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**Stealing Lives, Borrowing Voices: Inventing a Secret Life for  
Katherine Mansfield in *Sudden Flight***

**Extract from *Sudden Flight***

**and**

**Critical Commentary**

Submitted by Kirsten Lisa Ellis to Goldsmiths, University of London for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing, January 2019.

Reg. No: 33151863

This critical commentary and draft extract of my novel *Sudden Flight* (unpublished at date of submission) are available for Library use on the understanding that both are copyright material and that no quotation from either source may be published without proper acknowledgement. Where I have taken direct quotations from Katherine Mansfield's work within the novel extract I have provided attributions.

Declaration of Authorship I, ..... hereby declare that this commentary and the work presented in it and the extract taken from my novel *Sudden Flight* is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

To my mother and father

## Acknowledgements

My supervisor Professor Francis Spufford has been an inspiring and brilliant teacher, and I am immensely grateful for his acuity, advice, enthusiasm and outstanding patience with my maanderings in helping me find, in *Sudden Flight*, the book I wanted to write. I am also greatly indebted to my second supervisor Dr Carole Sweeney for her scholarly advice and support in my navigating of methodological and critical concerns. I am grateful for the valuable comments given to me by my external examiners, Professor Gerri Kimber and Edmund Gordon, allowing me to think through my final revision of my novel; to the best of my ability I have appreciatively incorporated their suggestions. Thanks to the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths, in particular Professor Blake Morrison, Ardashir Vakil, Professor Chris Baldick, Dr Michael Simpson, Professor Frank Krause and Dr Uttara Natarajan. Special thanks to my internal examiners, Dr Jane Desmarais and Dr Frances Wilson, for their insightful and vigilant feedback and comments. I also wish to thank Maria Macdonald for her assistance.

In New Zealand, especial gratitude to Gareth Winter of the Masterton Archives and Diane Rewi for their kind assistance; Rikki McGregor for sharing family history and memories and the late Niniwa Munro of Papawai for her welcoming *karakia* onto the Mahupuku cemetery and for her living memories of Maata Mahupuku.

Appreciative thanks also especially due to Janine Renshaw Beauchamp, Mansfield's great-niece, for offering family recollections, and to Bernard Bosque in Fontainebleau for giving very generously of his time and knowledge. Thanks to doctors Pierre Weinmann and Laurence Courdavault for the medical insights about Mansfield's likely physical state in the months prior to her death. Also to Ursula Kiraly-Müller at the Psychology Club Zurich for her considered assessments of what my invented protagonist Charles Jermyn would have encountered had he been accepted as a student by Jung in 1922 and for the wonderful tour of Jung's study.

Thank you to the kindness of the staffs of the Alexander Turnbull Library and the Wairarapa Archives in New Zealand; the Salt Spring Island Archives, the BC Archives in Victoria and the Vancouver Museum of Anthropology in Canada, and in Britain, the British Library and the Senate House Library.

I wish also to acknowledge the support of my agent Bill Hamilton at A. M. Heath & Company, without whose early encouragement to imagine Katherine and Maata at the beginning I would not have embarked on this novel.

My father, Howard Ellis, died just before Christmas, 2013. We spent two gloriously golden days in the Wairarapa on the Katherine/Maata trail earlier that year, and I dedicate this thesis in loving memory to him. I also dedicate it to my mother Professor Louise Longdin, who, along with my stepfather Professor Ian Eagles, encouraged me with love and support along the way and provided me with a wonderful haven in Saignon where I was able to work intensively on both novel and commentary over two consecutive summers. Their erudition on the legal framework regarding copyright and intellectual property in relation to melding fictional characters with real people sparked my interest in this niche topic. I am also grateful to my stepmother Fran Parkin for her loving encouragement to pick up and keep going when times got tough.

When researching on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, I was greatly helped by Charles Kahn, Gillian Watson, Frank Neumann and Diana Hayes, and elsewhere in Canada I appreciated advice from Richard Somerset Mackie, Dr Megan Davies and Ben Clinton-Baker. Thank you to Bettina Bradbury for helping me make these connections.

Finally, heartfelt thanks especially to my partner Gregory, who never fails to inspire me, for his unwavering support, love and tender care.

And to my son Nathaniel, with all love as always.

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## **Abbreviations**

Unless otherwise indicated, references to Katherine Mansfield works are to the editions listed below and abbreviated as follows:

### ***CKLM***

*The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, 5 vols, ed. by Vincent O’Sullivan and Margaret Scott (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984-2008)

### ***CW4***

*The Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield, Vol. 4 – The Diaries of Katherine Mansfield, including Miscellaneous Works* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, ed. by Gerri Kimber and Claire Davison (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016)

### ***LJKM***

*The Letters and Journals of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. C.K. Stead (London: Penguin Books, 1977)

### ***KMN***

*The Katherine Mansfield Notebooks*, ed. by Margaret Scott 2 vols, ((Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002)

Other abbreviations used:

### **ATL**

Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand



**Abstract**

My novel, *Sudden Flight*, envisages an alternative telling for the last few months in the life of the New Zealand modernist writer Katherine Mansfield, closely based on fact, narrated by an imaginary protagonist, the Canadian doctor Charles Jermyn with whom she has had a brief passionate affair during the war in Paris, who unexpectedly re-enters her life. A fable-like blend of historical fiction, life-writing and biographical fiction, the novel straddles several literary subgenres with different methodologies, critical traditions and literary standing; in this critical commentary I contextualize the approach and methodology I used in identifying, describing and weighing up those differences. I analyse how I attempted to meet the challenge of doing biographical justice to my subject, well aware that I would be venturing into territory already heavily mined by Mansfield scholars and biographers, as well a number of novelists, while at the same time constructing a speculative fictional life for her, one deliberately at odds with the version of events presented by Mansfield's husband John Middleton Murry.

This commentary is an exploration of the problematic —even controversial— ethical and methodological challenges facing a writer combining real and fictional characters, set within the critical context of biographical and historical scholarship. In particular, I question by what paradox biofiction can promise to satisfy particular curiosities about gaps in the record about the life of a real person while also asking readers to suspend disbelief and trust in its facsimile reality, and ask by what criteria successful biofiction can (and should) be judged.

**Extract from:**

***Sudden Flight***

**Kirsten Ellis**

2019

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The moral right of the author has been asserted.

This is a work of fiction, and the characters in it are solely the creation of the author. Any resemblance to actual persons – with the exception of historical persons – is entirely coincidental. When historical figures consort with fictional characters, the results are, necessarily, fiction. Similarly, some events have been created to serve fictional purposes.

**Note on context:**

This extract comprises a significant portion of my completed novel, *Sudden Flight*. At over 100,000 words it exceeds the word limit for the thesis.

At the conclusion of the extract, the invented protagonist Charles Jermyn learns more of the background and nature of Katherine, the elusive woman with whom he was besotted seven years before, when he knew her as Katie Beauchamp. When he re-encounters her, she has acquired a reputation as a gifted writer but is gravely ill with tuberculosis, seeking a spiritual and physical cure at Gurdjieff's institute Le Prieuré in Fontainebleau. Mysterious and secretive, she leads Charles to change his own former plans. Not only is she preparing to make a radical break with her marriage and her old way of life, but in a burst of inspiration, she has begun to write a novella. Katherine is convinced she is recovering with Gurdjieff's methods and teachings; she gains weight, she is luminous-eyed, flaming bright; she can walk in the forest. But Charles, a doctor, acutely aware that the harsh, damp winter climate of Fontainebleau is dangerous to a patient with tuberculosis, feels compelled to see that she gets the medical treatment he is certain she needs.

What follows is a story about love, deception, loss and redemption; about Katherine's quest to unlock and reveal memories and secrets repressed since she fell ill and why, in coming to terms with the choice she now faces, the risks she takes might undo them both.

The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.

**Carl Jung**

*Modern Man in Search of a Soul (1933)*

Risk! Risk anything! Care no more for the opinions of others, for those voices. Do the hardest thing on earth for you. Act for yourself. Face the truth.<sup>1</sup>

**Katherine Mansfield**

Paris, 14 October 1922.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield, Vol. 4 – The Diaries of Katherine Mansfield, including Miscellaneous Works*, ed. by Gerri Kimber and Claire Davison (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 434.

## PROLOGUE

*Salt Spring Island, British Columbia. June 2 1925.*

There was no electricity on the island. For light, as well as candles he used a few of the kerosene lanterns neatly lined up near the back door. The pale aureole of the lamp and the light of the fire made the darkness outside seem even more black. When he opened the door and stood outside for a moment to look for stars, he saw instead that the sea mist off the Pacific had rolled in, enveloping the darkness with thick vapour through which he could hear but not see the rush of the waves below.

In the kitchen, on the stove, there was a cast iron pot with a stew in it. In the cooler, freshly baked griddle scones wrapped in a tea towel, fresh milk, butter and eggs. On the table, a note: *I'll be by tomorrow*. He expected this was from Cooper, who'd got his wire and left his grandfather's old Ford pickup for him behind the Fulford Harbour general store, and prepared things for his arrival.

His grandfather's house was as handsome and solid as he remembered, reached by wide, stone steps through a wooden gate, and the first sight of it took him right back to childhood. Everything was as it used to be, although even with the briefest glance he'd noted a hole in the porch roof, cracks in some of the exterior weatherboards, and the dilapidated state of the guttering. It sat on the waterfront on the east side of the island, with an orchard, some livestock and a boat. His grandfather's larger holding of cultivated acreage was up on Mansell Road near the head of Long Harbour some four miles away. Decades ago, he had started out subsistence farming, with milk cows, pigs, some sheep to forage on the hills, along with some chickens, turkeys, ducks and geese. He had grown hay, grain and roots to feed the stock. But apples and cherries became the main thing.

All was as it had been since the last time he visited, the year he left for the war. His grandfather's collections of native artefacts: tribal carvings, masks, paintings, and sculptures dominated almost every square inch of the house, covering most of the walls in the house, even the bathroom. Only the kitchen was spared. In his study were yellowing stacks of his

ethnological papers and notebooks, and folios of photographs and sketches held in place by lumps of black argillite, the precious rock found only on Haida Gwaii.

Charles unpacked carefully, shelving his provisions, methodically arranging his notes and books in his grandfather's study so that he would be ready to work the next day.

He put a small box on one of the empty chairs. It sat there waiting, like an invited ghost.

\*

It had been a surprise to discover that in accordance with his grandfather's wishes, he was the sole inheritor of the property.

*To my grandson Charles Alexander Jermyn, I leave the house at 194 Old Scott Road, and all its contents, in addition the thousand acres of Mansell Road Farm, both said properties of Salt Spring Island, British Columbia.*

When his grandfather Alexander arrived here with his young family in 1882 he had bought up an old pre-emption that had been lived in but only partially developed, then built a family home closer to Ganges Harbour. The island had a curious history that reflected the changing fortunes of this part of the Pacific North West coast. Settlers arrived midway through the 1850's, many of them blacks lured by the promise of free land, former slaves or children of slaves fleeing discriminatory laws passed in California where they faced persecution and racialism, Hawaiians who were attracted by the whaling industry and fur trade, and also Japanese labourers who had drifted across the Pacific looking for work. His grandfather had, in his own inimitable way, managed to make friends of them all.

