

Permissions & Acknowledgments

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