

***The Virgin Suicides* (1999)**

Dir. Sofia Coppola

"Cecilia was the first to go." With these words, Sofia Coppola's directorial debut begins with an ending. The film opens on an idyllic, tree-lined street, an instrumental version of Air's "Playground Love" lulling the viewer into the curious mindset necessary for a film with such an ominous, foreboding title. Yet we can clearly see that Cecilia, (at thirteen the youngest of the five Lisbon sisters the movie revolves around), is still alive at the onset of the film, her failed attempt at suicide by straight razor first discovered by one of the neighborhood boys through a secret sewer tunnel into the Lisbon's upstairs bathroom. Throughout the course of the film it becomes clear that these neighborhood boys, all similarly obsessed with the mysterious day to day lives of these four blonde ingénues, cared to know far more about the Lisbon sisters than anyone else in their lives ever had. They collect small tokens of "evidence" about the sisters the way a private detective might go through a cheating husband's garbage; pieces of mail, family photographs, even Cecilia's post-mortem diary, in order to piece together the singularly tragedy bereft of any discernible meaning but meaning itself. While the film centers around the Lisbon sisters, it is as much about the infatuated young boys Coppola uses as a framing device for her ever-evolving narrative of what it means to grow up with a mother whose terrified that her daughters might discover their own sexuality as it is about the short, tormented lives of the girls themselves.

Through the use of a non-specific, first person plural narrative, the voices of the neighborhood boys are funneled into the voice of one single, wistful narrator (Giovanni Ribisi). The cautionary tale of the Lisbon sisters is told not through the girls' own perspective, but rather from the perspective of the boys who have taken it upon themselves to become the "custodians of their lives" even after each of them has abruptly departed this world, leaving them in a state of continued shock into their respective adulthoods. These boys cared for the sisters in a way no one else seemed up to task for. "We knew that they knew everything about us, and that we couldn't fathom them at all." They ordered the same catalogs as the girls and poured over them together in an attempt to feel closer to them, planning imaginary vacations with the sisters through photos of the exotic destinations shown in these magazines. They are in love them, they care for them, they are terrified of them.

"Cecilia needs a social outlet where she can interact with males her own age," says Dr. Horniker (a hardly recognizable Danny Devito) the psychiatrist Cecilia is referred to after her initial attempt to escape her adolescent jail. Her deeply religious and overbearing mother, played by the indomitably husky-voiced Kathleen Turner, balks at this notion. If it were up to her (which it almost always is), her

daughters would exist in a sexless environment of her own creation (not unlike a female zoo) where men can pay the admission to view these beautiful, exotic creatures but can under no circumstances touch them. But after some thought, she invites the neighborhood boys to the carefully chaperoned basement of the Lisbon house in an attempt to lift Cecilia's spirits. During her own party, Cecilia jumps to her death from her second-storey bedroom window, impaling herself on the wrought iron fence below. Her father (James Woods) cradles her body in his arms as she lies there crucified by metal rods. This marks the moment he becomes a shell of his former self and ceases to be the enthusiastic (albeit beaten down by marital circumstance) math teacher seen proudly explaining the aerodynamics of his model fighter jets to the less-than-interested neighborhood boys at Cecilia's party. The fence is removed a few days later accompanied by a reprise of "Playground Love" and the four remaining Lisbon sisters are pulled out of school in order to cope with the preventable death of their youngest sister. One wonders why more wasn't done to keep an eye on the suicidal Cecilia. Adequate supervision was certainly never an issue before the day of her party.

Throughout the film, the sisters are hardly recognizable as separate from one another. They are typically seen in a group of four, whether it be eating lunch together at school or curled up on their bedroom floor together like four blonde-haired kittens. But the boys know better than to lump them together this way. They view them each as special in their own ways, from fourteen-year-old Lux (Kirsten Dunst) to seventeen-year-old Therese (Leslie Hayman). Their love for the Lisbons is competitive but not predatory. They want them to live their own lives, to escape from their mother's holy fortress, to act like normal teenage girls. Their sense of protective longing gets called into question with the introduction of the dreamy Trip Fontaine (Josh Hartnett), a junior adonis whose freshly shed baby fat made him the object of lust to every girl in school; every girl, that is, but Lux.

As Trip's continuing earnest efforts to get Lux's attention intensify, we, too, are wooed. He calls her "the still point in his turning world," a bit of dialogue anyone could find themselves wanting to be on the receiving end of. "You're a stone fox," he whispers before pressing his lips against hers for the first time. He's even able to convince her mother to let him and three other boys bring her daughters to the homecoming dance, even if she personally adds four inches of fabric to each girl's dress, making them look like "four identical sacks." At the dance, Trip and Lux are elected homecoming king and queen. They celebrate by taking each other's virginities on the football field. "Playground Love" plays for a third time. We think they have fallen in love. When Lux wakes up the following morning to an empty, wet football field, we experience her confusion with her. We thought Trip was the one. "I liked her a lot but out there on the football field it was different. I didn't care how she got home. It was weird," recounts Trip (Michael Pare) in a drug rehabilitation

facility twenty years later. After that morning, Lux and the others will never leave the house again. "I can't breathe in here," Lux protests. "Lu, you are safe in here," insists Mrs. Lisbon.

The film ends with the suicides of the Lisbon sisters, each in their own individual way. We are left wondering how to feel; the title told us this would happen and yet, we're still surprised. Coppola isn't trying to push an agenda. She seems content to let the viewer revel in the inherent confusion that comes with interpreting the angst of young adulthood. There are times when she lets us know how to feel: the deep, blue tones she employs to show the placidity of a psychiatrist's office, Heart's "Magic Man" accompanying the introduction of Trip Fontaine, and Coppola's trademarked "sun through leaves" shot as the family car drives down the street towards home. We are not meant to understand the contagion suicides of the Lisbon sisters. We just have to accept that it happened. "So much has been said about the girls over the years, but we have never found an answer. It didn't matter in the end how old they had been, or that they were girls, but only that we had loved them and that they hadn't heard us calling, still do not hear us calling them from out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time, and where we will never find the pieces to put them back together." Despite the evidence, we are lost.