In summertime, he remembered, it had been close to paradise: when the yellow wheat grew high and the light shimmered through the fields like floss, the thick smell of the purple buddleia clumps that grew around the house, hedges dripping with blackberries, the hum of bees and the flitting of butterflies, and dipping swallows. Here were his grandfather's quince and pear trees, the bare stems of his roses, the places where his hollyhocks and sunflowers used to grow. There was the lightning tree, struck down the middle, one side cauterized and barren, the other that grew green buds every spring. There was the stump of a tree he always

remembered being enormous – when he was small, and which he later saw was no more than a few feet wide.

From here, his grandfather had taken him on trips all up the coast, all around British Columbia. He took him to the Kwakiutl community at Alert Bay and the Queen Charlotte islands, to Haida Gwaii and into Skeena and Naas Country; sometimes they had even witnessed outlawed *potlatches*, held in secret, the gatherings of clans for dances and ceremonies, births, marriages, and the naming of a new chief.

Charles opened the kitchen cabinet. Seeing the dust on the quarter and half-finished bottles, opening one or two to sniff them out of curiosity, made him feel like he was intruding. His grandfather loved his whisky, one of the few things for which he had an expensive taste. There was an unopened bottle of Vat 69. He looked at the date: 1915. When had his grandfather been planning to open it?

Charles stoked the fire and sat at his grandfather's table with its wide window overlooking the cove.

He swirled the whisky a little in the glass before he took a sip.

He hadn't been sure how it might be to come back. But the house had a profound peacefulness. Even his grandfather's old fishing nets and boots by the door seemed at rest.

He heated the stew and watched the fire as he ate.

He re-filled his glass.

\*

In the box, he saw a slim, green notebook he did not recognize, some loose pages of manuscript which had been folded together, and a collection of letters, some without envelopes.

There was also a sealed plain manila packet addressed to a Mrs Maata Asher in Greytown, New Zealand.

He felt ashamed. It suddenly seemed unforgivable that he had never thought to open this packet, not to have even considered the possibility she might have left something that she intended to be found – for him or anyone else.

There was something soft, folded in faded red tissue paper. When he unwrapped the tissue paper, he saw the silk bed-jacket he had bought her in Paris just before Christmas. He pressed it to his nostrils. No trace of perfume; it had taken on the musty smell of the box. He opened the notebook to pages filled with her strong, cramped black-ink handwriting. Hard to decipher at first glance.

A canister of undeveloped film.

He picked it up and held it in his hands. Cold and metallic; the size of a bishop on a chess game, the edges of it like a small unexploded grenade. He wanted to consider the possibility of a different story than the one he has told himself.

*Promise you'll take me there when all this is over? To that island of yours?* The look she gave him; so guileless, even beseeching.

\*

He took out the roll of undeveloped film and put it on the bathroom sink.

Perhaps it would be better to let well alone.

His grandfather had been a serious amateur photographer, a necessary skill for his ethnological field research. They had spent hours in this bathroom together, developing plates then camera film. A special wooden shutter had been constructed to keep the room sealed from light. The solutions in glass bottles had always been stored in the large cupboard under the sink.

When Charles looked under the sink he saw all the chemicals still stored there, right at the back.

He mixed the solution in the tray, making sure everything else that needed to be done was in place for him to be able to feel his way with his fingertips in the darkened room. Then he put the wooden panel up against the window, blacking out the night sky, covering the cracks with the cloth that was still there for the purpose, and closed the door.

Complete darkness.

\*



He has not felt ready, until now. The sensation he had of longing – hoping – for the directness of her gaze felt almost primal, setting off a tuning fork in his body.

He sees the negatives begin to flicker alive in the bath, like a whisper, a caress. Black and white, in reverse. He begins to discern the outlines of her, the proportions of an image crystallizing.

She is swimming to the surface, becoming visible.

He must – he has to – see her again.

Now she is swimming to the surface, becoming visible.

### 1. Boulevard Saint-Michel

Paris. October 13 1922.

*I'm first in to the clinic, grateful to find I am quite alone and won't have to face my fellow sufferers.<sup>2</sup> I've come to loathe our familiar shorthand, how we discreetly observe one another, attuned to the most minute details – weight, pallor, who shows traces of fever after a night of sweats, who coughs, and most importantly, how the cough sounds. The covert evaluations we make of each other's chances of survival. I can't bear to see their melancholy eyes reflect my own fears and hopes.*

*I stand in a cubicle, one in a row of makeshift screened partitions, in what was once an elegant, parquet floored room in a grande bourgeoisie apartment off the Trocadero. I take off my new fur coat and hang it on the rack. The most expensive indulgence I've ever allowed myself, bought at Harvey Nichols with my first cheque from The Garden Party. When I first wore it, I felt sure its luxury and warmth could protect me from anything.*

*I wriggle out of my green woollen dress with a little difficulty – the left side of my body aches horribly. On the hook, the dress seems to reproach me. I chose it – one of my Jaeger 'reliables' – a lifetime ago, to see me through daywear for teas and dinners and 'events.' I*

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<sup>2</sup> This imagined diary-style entry is based on descriptions Mansfield wrote in her notebooks about her experiences at Dr Manoukhin's clinic. *CW4*, pp. 409-418, 433-435 and her letter to Brett, *CKLM*, V, p. 117.

*slip out of my silk camisole and peel off my charcoal grey stockings, fold them neatly and place them on the wooden chair. My shoes I tuck underneath. They are stained, and they've lost their shape. I ought to buy a new pair. But these treatments are exorbitant. The knickers that Ida made for me, I leave on, as usual. At such moments, I always think of my mother and her exhortations as to the importance of good manners and good knickers. You never know when you might be run over by a tram, she'd say.*

*There is no mirror. I glance down at myself. My left side has swelled up slightly from the treatment and is tender to touch. I am glad my breasts are still beautiful. The sight of my toes also cheers me up. They are – scandalously! – painted Rouge Noir.*

*Yesterday those two charming little creatures from the Chemiserie came to set my fringe straight, painting up my face and leaving me with these indecent toenails and various new silk undergarments about which there was so much twittering of “chic-chic-chic”<sup>3</sup> I was unable to say no. Madame, surely you aren't going to turn thirty-four without these necessary preparations?*

*But after they left, I sat on the bed and wept.*

*When I dress in the thin cotton robe left out for me and emerge from the room to step back into the corridor, it is empty. I wait. After a few moments, I clear my throat, and eventually, the attendant emerges. It is the pretty young Russian girl who works for Dr Manoukhin. She has a pronounced limp; her French is poor and her English non-existent.<sup>4</sup>*

*“Bienvenue Madame Murry. Vous allez bien aujourd'hui.”*

*She leads me to the salon – an elegant room which has a frescoed ceiling trimmed with gilt and 17<sup>th</sup> century portraits – the treatment room where I will receive ‘des Rayons X’. The shutters are drawn, the room is dark, with a large clock above the door, so that neither doctor nor patient can misplace a second.*

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<sup>3</sup> From Mansfield's description of being tended to in her hotel room by beauticians in her letter from the Victoria Palace Hotel, 1 May 1922, CLKM, V, p. 163.

<sup>4</sup> CW4, pp. 433-435.

*I am asked to lie down on the examining table, and to have my limbs coaxed into position as though I am a human doll. The assistant smiles at me, deliberately bright, adjusting my arms out of the way, and twisting my torso, just so.*

*The machine is beside the examining table. When I first saw it, I found it both impressive and repulsive. The apparatus is made of steel; the ray gun is attached to the end of an angle poise arm. Before I experienced its effects, I thought it looked impressively scientific. I imagined myself bathing in the light of blue rays, like a fish in an aquarium. Now I see it for what it is, a torture device. The instrument panel is inside a wooden cabin which shields the doctor from the device during the procedure. I am used to Dr Manoukhin's calm, soothing voice speaking to me as though as from the inside of a confessional as he operates his machine.*

*Ten days ago, Dr Manoukhin promised me I could look forward to "complete and absolute health by Christmas" if I completed the course. I should be as well as I have ever been, he told me. Perhaps better. But I have not been feeling at all better. Not remotely. In fact, over the past few days I have been feeling wretched.*

*The door opens. It isn't the kind, sympathetic Dr Manoukhin. It is his French partner, Dr Donat, brisk and stiff in his white coat and clipped beard.*

*"Voilà Madame Murry", he says. "I hear you are not so well as you were."*

*He looks at his clipboard. "Voilà. Nausea. Heat rashes. Pain and numbness in the limbs. Palpitations."*

*Dr Donat has the air of an elderly French diplomat. He speaks as though whatever he pronounces will not be contradicted. That these words denote suffering of a rather horrible kind, he seems deliberately indifferent.*

*"These are normal reactions, Madame. You must try not worry. Your heart is functioning perfectly well. Parfaitement," he repeats.*

*"Are you quite sure?"*

*"Quite sure," he assures me. "Shall we proceed?"*

*Nothing in me wants to proceed. I feel naked and defenceless under the robe. Why do I not leave, right there? Instead, I continue to be meek, and simply nod, mutely.*

*Dr Donat uses a wax pencil to mark out a circumference around my spleen, and when he is satisfied, he adjusts the apparatus, drawing it closer towards its target, then disappears into the wooden cabin. I can see him through the window of the cabin.*

*“Préparez-vous, Madame.”*

*At this, he turns the switch on. As the little red arrow flicks forward on the dial, the machine makes a peculiar whirring sound, and at intervals, emits tiny sparks and flashes as the rays penetrate my body. I feel a violent confusion in my body and head, the burning pains that, when they come, make me think of poor Joan of Arc. I have to force myself to take tiny, shallow breaths. I have the sensation that if I were to take a deep breath, my heart would rupture.*

*I can't bear it I can't bear it I can't bear it I won't.*

*In the taxi, a wave of nausea grips me and I plead with my body not to vomit. My heart races, fearful. The sensation passes, only just. The driver is horrible, glaring at me as though I might cause an unspeakable mess in his back seat. No one pays me any attention as I walk slowly across the Place de la Sorbonne, past the laughter and life clustered around the café, the chestnut trees and the fountain. I go straight to my room at the Select, and put myself to bed, unable to think of anything except to lie down.*

*I want to cry. To cry would be a relief. But I feel so numb, I am beyond feeling, beyond crying.*

*This hotel has memories. I stayed here during the war. I used to skip up these stairs. My room here this time feels shabby. Now I am too desolate even to attempt a bath. For a stupid – bête – moment, I feel sure that if the Victoria Palace hadn't been full, if I'd been able to have my cosy old room there instead, everything would somehow be alright...*

*I feel unspeakably alone.*

*Jack could have insisted on coming with me. It really was his last chance to insist. Instead my husband stayed in Sussex, as I knew he would. His "You'll be alright, won't you?" was the best he could do. He'd tell me I was the one who convinced him that Dr Manoukhin is a man of science who knows what he is doing. That I had chosen this path for good reason. We both know his offer yesterday to come here for my birthday was a feeble, meaningless gesture.*

*I have a decision to make. I've been circling it for weeks. This is making me worse not better. I have lost my faith in Dr Manoukhin and his treatments. Why did he allow Dr Donat to treat me today? Despite all his promises and assurances that I would be perfect by Christmas, it seems my condition is not responding. If anything, today has confirmed it. The ghastly sensations of heat in my hands, feet and bones, the headaches that pound in my skull. The sickness comes on each time, like clockwork.*

*I retch but there's nothing to expel. It seems impossible to think that what makes me so sick and crippled for days afterwards could be in any way curing me. Today my reaction to the treatment is so bad I feel sure if I continue it I will die.*

*There is nothing else for it: I must stop. I will never go back.*

*I remember the first time I went to Dr Manoukhin's clinic. In the waiting room, I saw a man emerge from the treatment rooms carrying what appeared to be a cross with green leaves. But then the arms of the cross waved feebly and I realised to my horror that it was in fact a small child strapped to a wooden tray. It seemed such an omen – how could I have ignored it?*

## **2. Birthday**

October 14 1922.

