

LYDIA CORTESE-BLAKE

On Thursday, February 18, 1971, Lydia Cortese-Blake ended her life by jumping from the tenth floor of Mount Sinai Hospital to the street below. All were shocked. Why did she do it? She had a good job, family and friends, worked with a number of organizations and projects, still had an excellent singing voice and looked much younger than her age (she was in her 60's). Why could she not have completed her natural span of life?

I had first met Lydia about ten years before, when she worked for the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation. (I was with the Henry George School at the time, in the same building.) While there, her husband, Whitney Blake, died suddenly of a heart attack. She was much broken up over this but eventually seemed to recover bit by bit. She left the Foundation and continued working at various other jobs. She completed her husband's musical research project and donated it to the Eastern School of Music. She kept in touch and we saw her at the Henry George School from time to time.

In the Summer of 1970 I was looking for a new job, having completed a sabbatical leave from the Henry George School. Lydia was working at Mount Sinai Hospital at the time and told me of a job opening there which I took. It was with the Anesthesia Dept. where she was also working.

Thereafter I was in frequent contact with Lydia. We met daily for lunch and I saw her during the day and after work. I learned much more about her through these meetings and conversations.

She told of her unhappiness and loneliness. She had been much attached to her husband and it was a terrible wrench for her when he died. They had lived a total life together, 24 hours a day for 16 years, devoting themselves to musical research, recordings and publishing. She sang, typed, filed, worked, corresponded, loved, kept house, and on occasion took outside work to help needed money coming in.

With Whitney's death, Lydia's world seemed to come to an end. She tried to pick up some scattered pieces but had difficulty in forming a new pattern of life. She felt the need of a man in her life and kept looking but nobody seemed to fill the bill. She wanted another Whitney Blake, a very "rare bird." Some widows are consoled with their children, but this was denied to Lydia, not having had any children.

The problem was deeper and went back, as Lydia herself said, to her childhood. Very early in life she aspired to education and culture. Her father scoffed, not considering this appropriate for a girl. This made Lydia all the more determined to make a success of it, to win over her father and have him praise her. She brought home from school top grades and honors, but her father belittled it all. This was a hurt from which Lydia never recovered.

With the same determination, she came to New York and studied dramatics and singing, eventually launching an operatic career. When she met and married Whitney Blake she then diverted her career into the musical channels in which he was working. Her intelligence, talent and capacity for hard work as well as affection were all at his service.

Lydia, besides having strong drives and being strong-willed, was also very sensitive. She was frequently hurt by slights - fancied or real - and disappointments. Whitney was always ready to comfort her until she was restored - and it often took a great deal of comforting.

When he died, this source of comfort was gone. Her father had died but her mother still lived and Lydia turned frequently to her. Together they went regularly to a philosophical-inspirational group under the direction of Dr. Zeukal, and Lydia praised him highly.

But as time wore on even this recourse proved inadequate. Discontent and loneliness beset her. She had a dog in her house of whom she was very fond and said that this responsibility helped keep her going.

She renewed acquaintance with an old friend, John, who was also in musical work. Somewhere along the line Lydia became persuaded that John was the man for her. She approached him frequently and sometimes he was receptive but more frequently he discouraged her. With her combination of strong will and sensitivity she could not accept this and kept after him more persistently. Finally - this was around November 1970 - he rebuffed her in no uncertain terms and this was a deep blow to her.

Another old friend, Tito, saw her agony and offered to come and stay at her house and help in whatever way he could. Lydia was at first pleased with this and accepted, but in time she became dissatisfied. Tito, she complained, had no "intellect," there was no rapport, she criticized his habits, etc. It was John she wanted.

I had many conversations with Lydia about this and so did other friends and family members. No matter what qualities John may have, we pointed out, there is nothing to do if he does not want a relationship, and the best thing is to forget him. Lydia agreed, said she saw the situation clearly with her mind - but could not control her emotions.

We kept exploring the situation and once found a book which described her condition exactly and offered a remedy - not to try to overcome it all at once but to take small measures and build on them.