*I turn 34 today. So old!*

*My supposedly closest friends didn't remember. But I was cheered to have a few cards and a couple of sweet telegrams, one from Jack, another from Walter de la Mare.*

*Dear old Orage arrived, bringing me flowers, straight off the train from the Gare du Nord. As promised, he had Dr Young in tow, to examine me – to allow me, if I want, my laissez-passer. Both of them bursting with talk about the whole new way of life possible with Gurdjieff. I was determined to look my best. We had champagne in the café next to my hotel and Orage raised his glass and made a toast to my birthday and his escape from London. “To New Beginnings!”*

*I always thought Orage one of the cleverest men I’d ever known. He’s thrown in his lot with Gurdjieff: left everything behind, left his magazine to fend for itself. He told me I should think of it as my duty to take a leap into the Dark, like him. He asked: “If the Grand Lama of Tibet himself promised to help you, would you hesitate?” He pointed to his small suitcase, boasting that all he had in there were three volumes of Nietzsche, a copy of Alice in Wonderland and his toothbrush. He was ludicrous, but brave. It was wonderful to see him. He made me laugh for the first time in ages.<sup>5</sup>*

*Jack has not one iota of his courage.*

*We talked for hours about Gurdjieff’s new institute in Fontainebleau, the wondrous-sounding château from the time of the Sun King. Orage and Dr Young told me how inspired they are to be part of it, and the people who were already there – mostly Russians, intellectuals and dancers. Orage could hardly contain his excitement to join them.*

*After we said goodbye in the dim, murky light of early evening, I watched them disappear into the crowd on the Boulevard Saint Michel. The wind was up, blowing out umbrellas, gusting autumn leaves. I paused, resting on the stone fountain in front of my hotel. What is the word I am thinking of? Ah yes – ‘bouleverser.’ The sudden upturning of everything. With a lurch of my heart, I remember, I was happy in this hotel once. In a hurry. Full of plans. How quickly what used to seem beautiful and charming can seem sad and squalid when one feels on the wrong side of life.*

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<sup>5</sup> Inspired by, including some paraphrasing from, Mansfield’s notebook entries, *CW4*, pp. 433-434.

*In my lonely little bed, I dream I am crossing streams, climbing hills or just walking... I dream of freedom – health. Not being offered chairs or given arms, but strong, in nature, invisible...*

*I must accept that Jack is never going to protect me. Jack, who is apparently unable ever to pay even a sou for anything I need, despite my paying for his upkeep, for years. Not a banknote for any of my doctor's bills, not even a train fare or half a sandwich. The problem is, if I think too much about Jack's behaviour, I begin to despise him,*

*A broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart – these words never used to mean much to me. But this is where I am. Broken wings. Can't fly.*

*I have already made the decision to use my conscious will, to do this on my own terms – to act. The old Katherine might have toyed with the idea of going somewhere like this — this strange, unproven world promising a harmony of existence that has felt beyond reach — but she would never actually go. Now I must be stronger.*

### **3. Le Prieuré**

Fontainebleau-Avon. October 18 1922

*Gurdjieff summons me to have Turkish coffee with him in his study, a cavernous room on the second floor of the new Institute, crammed with rugs, paintings, antiques, mirrors, lit by candles and incense in the middle of the day.<sup>6</sup> He wears a black astrakhan hat and a thick linen tunic with a fireman's belt, and he sits cross-legged on his bed – a large divan-style affair – from which he dictates to his Russian secretary, Madame de Hartmann. The coffee is rich and sweet with the aroma of cardamoms. He and I survey one another, with the elegant Madame de Hartmann sitting between us. In her embroidered blouse, her hair up just-so, she reminds me of a Chekhov heroine.*

*Madame de Hartmann translates. Her English is good.*

*“Your husband knows you are here?”*

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<sup>6</sup> Based on Mansfield's letters to John Middleton Murry, Dorothy Brett and Ida Baker, from Paris and Fontainebleau-Avon, October 1922-January 1923, *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. by Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), V, pp. 303-348.

“Yes.”

“What word do you most identify with your husband?”

*The directness of his question catches me off-guard. But Orage has warned me that nothing will work with Gurdjieff unless I speak the truth.*

“He is clever.” I say. Then, knowing I must be truthful, I add, “He is weak.”

*At this Gurdjieff looks at me. He does not drop his gaze as he leans across and taps me again with his fingers, just above my breastbone, as though drumming a tattoo onto my heart, as though he expects something more.*

“He’s very unfaithful. He thinks I don’t know.”

*I want to add: He’s a boy, who won’t grow up. He thinks only of himself.*

*Gurdjieff stays silent, as though waiting for something else. “And you need...?”*

*Orage has prepared me. I know the right answer. He’s described this interview as a very strange Knock-Knock, Who’s There...*

*“I need to find a completely new way to live – to be, to feel, to learn, to know, to act. I want to live fully, to be part of the world, to get rid of everything that is superficial or superfluous in me, to become a conscious, direct human being...” My voice sounds strange and dutiful repeating what Orage has told me to say.*

*At this, Gurdjieff nods, satisfied. He says something in Russian. Everything about him is direct and certain.*

*“Mr. Gurdjieff says you already have intellectual awareness at a high level. But you must become more self-aware. You have been forgetting who you are,” translates Madame de Hartmann.*

*How can that be possible? I can hardly forget who I am! But then I realise the answer in my head is a resounding yes, and I know he is right.*

*“Most importantly,” she went on, “from now on, no more keeping secrets from yourself, no more keeping hidden what causes you suffering or pain. If you do this, it is like, Mr Gurdjieff says, burying poison in the body, or imprisoning a scorpion in your mind. You must free yourself of such poisons, to recover your health,” she says.*



*Is this even possible?*

*Gurdjieff wags his finger at me. "You must do self-remembering", he says. His breath comes close; he smells of garlic and cloves. "You understand what is "self-remembering?"*

*"I think so," I murmur. Orage has discussed it with me.*

*Gurdjieff speaks quickly in Russian.*

*Madame de Hartmann continues translating and Madame de Hartman continues translating: "This process is for you alone. You must ask yourself everything that grieves and upsets your mind, body and heart. Hide nothing. Write it down. Then burn it. Whatever is false inside you, whatever you keep secret out of shame or humiliation. It must come out, like a tapeworm."*

*Gurdjieff speaks in a coaxing voice, as though I am a child, as though he wants to reassure me there is nothing to be afraid of. He gesticulates what must be drawn out, as though expelling detritus from his stomach and his throat. As he speaks, he has such a look of mirth, as though amused by the absurdity, the cosmic joke. Without even trying he makes me laugh. Of course, all my problems, my anguishes and my rages, my illness – are all the fault of my invisible tapeworm...*

*"You must trust Life," he tells me.*

*Then he smiles. A generous, encouraging smile that makes me feel hope lifting within me. My anxiety ceases.*

*The strangest thing happens as he looks at me: I take a full, clear breath. To be able to breathe entirely without pain, hold air in my lungs and exhale – without coughing – is a miracle in itself.*

*Now they order me to lie on the bed, a pillow under my head. I close my eyes and feel Gurdjieff place his hands on various parts of my body. I cannot say why or how, but as he touches me and says prayers over my body, I feel overwhelmed by sensations of grief and loss; tears slide from my closed eyes. He stands by my side, with one hand on my body, and makes strange breathing sounds. As I cry and as he breathes, the sensations crescendo, then ease and subside. Madame de Hartmann hands me her silk handkerchief, as though this is*

*quite to be expected. I don't want to ask for an explanation. I don't try to understand. When he is finished, I feel limp and purged and almost ecstatic at the sensation that many layers of burdens have been lifted from me. It is all utterly inexplicable, just as I hoped.*

*When I sit up, he gives me a special exercise of movements for my shoulders, combined with others to expand my chest in a particular way with tension and relaxation while inhaling and exhaling. Fifty times a day, he tells me.*

*Gurdjieff is stern as he giving me orders. "Now, Madame Murry. Stop thinking so much! While you are here – I insist – none of your usual story writing! Live in your body!*

*He tells me that I may stay on a fortnight's 'trial basis'.*

*After that, he says, "We will see."*

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*I don't want to believe Gurdjieff is a fakir. I want to suspend my disbelief and put my trust in his reputed magical powers. To me, he is charming, courteous, even courtly. He looks Eastern and exotic with his dark walnut skin, his preposterous black ringleader moustache...*

*When he looks at me, it's as though he sees deep inside my mind, even my body. He radiates absolute certainty. I feel if anyone could put me on the right track, bodily and every other way, he can.*

*Now I am here in Fontainebleau, I am swimming towards a new peace. To even be here means I have chosen to confront the truth. I am facing the facts fair and square. My choice feels stark: I must either change radically – or perhaps I may die. My life – as it has been – is, for whatever reason, literally killing me. I could never go on as I have. If I'm at the end of one phase of my life, it stands to reason another phase will begin. Whatever is at the end of this will be worth it, I can feel it.*

October 20 1922.

*I sit in a quiet corner of the terrace and look at the sky, holding my notebook. The tall oak tree is skeletal, bone filigree against the strong blue of the mid-morning sky. Unusually warm*

*autumn sunlight glints through the tea glasses, flashing gold, and the sparrows and the finches fight for crumbs of black bread on my plate.*

*Next to me, Orage has left his spectacles and his book upturned and gone back into the house, his jacket draped on the empty chair next to her. Our conversation still hangs in the air.*

*“I’ve finally asked my wife for a divorce. You remember her?”*

*“Of course.”*

*Actually, I always rather liked Jean, even though Orage had lost interest. She had spirit. She didn’t just wither up and die when Orage had his affair. She took up with the Arts and Crafts movement – and Holbrook, Orage’s best friend.*

*“I thought she refused to give you a divorce,” I add.*

*“Gurdjieff says I must demand it from her. We have to break off our identification with one another.”*

*“Identification?”*

*“That’s what he calls it.”*

*“Calls what? Marriage?”*

*Orage nods, solemn. “When it becomes a lie, yes. We have to discard whatever hold us back. But thank God I was still married to Jean when I was with Beatrice. Imagine – otherwise I would have been crazy enough to marry her! That woman was like a vortex.”*

*Perverse, meddling, spiteful Beatrice. I think – once, not long after we met, Orage tried to kiss me.*

*“I feel ashamed...of what I did to Jean. My own lies...”*

*I look at Orage, his nicotine stained fingers and hazel eyes. He’s much nicer without Beatrice.*

*“By God though, I loved her, or at least I thought I did. I had no idea how fatal it can be, getting love wrong. You find yourself behaving in ways so ludicrous that later you realise you had gone temporarily stark raving mad. You remember what I was like, with Bea...” He gives*

*me a rueful smile. “Real love, with each one wanting to help the other, that’s altogether different. But it’s very difficult to love wisely until you have become fully aware of who you are... and what a shame if you only wake up to this late in life, by which time you’re already an old duffer.” He looks at me. “I speak for only myself, of course.” Then he looks at me more carefully. “How are things with you and Jack?”*

*I just smile at him, and that’s answer enough. But I think of something.*

*“When we’re young we seem to know who we are – by instinct – I think we do. Aren’t we capable of love then? The problem is, we just seem to unlearn everything, and have to learn it all over again... It’s the un-learning that’s so painful...”*

*He gives me a slow, cracked smile. “True.”*

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*I look at the instructions Gurdjieff has given me, translated by Madame de Hartmann.*

*Be in nature as much as possible. Walk in the garden. Walk in the forest.*

*Do practical things with your hands*

*Sit in the sun*

*Pick flowers – and arrange them.*

*Watch the dancers.*

*Listen to the music.*

*Look after the chickens. Feed the animals.*

*Help in the kitchen.*

*Eat more. Especially milk, butter, cream and eggs.*

*Get ‘poisons’ out with Self-Remembering Work.*

*Rest as much as possible. In all things, ‘Be’.*

*I write another instruction, of my own:*

*Forget Jack.*

\*

October 27 1922.

*For the first week, I do nothing but sit in the garden. It’s extraordinary weather for October,*

*everybody marvels at it. Some days have been as warm and bright as late summer. Sunlight, day after day. I even take off my stockings and let my feet go bare.*

*Surely a week is a good measure of these things? Because I feel already almost miraculously better.*

*I love my peaceful room in the part of the château everyone here calls 'The Ritz.' It's really very grand – with its big bed, window overlooking the gardens, and fireplace. It feels very exotic, with textiles and carpets Gurdjieff has brought with him from Constantinople.*

*I haven't seen the Grande Château, or the forest. I haven't even been into the town of Fontainebleau. Life inside Le Prieuré is so absorbing, like an enclosed world all of its own. There are pathways to the river, where I also haven't yet been. All of a sudden, nothing outside exists... I feel – finally – that I'm in the right place, that everything I need is somehow here. Knowing this makes my heart beat faster, and I can't say why...*

*I have led myself to the garden gate of my old life, opened it, and walked into a new space – free.*

*The old Katherine is finally dead.<sup>7</sup>*

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*I follow the path down to the orchard, where the Russian women are harvesting the apples, pears and the quince. They are ripe and must be gathered from the ground before they rot. The leaves have begun to fall off the trees, and yet there are still late-blooming flowers. I watch the women with their bright patterned skirts and tunics hitched up, joking and laughing. It is like a painting, full of sound and bright sun. I wish I could speak with them in Russian. Some of them are Gurdjieff's dancers. How beautiful and young they are.*

*But then I realise many of them are at least my age – and older.*

*Everyone is very kind to me. I've begun to make friends. Being among these people is wonderful for me – like a dream.*

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<sup>7</sup> Mansfield wrote on 3 October 1922: 'One of the K. M. [sic] is so sorry. But of course she is. She has to die. Don't feed her'. *CW4*, p. 427.

October 29 1922.

*I've discovered I love feeding the animals. The goats come nudging at my fingers hungry and eager like little children. Their soft, scraping tongues, the mechanical matter-of-fact way they go about chomping and licking water as though it were the most important thing, the way they push forward to be patted and caressed, and collapse their bodies with delicate curtseys, forelegs crossed under them, to nudge into the crook of my arm.*

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*In the chicken-yard I meet Olga Ivanova, Gurdjieff's principal dancer. She is extremely beautiful, like Gurdjieff's wife and Madame de Hartmann and a few other of the women here. Together we investigate how many chickens have hatched and admire what a fine rooster the new one seems to be.*

*Olga Ivanova always speaks with commands. She says: "Cup your hands." She ladles wheat into my palms, and immediately the chickens rush up, surrounding me on all sides. It is such a sudden, unexpected sensation to feel them all pecking the grain from my hands and fingers that I am startled and cry out, and we laugh like young girls.*

October 31 1922.

*Another glorious warm day. Blue, blue sky. From my window, I notice how the thick, clump-like branch ends of the lime trees have been pollarded, trained towards each other. Missing their leaves, they look like clasped fists holding candelabra, and I imagine candles burning over their corridor of empty branches, burning like an arrow to Le Prieuré...*

*I have never seen such beautiful autumn leaves as there are scattered everywhere in the garden of Le Prieuré. The trees are alive with them, as though wearing a special coat of colours; the streets outside are carpeted, and the presence of so many leaves creates a special hush. When it rains, the leaves along the garden paths become slippery... The followers assigned as leaf-gatherers toil endlessly with their hessian sacks and rakes.*

*I feel as though I have survived a shipwreck and been washed ashore on an unknown country where everything is different. New language, people, food, ways, music, methods,*

*hours... everything! Gurdjieff is a magician and Le Prieuré is a Prospero's island. Watching the dancers, and listening to Hartmann's music, I have been travelling everywhere – to Russia, India, Persia, Afghanistan....*<sup>8</sup>

*I feel anything can happen here. Even a miracle.*

*But who can I tell? Who in my old life would understand?*

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November 1 1922.

*Gurdjieff has an astonishing facility for telling me exactly what I long to hear.*

*We were discussing whether he was going to grant me my wish to stay longer, and he looked me up and down.*

*“Did you know you were born with a dancer's body?”*

*I consider whether he might be flirting with me, even a little.*

*I wonder if anyone remembers my little performances at The Cave of the Golden Calf. Madame Strindberg, who had been married to the playwright, said, in her flat German that I had the ability to dance with “erotic appeal”. Taking a drag on her Turkish cigarette, she added: “Like Colette.” And I thought, yes, exactly. To write from the mind and the body, to live and dance, supplicant and temptress to the flame. I ache for the way my body was then, for the havoc and desire I had it in me to cause.*

*It's been a lifetime since I danced.*

*Gurdjieff is looking at me in a way that makes me feel a little uncomfortable. With her wide-spaced, doe-like eyes, Madame de Hartmann translates what he says: “You have lived in your mind far too much, for too long, ignoring the needs of your body. If you ignore the body, the body makes ways of saying ‘STOP’. If your mind does not connect with your body, it places great stress to your system...”*

*Gurdjieff makes a gesture to demonstrate, like an animal turning in on itself, then rapidly speaks in Russian.*

*“Where is your release? If not dancing, then fucking... Most people should be more*

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<sup>8</sup> Paraphrasing from Mansfield's descriptions, *CW4*, pp. 307, 319.

*dancing less fucking. In your case, if you don't mind me saying, not enough dancing OR fucking." Madame de Hartmann says 'fucking' like a trouper, clipped and clear in her St Petersburg accent.*

*I thought nothing could shock me.*

*Gurdjieff is so unexpectedly crude and truthful – I want to burst out laughing.*

*I smile, and think, but where – where? – must a writer live but in her mind?*

*Gurdjieff smiles with me, as though we are sharing a grand joke. We laugh, the three of us.*

*When I am by myself again, alone, I am still laughing – I cannot remember the last time I have laughed like that.*

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*I try again, closing my eyes. Trying to remember, my first pure memory, as Gurdjieff instructed.*

*Not long ago in the last stretch of my old life, on one of my days after Manoukhin's hellish treatment, I went to sit in a half-full cinema in the dark hours of the afternoon. The Young Rajah was playing. How ridiculous to admit that Rudolph Valentino made me cry. It was the sight of him cantering along a country lane, the careless graceful way he pulled up his horse at the gate of a white verandahed house, all picket fence and honeysuckle homeliness, and so much like our first house, Chesney Wold, in the wilds of Karori. The dappled sunlight through the trees – even in black and white – seemed to pulse and shimmer with the quality of a golden moment. The whole screen was his big, wide open smile. For just a split second it was my brother Chummie turning his head and smiling at me, the sun lighting through him. Life was all ahead of us then, beauty and joy waiting for us both, dancing just beyond in the bower of the trees.*

*When this happens, when I can't bear the pain of remembering, when my heart gives way, I can hear Chummie telling me Stay, Katie – it will lead somewhere that is good – goodness is never lost...*



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*I close my eyes again.*

*Bright scarlet rata blossoms. The dense summer shadows, under the pohutakawa tree's shady canopy, the deafening rasp of the cicadas deep inside the green darkness of the New Zealand bush.*

*Standing in the pantry in the house on Tinakori Road, looking over into the Gully. Bright yellow gorse and flax bushes. Everything genteel in our house except the crude square of yellow Sunlight soap on the windowsill near the downstairs privy. The smell of rimu and wood polish. The soft chime of the clock. The darkness of the house in summer at midday. How blinded one felt coming in from the merciless bright light, for a moment unable to see anything.*

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November 7 1922.

*I ask Mr. Gurdjieff the burning question. "Can I hope for a full cure?"*

*He is kind, but unsparing. According to him, we all have our 'illness'<sup>9</sup> – the hope is to awake from what he calls our 'waking sleep,' and to live a conscious life. But he tells me I have the kind of illness for which miracles are possible, and that certainly, he can help me. He says: "To achieve wholeness there must be no division between the body, the spirit and the emotions. Then healing can happen. Achieving integration takes daily practice."*

*I tell him that I need to be here, that I know I could never regain my health and grow strong, mentally and physically anywhere else. He tells me I must stay as long as I wish. But soon, he tells me, I will be well enough to join his dancers in their practice.*

*By spring.*

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<sup>9</sup> CW4, p. 320.

#### **4. Zurich**

*December 9 1922.*

There is time to spare before boarding the train. For a moment Charles stands in the main concourse of Zurich Hauptbahnhof, admiring the crystalline light through the monumental arched window, projecting shafts of light across the floor. Crowds surge around him, and in their wake here and there, uniformed porters shunt carts of luggage, darting deftly to avoid ankles and shins. Three warning bells ring, but not for his train. He makes for a nondescript café directly under the giant hands of the suspended clock, from which he can easily see platform 7. The coffee is good, black and strong, and the honey cake makes him think of his student days, and the Café Louis in Toronto. He glances around.