Lydia agreed with all the positive advice she received - but could not make it stick. She grew more despondent and could not sleep at night. She began looking haggard and started talking about suicide. I and others tried to put her off on this. I don't think we took her seriously but felt this was a way of bringing her agony to the attention of others. She asked me to find out from the doctors what pills she could take to end it all.

I urged Lydia to seek professional psychiatric help. She was afraid, she said. Besides having had a bad brush once with a bungling psychiatrist, she was afraid she would be committed to an institution and never get out. Nor was that her only fear. "I'm scared," she kept saying. "Of what?" I asked. "I don't know," she would reply. Her mother urged her to have faith, to trust in God, and I said this was not bad advice. But Lydia said religion held no comfort for her.

One day on her way to the office, Lydia said that "something happened" to her - something inside, as though everything had gone haywire. Outwardly there was scarcely any change except for a worried look on her face. She kept to her daily rounds, kept working and functioning. "Nobody knows," she would say, "how much bravery it takes for me to get up each morning and go through the day. I force it through sheer will power."

I commented that her inner suffering did not show, that if she could only cheer up a bit she still had her looks as well as her talent. She tried to smile but it was a pathetic smile. "Isn't it ironic," she said, "that none of this shows on the outside? Nobody can believe what is going on inside of me. I can't believe it myself." There developed an odd passivity about her. Once, when I pressed her arm to comfort her, it felt as though the flesh were dead to the touch.

She kept talking of John, at one moment hating him, at another moment wanting to be near him. Her anger at him was turning against herself and I pointed this out. "I know," she said, "but I can't help it."

As I believe, the John episode triggered off a whole series of memories and habits, reaching back to childhood. She said John reminded her of her father, "a

"stubborn Italian." All the old wounds were opened - the frustration of a strong personality, losing in the "battle of wills", grief over her husband, not finding the kind of comfort she so badly needed. And she somehow felt her life had to be built around a man, the right man, and she would not settle for less. "You have had such a life for 16 years," I said. "Can you not now build a new life for yourself as other widows do? If you relax about it, maybe the right man will come along. While you are desperate you will only repel any prospect." Here too she could agree mentally but not emotionally. She felt she was "out of control."

Her agony was compounded by a feeling of guilt about all the friends who were trying to help and whose time she felt she was wasting - guilt about her dog who was sad because she was sad - guilt because she disliked Tito who was so kind to her and wanted John who was so unkind to her.

On February 18 we had lunch as usual. She spoke strongly about her suffering. Later in the afternoon she seemed calmer and went about her chores. About 3:45 P.M. I received a frantic call on the 9th floor where I worked, from the 10th floor, that Lydia had jumped out the window. I ran up and they told about it. While the others were not looking Lydia opened the window and climbed onto the air-conditioning box. She was sitting there when one of the girls (Linda) came in and called out to one of the doctors (Dr. Weinreich). He ran to the window but it was too late. She had jumped and he watched, hypnotized, as the body floated down what seemed forever before landing on the street below.

And so ended the earthly life of Lydia Cortese-Blake.

It seems ironic to me that Lydia worked and ended her life in a place devoted to healing the sick - a hospital that was oblivious to her suffering. While her decision for suicide was a matter of her personal will and seemed to originate in an area inside her where no one could reach - yet does this not bespeak some sort of social failure that such a person could not be helped in the midst of such an environment?

Perhaps an atmosphere needs to be created where the subject of suicide is not tabu but can be discussed more openly - a "suicide clinic" if you please, where people can be counselled and helped. Every one to whom Lydia spoke about suicide brushed it off as though such a thing was not to be discussed (including myself). It may be wondered too whether, after all the counselling by a "suicide clinic", a person still feels that suicide is the only way out, if he or she might not be assisted in the least painful and shocking way.

Has medicine come no further than when these lines were written? -

Macbeth: Canst thou not minister to ~~an~~ a mind diseased;
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow;
Raze out the written troubles of the brain;
And with some sweet, oblivious antidote,
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff,
Which weighs upon the heart?

Doctor: Therein the patient must minister to himself.

Whatever the case, Lydia has left us, and her family and friends find some consolation in the thought that her sufferings have ended and she has found peace.

Her friend -

Robert Clancy