A pair of young lovers linger over their farewell at platform 9. The woman is tearful. The man holds her face tenderly and cradles her for a moment, as though comforting a baby, rocking her gently and kissing her repeatedly on top of her head. He is about to go, then holds her and kisses her again before they finally break apart and go their separate directions. Charles averts his eyes, but not before catching sight of the woman's face crumpled with tears as she walks away; he lets his attention wander back to the grand concourse with its hum of human traffic and cacophonous echoes. Train stations are all about coffee and cigarettes, kisses and tears; the pauses between lives, distances that might become finalities. The bell sounds. Charles gathers up his suitcase and knapsack, finds his way to his carriage and then to his seat. Thankful, that at least for now, his compartment is empty. Today is his thirty-third birthday. To be alone, and on a train, and to have no one waiting for him at the end of this journey — this is his choice.

#### **5. Maison de Fous**

*Fontainebleau-Avon. December 10 1922.*

The driver grunts at the address, and glances at him with suspicion. They turn right at the top of the sloping hill, where he guesses he is seeing the modest little village of Avon rather than Fontainebleau itself. They follow a long avenue of towering trees down the hill, alongside

tram tracks, passing houses and small villas tucked back from the road. Beyond, as far as he can see, is forest. They pull up outside the entrance to a large white building, set back from the road behind a high wall. There is a small guard's house next to an imposing wrought iron gate.

This is Le Prieuré, on the corner of the Rue Basses Loges and the Rue Bezout. Gurdjieff's grandly named new Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man.

"*Maison de fous*," the mad-house, the driver calls it, taking ten francs for his trouble. Charles makes a mental note that the distance from the station is so negligible that in future he will walk or take the tram. Fontainebleau itself cannot be much of a distance away.

The old estate is grand, in its way, and looks to have been built in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Within its high walls, there are gardens and acres of woodland as far as the eye can see. The main building is rather beautiful, if simple and somewhat run-down. It overlooks a large courtyard with a fountain playing into a round basin and the flower beds are full of crimson flowers. The crunch of white gravel, the green shutters, the fountain – all so unmistakably French.

It is the first time he has returned to France since the war.

His friend John, who made some recent enquiries for him, had written from Hampstead. Charles had read his letter again on the train:

Dear Charles,

The 'Forest Philosophers,' as a reporter at the *Daily Mail* has described them, apparently live outside every usual code of behaviour. It is largely thanks to that newspaper's extremely rich benefactress Lady Rothermere, wife of the press baron who owns the *Daily Mail* and herself one of Gurdjieff's faithful, that Gurdjieff has been able to execute the miracle of transplanting his original Institute (no more than a tumble-down house in Tiflis in the Transcaucasus) to Fontainebleau. We have heard that his spiritual colony is taking off on an ambitious scale amid considerable magnificence and that several doctors and psychoanalysts have already enrolled along with one leading editor, Orage, 'the Mystic of Fleet Street. You'll likely come across two psychoanalysts, Young and Nicoll. Like you, they studied with Jung. But they have now disposed of their Harley Street practices. Apparently they've sold everything they have in

order to support his cause. Word is, there's a lot of dancing in the nude. You'll find it quite a change after Zurich. Rather you than me...<sup>10</sup>

Charles rings the bell at the grand entrance, but no one answers. Looking for another way in, he ventures to the rear of the building, where a door is open. Women are singing Russian folk songs.

In the passage, above the lintel, an embroidered banner above the door reads: "Overcome Difficulties – Make Effort – Work." And "Truth is Life."

He hears the sound of singing and realizes he has stepped into the kitchen. The singing ceases abruptly, and women in aprons and headscarves look up from chopping vegetables and pounding herbs in mortars. It is hard not to notice that many of them are more than usually good-looking. One of them, Slavic-featured, looks like a dancer, her hair severely pulled back in a bun. Another, dressed in an overcoat, her face imperious like a Russian icon, seems to be in charge. She is intent on efficiently butchering skinned rabbit carcasses, but darts a look at him, then calls out something in Russian, and a boy of perhaps fifteen materialises. It's obvious when he's a grown man he's going to be strikingly handsome. For the moment he's thin, gawky, with a rash of acne; all adolescent self-consciousness. Just looking at him, Charles is touched, reminded of the awkwardness of that tender age. The boy gestures him into the hallway, to sit near the fireplace; returns with some strong sweet dark tea.

The room is panelled in dark wood and lavishly furnished. Despite its size, it feels claustrophobic, and is dominated in one corner by an imposing oak staircase. A silver samovar and dozens of glasses are laid out on a table. A strong scent of spiced incense pervades the hall, and there are so many carpets, rugs, woven kilims and embroidered fabrics it feels like a rug merchant's gallery in Constantinople.

Charles waits patiently but no one comes.

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<sup>10</sup> I have drawn directly on C. E. Bechhofer Roberts, 'The Forest Philosophers', *Century Magazine* (May 1924) <<https://www.gurdjieff.org/roberts.html>> [accessed 4 June 2016]

Half-awake, he becomes aware that someone is playing the piano in a room behind the door. The playing is liquid, meditative and melodic. Without realizing it, his mind has been ranging free and travelling to places half-imagined: the high mountains of the Caucasus perhaps, snowy ranges untouched by human feet, places where white-feathered cranes fly over forests and clear sparkling streams... When the music ends, there is a long silence. Then, rapid-fire instructions in Russian, the sound of tambourines and drums, and regular, light rhythmic thumps that can only be a large group of dancers.

He is wondering what to do when the door opens. A man of about fifty appears, tall and a little stocky but un-athletic, with stooped shoulders and an unruly lock of hair that strays over his forehead. There's a slyness in his smile; something a little combative about him. Charles has the impression of a very determined, idealistic headmaster.

"Forgive me, won't you." The man extends his hand with a firm shake. "Alfred Orage. I'm the welcoming committee. You *are* in luck. We're putting you in the Ritz." He pronounces his name the French way, the word for 'storm.' He has an accent Charles can't place, perhaps from the north of England.

Orage fishes a rolled-up cigarette out of his pocket with nicotine-stained fingers. "I've been ordered to give them up. I must say though, it's dammed difficult. Here, let me help you with one of those."

Charles is travelling with two leather suitcases and a wooden box with a handle, which Orage takes from him.

"This is heavy – books?"

"A gramophone."

"Ah."

He follows Orage up the stairs and into the corridor of one of the wings of the house.

"Gurdjieff must have decided you are more distinguished than the rest of us, putting you in The Ritz." Orage casts an eye over Charles's beautifully-cut blue suit, his bespoke brogues, his Girard-Perregaux watch. Not coveting, merely assessing.

The room Orage shows him into is quite sumptuous with exotic Eastern textiles and carpets on the walls. It is decorated with French engravings and antique furniture. Someone has thought to place flowers in a water jug. There is a writing table, a soft chair by the fireplace, and a basket of ready wood. On the table are two letters that have arrived for him, both with Canadian stamps. From his mother and sister Marion most likely. The window looks out over formal gardens and flower beds, unkempt but charming.

“As I said – the Ritz.” Orage hovers. Charles notices he has a large ragged birthmark on his left cheek, like a sunburn. “The place used to be owned by the Dreyfus family, the lawyer for Zola.” says Orage. “We’re leasing it and Gurdjieff’s going to buy it. Before that it was a Carmelite priory – hence the name – and apparently, the residence of Madame de Maintenon. It’s even got a chapel from that time. Want to freshen up? Or shall I give you a tour now?”

“Now’s fine.”

“Have you met Gurdjieff?”

“No.”

“I take it you must have met Ouspensky then? Heard his lectures?”

“No.”

“Read *Tertium Organum*?”

“No.”

“*Cosmic Anatomy*?”

Charles shakes his head, starting to feel a little under siege.

“Ah. Well. What brings you here then?” Orage looks wary.

“A friend in Zurich thought I would find Gurdjieff’s work very interesting and wrote a letter of introduction.”

Orage considers Charles speculatively. “You look like you’re not sure you’ve come to the right place. Perhaps it’s for you, perhaps it’s not.”

Charles smiles non-committedly against the hint of antagonism in Orage’s tone.

“If you are like me you will find him to be not one man, but a million men in one. I believe he’s a soul of God,” says Orage, with a cryptic look. “His teaching is unlike anything we’ve

heard before in the West. He's astonishing. You'll find out for yourself... Don't let the upheaval caused by all the building works put you off all the great things we're achieving here."

They are on their way down the stairs, passing men who are carrying planks and buckets filled with tools.

"You're a doctor then?" Orage asks.

"A surgeon. Yes."

"In the war, I suppose?"

"Not at the Front. With the Canadian Army Military Corps —part of the medical team..."

Orage gives him a guarded look. "Fortunately, I wasn't considered fit for duty. In case you were wondering."

Charles meets his eye. "Actually, I wasn't wondering that."

He can see the older man relax, just a touch. "We're still being swindled to think we don't have to radically change our ways", Orage says. "As if, after the war, we shouldn't question *everything* – authority, religion, propaganda, the whole underlying economic system." The blotchy red birthmark on Orage's face darkens as he gets more animated. "Gurdjieff predicts that unless each of us fundamentally changes the way we think and act, we'll sleep-walk our way into another cataclysmic war, worse than the last. Shaw thinks so too. The world needs a spiritual awakening..."

Charles feels oddly encouraged by Orage's optimism that such an awakening was possible. He senses beneath this almost boyish enthusiasm is an ordinarily dry, ironic intelligence.

"We're all looking for that awakening. I doubt any of us would be here without the war. Except perhaps Lady Rothermere," Orage says, with a droll look.

They have come out into the château's enormous grounds. They walk through an arcade of lime trees towards a marble fountain and statue, passing a large glasshouse. Men and women, and a handful of children in rough, dirt-smudged blue tunics, are still at work in the last of the afternoon light, carting away stones, lawn and hedge clippings. Charles suddenly feels out of place, in his suit, dressed for Zurich streets.

“For Gurdjieff, it wasn’t just our war. You know his people were systematically exterminated. The Bosphorus ran red...”

“Gurdjieff’s Armenian?”

Orage nods. “Half Greek too.”

Before he left for Europe, Charles had been so appalled by reports of the massacres he felt compelled to donate a week’s salary to a fundraiser for Armenian victims. There was a campaign to bring over as many of the orphaned children as possible.

They come to a halt before a distinctive structure looming behind the glasshouse. It has been obscured by a line of high trees. It’s so incongruous, Charles can scarcely believe his eyes.

“What’s an aircraft hangar doing in the garden of a château?”

“Gurdjieff brought it, from an airfield, not far from here. We dismantled it – then re-assembled it here. We’re turning it our study house and theatre.”

Orage beckons Charles inside. The structure is almost completely in place. There is seating on two tiers around the walls. A stage and a small area for an orchestra has already been constructed. Dozens of men and women are at work, finishing the walls, sealing them with a clay-like mixture, and manoeuvring large timber panels into place. A few chickens stray through; Orage shoos them out.

“We only brought the hanger here ten days ago. We’re hoping to finish before Christmas. We could use a strong fellow like you.”

In a makeshift carpentry workshop and smithy, men are huddled over, busy working wood and tempering steel on an anvil. What were these men, before they came here to shift soil and cart stones? Lawyers, journalists, doctors, artists, teachers, accountants...?

“Can I ask”, Charles says, “what you do – or did – before coming here?” He has to raise his voice over the banging and hammering.

“I was the editor of *The New Age*. I don’t suppose you’ve heard of it in Canada.”

Charles, momentarily discombobulated, looks at him with instant respect. Of course. His friend had mentioned him. And now he thinks of it, Charles remembers the by-line: ‘A.R.



Orage'. *The New Age* was inspiring, one of the few newspapers to call itself socialist, and devoted itself to presenting and propagating the best in intellectual and literary culture.

"Of course — I've read it since university. I always liked the scope of its ideas — and its politics." He scrambles to think of a question: "Was it you who came up with the title of it, by the way?"

"It was Shaw's suggestion. George Bernard Shaw. Without his financial support, we would never have got it started. He said he was born in the wrong century — he should have been born in the twentieth century." Orage considers him thoughtfully. "How did you come to study with Jung?"

"I was attracted to Jung's ideas..." Charles says. "I wanted to understand more about the workings of the mind, and the causes of illness. During the war, I'd treated men suffering from shell-shock, recommending a number of them to be sent to mental institutions, or at the very least to be granted leave... Only for them to be sent back to the trenches and shot, for cowardice, or malingering. We didn't have the skills to treat them. Men unable to control their bodily movements, who had partial paralysis, facial and physical tremors and spasms, involuntary blindness... physical symptoms without any physiological explanation. I felt I owed it to them, and myself, to at least try to understand."

Orage closed one eye and scrunched up his face. "And what do you think Jung would make of a man like myself who came here with no return ticket, as it were? No money, no future plans, except —" he waves his hand in the air back towards the château — "This?"

"I think he would probably deny that the man in question didn't have future plans. He'd say he was on a personal quest."

"That covers it for most of us here then."

Orage grins. Something about their conversation has tipped the scales; whatever initial reservations Orage had towards him, the interloper, have dissolved.

"So — might you decide to throw in your lot with us, then?"

"I'm about to travel to the East. But I wanted to learn more about Gurdjieff before I left."

"We'll have to make the most of you while you're here then," he says dryly.

Orage leads him further into the grounds, towards a farmyard section. There are sheep, goats and pigs, all kinds of rabbits and hens, and grazing horses and mules. He catches sight of some women cleaning out the poultry yard with shovels.

“While all this is going on, is Gurdjieff still teaching?” Charles asks.

“Gurdjieff does give talks and instructions. We are usually told on the day. But this physical labour we’re doing is a vital part of Gurdjieff’s system, designed to break our habits and set new patterns. “

“Meaning?”

“Gurdjieff says you can only learn if you are willing to suffer and work. Self-remembering, and suffering, that has to be the first stage.” He shows Charles his painfully callused hands. “The only thing I ever used my hands for before was typing. Smoking. Drinking. Now he has me digging drains,” Orage says with a laugh. “One last thing to show you...”

Orage leads him to an excavation site. Inside the framework of the solid stone structure, they are surrounded by what looked like burial niches or chambers, with pits leading to a large pool. A formidable task of earth removal is in process. Materials for making cement and bricks are stacked to one side; an old cistern has been transformed into a boiler.

“They’ll all be tiled with mosaics, like a hammam. Seven types of baths – seven of course being a sacred number – and a steam room. We’ll get them finished soon. Facilities in the château are a bit limited in the meantime.”

As they walk back towards the château, they pass a block of plain outbuildings.

“This is where I am. Most of us English are out here. I’m lucky not to be sharing at the moment.” Orage suddenly seems exhausted, drained of his earlier animation. “I almost forgot to say — we have exercises and dance, most days.”

“Dancing?”

“Don’t worry. Look at me!” Orage gestures to his slight paunch. “If I can do it, anyone can. Gurdjieff is brought some of the best dancers from Russia with him. Diaghilev’s already stolen two of them for his Ballet Russes.” Orage looks at his watch. “Dinner is at seven. The

people here will show you what to do. I suggest you rest now —or take a walk. A path goes down to the river that way.” He points towards a clearing in the trees at the end of the garden. “Don’t go off walking too far in the forest. Wild boar in there, and people have been known to get lost for days. I got lost myself last week. Took me four hours to get back to somewhere I recognized.”

“I meant to ask. What was that music I heard this afternoon?”

“Thomas de Hartmann, the composer. Hartmann escaped with Gurdjieff on foot, across the Caucasus. The Bolsheviks would have killed them all if they’d caught them.” At this Orage abruptly turns, and sidles back to the main house.

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*It’s intensely cold – the fire is almost out. I put some more logs in the tiny grate, coax some flames alight from crumbled-up envelopes. I glance – by habit — at my thin gold wristwatch, the one Jack bought me —its companionable tick always used to give me comfort. But although I wind it conscientiously, it’s become worse than unreliable. I take the watch off and stuff it at the bottom of my suitcase.*

*Gurdjieff says time has a different meaning for us here.*

*I was reading one of Chekhov’s letters. The one to his sister, after he left Sakhalin, the island off Asian Russia he called ‘Hell’, and returned to Europe by way of India, when he was living in a house dating from the days of Catherine the Great. Where he would fish and gather mushrooms and think about what to write next... spinning his stories.*

Bogimovo, June, 1891.

Masha! Make haste and come home, as without you our intensive culture is going to complete ruin. There is nothing to eat, the flies are sickening. The mongoose has broken a jar of jam, and so on, and so on. All the summer visitors sigh and lament over your absence. There is no news... The spiderman is busy from morning to night with his spiders. He has already described five of the spider’s legs and has only three left to do....

It is hot, there are no mushrooms. Suvorin has not come yet...

Come soon for it is devilishly dull. We have just caught a frog and given it to the

mongoose. It has eaten it.<sup>11</sup>

*Chekhov makes me feel he is sitting with me, very close. I can smell the summer fields on the morning air – a perfect day, fresh and beautiful and with the bluest sky. I can imagine the view across the river from the dacha, the strong scent of cedar, the way the young children squirm and scream and giggle and run away... I imagine him, in his trunks on some shore in the Indian Ocean. What a daredevil, throwing himself off overboard when the steamer was at going at full speed, then catching a rope tossed out from the stern... How disappointed he must have been, wanting so much to visit Japan and then the steamer could not put in at port due to an outbreak of cholera... And what happened in Singapore – which first delighted him and then struck him into a heap of misery? He doesn't mention it, one has to imagine... But I recognise his TB pendulum swing – now joyous, now fearful, now confident, now doubtful – familiar as my own.*

*When Chekhov returned from that journey to Moscow in 1891, he was only just beginning to be successful; people had begun to recognise his talent. Yet even as they gave dinners in his honour, they were ready to tear him to pieces...*

*How clever and disagreeable people can be with their perfectly squalid gossip! I wonder if they know how much they have wounded me, my clever, treacherous friends. When Ottoline, in her dramatic way, said she had something she must say but only in strictest confidence, but that I must on no account tell Virginia, I felt utterly betrayed. I could hear the Woolfs talking about me, being scathing. To hear that Virginia had described me as 'common', 'a touch unscrupulous'; that they all thought Jack vile... To accept one's own faults is hard enough. But to feel hated like that by one's supposed friends – to be gossiped about, misrepresented to others whom one has not even met... There is something terrifying about being misunderstood. I could never reply to Virginia after that, not even after her long, coaxing letter. It makes me want to do what Chekhov did – retreat to his flowers and vegetables,*

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<sup>11</sup> *Letters of Anton Chekhov to his Family and Friends, with a Biographical Sketch*, trans. by Constance Garnett, The University of Adelaide, eBooks@Adelaide  
<<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/c/chekhov/anton/c511t/chapter66.html>> [accessed 8 August 2018].

*weaving his stories in peace. All he wanted was not to have to worry about money, to live fully as an artist.... but always something got in the way. And all this time – for years! – he was writing his novel, the one he said would encompass everything he had to say, his view on life... But after he died, no trace of the novel was ever found. He must have destroyed it – surely no one else would?*

*Concentrate.*

*Did I think following Gurdjieff's orders would be easy?*

*I have been at Le Prieuré for 54 days. Everyone is here because they want to transform themselves. There is something astonishingly wonderful about the simplicity of this that is the power of this place. To simply set the intention, concentrate all one's force... Remember how I used to read Chummie the story of Maui catching the sun, lassoing it under the spell of the magic jawbone...*

*Oh – courage – love – spirit – poise – make me yours!*

*Help me end things with Jack.*

*Remember what Kot said. We were camped over our translations of Chekhov's letters when he laughed and said – Hah! – and I asked what is it, and he said did you know Chekhov uses the same word for ending his relations with Lika as he does with tying his necktie. Together we realised that the words 'tie up' and 'untie' – 'zaviazvat' and 'razviazvat' connected his love life to his ideas about writing—they also meant 'to devise a plot' and 'to devise the end of the plot'.... This triumph we celebrated with tea and simmel cake which Kot bought specially for me. We found a kind of happiness together working on all our translations, hours and hours we spent hunched over our collaborations. Not only Chekhov. Gorky's Reminiscences of Leonid Andreyev and Dostoevsky's letters to his wife. The one time he raised his voice at me, he apologized immediately afterwards. But he was peevish. Why was I was deliberately destroying my own hopes for happiness? He could forgive me everything else – even all my lies – my 'constant little lies' he called them – but not such a crime as that. What I had with Jack was something childish, he said. To grow up, he told me, I must learn finally to be a simple person — no more pretence, no more lies.*

*That day I told Kot I thought Jack might be having an affair with Brett.*

*Brett, who had been a witness at our wedding. Still a virgin at 37 – her nails bitten to the quick, her ear trumpet, her rabbit teeth!<sup>12</sup> But Brett walks without a care for miles, the way I used to – she plays tennis and flops herself down exaggeratedly on chairs, her skin exposed, glowing. She hangs around him, hoping for crumbs. Jack denied it. Brett — terrified – also denied it. Then he said he’d been considering lodging at Brett’s house and finally admitted they were close enough to “hold hands” – but “nothing more”. I wanted to believe them both. But a stray thought flashed into my mind: I imagined the two of them discussing the life they would have together when I was dead. Jack hung his head, hid his face with his fingers, as though life with me was unendurable and he could not even bear to look at me. Then and there I decided I must sever things. I’m leaving, I said, before I had decided that I would. The relief on his face. It told me everything I needed to know. Before I knew it, I was on the 11.00 from Victoria to Paris...*

*I look up at the sound of the door opening; Olgivanna steps in, hunting for something in the drawers of the bedside table. A safety pin. Her dancing costume is ripped at a seam.*

*“Someone new is here. Very handsome.”*

*She gives me a pointed look when I don’t answer.*

*“He got Adele’s attention. And — he’s American,” This she says with meaningful emphasis, apropos of nothing, as she closes the door.*

*Getting ready for dinner, I wash in icy water from a porcelain basin, comb my hair and brush my teeth. I look in the mirror and see a ghost: I don’t recognise myself. I reach for my powder and scent, fix myself up as best I can.*

*Chekhov’s last letters terrify me. His joy – lost. His passion – gone. He faced the worst thing I could imagine. Reduced to talking about asthma and incontinence and how unappealing he finds the German women of Badenweiler... Ghastly! He must have admitted to himself that all hope was over.*

*I cannot — I must not — let this happen to me. I must write the book I always intended — I*

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<sup>12</sup> CWKM, IV, pp. 315-316.

*must hurry. And when it is done, it must be bound and wrapped and sent to New Zealand with my soul...*<sup>13</sup>

*I hesitate, not wanting to have to go by myself to the dining room. It feels, all of a sudden, a very lonely thing to have to do.*

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Charles goes in search of the path towards the forest, thinking he might find the river. But it is getting dark and the grassy path he takes splinters and becomes less defined, and without a torch, is difficult to follow. Before too long, he turns back.

He is trying to decide what to make of the chaotic, exotic and utterly perplexing nature of Le Prieuré.

Back in his room, he goes through his mail. His mother sends news from home. His sister Marion is pregnant with her second child. It strikes him how close he had been to Marion when they were children and how he has nothing in common with her now. According to certain circles in Toronto, Marion had married spectacularly well, to a right-wing politician. Marion reminded him of their father, untroubled by any uncertainty or ambiguity.

His mother is in the habit of sending him newspaper clippings. She has tucked one into her letter, an article about a Canadian woman artist, Mary Riter Hamilton, living in France. His mother's scrawls: *Perhaps you have heard about her through the War Amps? There is apparently an exhibition of her work in Paris at the Palais Garnier you might see.* The article is titled 'The Sadness of the Somme.' He reads:

The first day I went over Vimy Ridge, snow and sleet were falling, and I was able to realise what the soldiers had suffered. If, as you and others tell me, there is something of the suffering and heroism of the war in my pictures...

He sets it aside.

When Charles worked at the clearing station at Ètaples, with so many urgent casualties, and so few surgeons, they had to work so fast they were forced to push dead bodies onto the

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<sup>13</sup> Paraphrasing of Mansfield's words, 'Oh I want this book to be written. It must be done. It must be bound and wrapped and sent to New Zealand. I feel that with all my soul'. *CW4*, p. 205.

floor and immediately start trying to save the next ones... After a while, they barely saw the bodies. They became indivisible from the tangled nightmare. The meat-grinder. There was nothing Homeric about it, not much glory in ending up in that first depot where he worked.

It's the last thing he wants to think about. What he hadn't said to Orage was that ever since he returned from the war, almost four years ago, nothing had felt right. There was an unspoken badge of silence about it. He sensed a schism in himself; the war had knocked him off course from whatever trajectory in life had been meant for him. He'd lost all his certainties. When he'd gone to study with Jung he knew he had to find a different way, deep within himself. The problem was, *what* different way.

On the table is a brochure, in English. Under the slogan 'To Know, To Understand, To Be,' it stated: "Gurdjieff is the herald of coming good." A person who submitted fully to Gurdjieff's process, it claimed, would be guided into the 'Fourth Way,' a 'new fully conscious way of living,' which, if 'embarked upon by all humanity, could achieve a powerful shift in world consciousness.'

Charles frowns and goes to the window to look out into the garden. A little goldfinch has perched on the fountain edge and is skittering about, merrily twisting his tiny skull back and forth.

At Jung's Psychology Club in Zurich, there was debate as to whether Gurdjieff might be a great mystic, a spiritual prophet — or merely a charlatan with a murky past.

Charles lies on the green satin quilt and shuts his eyes. By now, he's almost certain that coming here has been an interesting mistake. It doesn't matter. He's only passing through, really only here on a whim. Jung's assistant had suggested it. But although he had certainly been curious to find out about Gurdjieff's teachings, if there are to be no lectures or discussions – only manual labour – then there is no reason to stay, even for the short time he had intended.

Oddly, he's already missing Zurich. His routine there. The intellectual life, the everyday presence of its lake and snow-capped ring of mountains, the nightly pealing of all the church-bells. The late afternoon sunlight flashing off the great buttery gold hands on the enormous



clock tower of St Peter's. The discipline of having to improve his German, finding a certain satisfaction in the analytical precision of the language, had been an unexpected pleasure. The neat little *pensione* where he occupied the first floor near Jung's Psychology Club, off Gemeindestrasse. The intellectual civility of the world that revolved around Jung, and the friendships he had made there, not least with Jung himself. Usually being somewhat of a loner, he had been happy to find himself embraced by a community of like-minded people he had been genuinely sorry to say farewell to. Mostly Americans. One or two Germans who had also fought, on the other side, and with them he had experienced a curious, civilized comradeship. They would meet to talk for hours in the always-crowded Kronenhalle, drinking rough white Fendant wine from the Valais, or go walking and carousing down to Niederdorf, the low-life bohemian neighbourhood on the east bank of the Limmat River.

All in all, including some travels to Italy, he had been nine months in Zurich. But it had been time to time to move on. He was ready for that. He was booked on the Kitano Maru, a Japanese steamer, to Ceylon, departing from Marseilles. His plan is to continue to Bombay, Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai before arriving in Japan at Kobe.

He has just over a fortnight left in France.

It seems to him he should cut his stay at Le Prieuré short. His time before getting on the ship is going to be better spent in Paris.

## **6. A Toast for the Idiots**

On the table, platters of hors d'oeuvres, sardines and anchovies, bunches of watercress, mayonnaise, tureens of meat in rich sauces, saffron rice. Bottles of vodka. Two dining areas have been set up, each with long tables laden with a banquet, the scene illuminated by a great many candles and fires in the two hearths. Fifty – perhaps sixty people are milling around and seating themselves. They seem to be celebrating something.

Everyone around him seems to speak Russian, although he hears other languages – Armenian? Georgian? Polish? Not a word of French. There doesn't seem to be a single French person here. Instead, a mixture of many lively and intelligent faces, some artistic,

some shrewd. He finds himself wondering what their histories might be. Who of those Orage described as fleeing for their lives might still be nostalgic for the old regime of the Tsar? Idealistic supporters of Kerensky – or perhaps Denikin or Kolchak, those who were no better in their way than the Bolsheviks? The ones who are obviously the dancers wear layered white costumes, some ornamented with buckles and belts, the women in dancing pumps, and the men in Russian boots. There is a general air of emancipation and glamour. Charles has put on a suit and tie, and notices that strict formality is observed by some, but others wear raffish loose cravats and peasant-style clothing.

A gong sounds. The followers begin to take their seats. He hesitates, and a blonde girl, round and pretty, beckons at him.

She speaks neither French nor English. All he can gather is that her name is Adele, she is Lithuanian, from some unpronounceable village. She strikes him as simple, and very young. Making conversation seems impossible but he is enjoying the spectacle. People pass around bottles of wine and brandy. More dishes are brought in, lavish and unfamiliar, some very spicy, or tasting of lemon; a great assortment of pickles. Orage is at the other table, bundled into conversation with a sharp-faced, blonde woman in early middle-age with a fox fur around her shoulders, and he wonders if that might be Lady Rothermere. Around him, other diners look distinctly English.

Charles can feel someone looking at him.

When he turns his head, a woman at the other table looks quickly away. In the gloom of candlelight, he can't see her face clearly, just that she is pale and slight, with short dark hair and a severe fringe cut over her brow, like a Japanese doll. His heart responds before he has time to realise how much this woman reminds him of Katie. A couple of times, since he met her – what was it now, seven years ago? – his heart had leapt, unbidden, just this way, only to be disappointed. But it was never her. Just echoes of her in other women: her distinctive haircut, the proud turn of her neck, a flash of a creamy-faced smile, the graceful way she held her body. This woman can't be Katie. And the way she sits, he's sure it isn't her. She's older. It can't be her. There's something too fragile and vulnerable about her.

Just then Adele nudges him, handing him a tumbler of wine, her face flushed and open. She has loosened the buttons on her blouse, just enough to offer a glimpse of the curve of her breasts. Above the table Adele maintains complete innocence but his stockinged foot begins to caress his sex. He pretends not to notice, and cranes his neck, trying to get a better view of the dark-haired woman.

But she has gone.

Someone touches his arm. The imperious young woman in the overcoat he saw in the kitchen.

“I am Madame Ostrovska. My husband says – please, come.”

The way she carries herself and walks with her feet turned like an elegant duck – she is obviously a dancer. She has to be at least half her husband’s age.

Gurdjieff acknowledges him with a brief bow of his head and commands him to sit. Gurdjieff fixes him with an alarming stare, saying nothing for what begins to feel an uncomfortably long time. Although quite short, he gives an impression of formidable physical strength, the coiled-up energy of an athlete. Before Charles can venture to say something, Gurdjieff raises his hand, then his fierce expression dissolves.

“Welcome!” Gurdjieff fills every glass within his reach with vodka. He raises his glass. “To our new Canadian friend! Drink!”

The spectacle continues as two roasted lambs are carried in. Gurdjieff reaches for a small sabre, wipes it with a flourish against his large embroidered napkin, and begins slicing the meat; plates are passed around. The tiny heads of the lambs are still attached, and have been cleaved, like broken bowls, so that the brains can be scooped out. Instead of a sauce, there are plates with fresh herbs – mint, fennel, parsley and tarragon. A man opposite Charles helps himself to one of the dishes, and with his fork, he hooks out a piece of boiled patent leather from a shoe, holds it up to inspect it, then stands up to show it off.

*“Ya ponyal! Medvezhatinoy!”*

He shouts, several times, waving the mangled piece of leather triumphantly, and everyone laughs. To the great hilarity of the onlookers, another fellow plucks out wine-soaked laces

and artificial flowers. These too, are held up, like talismans; amid laughter, Armagnac is passed around.

It is odd and Dadaist, but evidently everyone expected such pranks from Gurdjieff, who is on his feet again. He speaks first in Armenian, then Russian, then a translator speaks for him in English. After each toast, everyone is expected to drain their glass.

“To health of all idiots!”

“To ordinary idiot!”

“To candidate for idiocy!”

“To super idiot!”

“To arch idiot!”

“To hopeless idiot!”

“To compassionate idiot!”

To the followers, this clearly is some kind of ritual, which they join in uproariously echoing each of the seven idiot toasts with laughter.

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After the meal, they file through to the other near-empty salon where mats are laid out on the floor and chairs set out. Charles sits near an empty chair, unsettled. A disturbance has overtaken his mood. A genial, boyish-faced, balding man of about forty sits beside him, offers him a cigarette, and winces as he takes a drag.

“I don’t really like them. But he tells me I should smoke them.” The man speaks with a Scottish accent. Charles feels an instant affection; he hasn’t heard a Scottish accent in a long time.

“He seems to have told Orage the opposite.”

The Scotsman laughs. “Perverse, isn’t it! It’s all about breaking our mechanical habits. Making us do what we don’t usually do. It might seem crazy, but it works.”

A beleaguered-looking woman in a dowdy floral dress appears at the doorway, carrying a fretful child. “Maurice,” she calls plaintively.

“My wife. Excuse me, I’d better go.”

Gurdjieff stops the chatter with a single clap of his hands and sits alone on a chair on a small platform at the front of the room.

A thin, bespectacled man sits himself down at the piano. This can only be Hartmann. He closes his eyes as he begins, letting his fingers find the keys. Hartmann seems to be in a trance as he plays. Although spare and minimal, the music is so subtle and deeply suggestive that, as before, Charles is only aware of feeling it rather than listening.

That woman had been studying him, he was certain of it. The longer she fails to reappear, the more he finds it hard to concentrate on anything but thinking about her. Jung would say he was just like one of his patients who had dreamed of a golden scarab and seeing a beetle, believed she was seeing the scarab of her dream. A coincidence, merely. More important, Jung would say, was *why* the coincidence of being reminded of her should occur now.

He'd pushed Katie out of his mind for years. Once he counted up the hours they had spent together – twenty-seven in total. And yet how many times had he thought of her, in the months and years that followed? First, in ways that were unashamedly erotic. And deeply romantic. The passion he'd felt for her was real. There were times he told himself he'd give his life to see her again. He had sent her letter after letter, but never got a reply. He was sure she was alive — why wouldn't she be? She had less reason to think the same of him. In the end, he had come to accept their meeting for what it was, a chance encounter. But no one else had ever made him feel the way she did.

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Around two in the morning, he is sure he hears music, doors opening and shutting in the corridor, and the footfall of dancers. He is also sure he can hear drum-beats. He is desperately thirsty. There is no water in his room.

On the way down to the kitchen, passing the salon, Charles catches sight of twenty or so dancers, mostly young women and men, swiftly walking around the room, their arms outstretched, then stopping to rehearse a complex series of movements. Despite the late hour they are pushing themselves – being pushed – to their maximum. He can hear them counting arithmetic – in Russian — under their breath. They move their bodies with precise, athletic

grace, and they are ordered to make strange, distorted grimaces at the same time. He sees Gurdjieff's wife, Madame Ostrovska and Adele among them.

“Faaster!” a familiar voice snaps. “*Skurra, skurra, skurra!*” Then – “STOP!”

Everyone freezes their posture and expression. Gurdjieff paces around them, then stands in the middle of the salon, to demonstrate how the next set of movements should be done. Before he can be seen, Charles steps back into the darkness.

Back in bed, he lies awake blinking in the darkness, looking at the moon, almost down to its last quarter. Everything about being here, and what it had stirred up for him, feels too strange and chaotic, not what he had expected at all.

## **7. Montmartre**

*Paris. March 21 1915.*

He had come to Paris on a few days' leave not looking for love, nor expecting to find it, mentally and physically exhausted by the extremity of the casualty clearing-station's routine. The daily task of playing God, deciding which of the men they should save and which they could not. They had nicknamed areas after circles of hell. Those in need of critical surgery had to be dealt with first; it was usual practise to perform the amputations at the clearing stations, otherwise gangrene could set in before the patients reached base hospital. They were well behind the lines; the men were shipped in by convoy and ambulance train. With each bombardment came the human tide: the worst injured crying out in agony or moaning through a haze of morphine. Worst, men with half their heads blown off, throats shot out, missing limbs. Some had limbs too shattered to move, gaping wounds, swathed in bandages leaking blood. The three chaplains and nurses did what they could to ease the last moments of dying men.

On the surgical team they survived on adrenalin, on their camaraderie, by following, at least in theory, strict protocols at every stage. He was so busy he had no time to think. It was an avalanche of suturing and amputations; having to slide his fingers into gaping wounds, gingerly feeling for breached organs and perforations, making judgements about skin and

flesh. In surgery, his talent for cutting and stitching was noted; he was quickly promoted. Everything was unpredictable, transport was inadequate and supplies failed; latrines got blocked. One thing they usually did have – he found this ironic – was plenty of champagne – given freely to those on the dangerous and serious list.

All he had wanted was to be alone with his own thoughts in a warm hotel room with the solace of a hot bath. To sink himself up to his ears in steaming water, to wash away the sickly pungent smell of death from his nostrils, to run the scalding tap and let the steam bring some comfort and stillness. To sleep in a comfortable bed with clean sheets. Have some good meals, wander a little. Perhaps pick up some new books, hear some music. Most of all, to sleep.

Paris was half-empty, many of the cafés along the Grand Boulevards closed at eight-thirty, with gloomy, patrolled streets. The City of Light was as beautiful as he expected but quiescent, the scene of deprivation. There were few men about who weren't uniformed, aside from the old and the young. Almost all the smaller shops were shuttered; basic provisions were sold in the big stores by women to queues of at least a hundred at any one time, with gendarmes directing the human traffic. Everything was labelled "*Maison essentiellement française*"; when he enquired why he was told it was to prevent the pillagers making a profit from sacking firms suspected of being German. Only a couple of metro lines were running, no buses, and the boulevards were bustling with horse-drawn carriages and carts and people toiling on foot laden with huge bundles on their bags. Horse-shit covered the pavements; he saw for the first time open *pissoirs* with tin screens.

Eventually, in search of music and life, he made his way up to Montmartre, wandering through Place Pigalle, full of garish bars, cabarets and hanging around not far off, straggling clusters of street-walkers, like moths tarted up as bright nocturnal butterflies. One of these women followed him, persisting she could show him a good time, even clinging on to his belt, forcing him to have to shake her off almost. He ignored the touts trying to tempt him inside. He'd been well warned about the prostitutes in Paris. Not that he would be tempted: the venereal diseases he'd seen and treated would make any red-blooded man pause.

Strolling up the hill, he had stumbled into a *b*ôte de nuit, attracted by the sound of gypsy music.

That's when he first saw her. He remembered still the catch in his heart, as he caught sight of her. How does one know with such immediacy, the certainty that someone could change your life? She was dancing, her face flushed, full of pleasure. There was something defiant about her happiness. She wore a bright red dress, fitted so that it showed off her neckline, her voluptuous figure. As he ordered a drink and sat at the bar, he saw her noticing him, long enough for him to be aware of her full steady gaze. He couldn't stop looking at her. Her chestnut dark hair was cut so short it grazed her cheek, a blunt fringe framing her brow. She looked – not like a boy exactly, but like a woman refusing to be told she couldn't behave like one. Her confidence – she had to be American. Or perhaps English.

It only took a few seconds to know what the look between them meant, in the warm haze of cigarette smoke and dim light of the cavernous, crowded bar.

For some minutes, he lost sight of her. Then he was aware of her sudden, bright energy next to him. She was stacking up a small tower of glasses on the counter, glancing at him in the most ironic, provocative way. Following her, a handsome Latin looking man with a mop of dark unkempt hair, dressed – bizarrely – in a top-to-toe corduroy suit with an odd, girlish shirt collar, a felt hat and a red scarf. His eyes had such feverish intensity Charles wondered if he was ill, on hashish, or both.

“If you're going to look at me like that maybe you should ask me to dance.”

She wasn't American after all. She sounded English, but with a hint of something else. She spoke loudly enough for the Italian man to hear. The man seemed to him to not be her husband, nor her lover, although Charles sensed some kind of energy between them. The Italian, a cigarette spiral glow at his mouth, nodded at the waiter who slung across a full carafe of the same white and cloudy drink, which he tucked precariously into the crook of his arm, scooping up the glasses with the other; with a cryptic look, he left them to it.

She smiled, in case he should need more encouragement, and waved her glass at him.



“Absinthe. It’s perfectly horrible stuff. They don’t take any notice of the ban here. Try it if you want to.”

He guessed she must be about his age.

He offered to order an *aperitif* if she preferred.

Brandy and soda. Why not?

She’d asked him a little about himself. He told her he was on leave from the military base hospital near Pas de Calais.

All around them, the heat and sweat of bodies, the laughter, the infectious pulse of the musicians playing. The next thing he knew they were dancing and all he could think about was the nearness of their bodies, the thrill it gave him to see her take off her shoes. To return to dance barefoot. He led her into a ragtime two-step; she veered him into the tango. How glad to be alive she was. He’d almost forgotten how that felt. He found himself laughing at the faces she pulled.

Something smashed on the tiled floor. Her friends, the Italian and a woman in a hat with plumed feathers that made her look like a cockatoo, had begun squabbling. What seemed to be a ferocious row was brewing. The woman had raised her voice; the man seemed to be goading her, people had turned to stare.

“That’s Beatrice. She’s South African,” she said, as though that explained it, bending to put her shoes on. She nodded at the Italian. “And that’s Dedo. Beatrice has got herself fearfully drunk. They’re always fighting—but they enjoy making up.”

She led him to a restaurant nearby, one of her favourites, not bothering to tell her friends she was leaving.

Chartier. A real worker’s restaurant, she told him proudly. She swept her black hat from her bobbed head and hung it up among the men’s hats on the communal brass racks. As she walked past the tables, a group of men at a table turned their heads. She barely tried to hide her amusement and delight as they sat down. The waiters, sweating with exertion, carried four plates on one arm and scrawled the bill on the rough paper tablecloth, and the walls were covered in speckled mirrors. They ordered *faux-filet* and *épinards à la crème*.

“You’d never get that in England. Though, I hate to tell you, it’s horse meat. And don’t try the coffee here. Ever since the war it tastes just like wet squeezed flannel. Everything else is more or less safe.”

The way she spoke was distinctive — she accented certain words in an amusing, distinctive way and sometimes spoke in a carefully modulated murmur, hardly parting her lips, as though she were humming or intoning her words – which had the effect of making him want to hang on to every word. He wondered if she might be an actress. He took in how beautifully her dress showed off the fullness of her breasts – he tried very hard not to look – how she moved her body when she talked, her unconscious and theatrical little gestures – the hand resting at the base of her throat, her arched eye, the way she sat, her back erect like a dancer.

“Shall we play a game? See how much we can find out about each other before telling each other our names?”

He sat back in on the hard, wooden seat, amused. “Alright. You start.”

“I have a Canadian brother-in-law. My sister lives in Ottawa. Is that very far from where you come from?”

“Is it that obvious I’m Canadian?”

“Canadians are like Americans but less shiny. And Americans aren’t in the war.”

He smiled, feeling vaguely affronted. “I have family in Ottawa actually. In Canadian terms, it’s just around the corner. 280 miles from where I grew up. In Toronto.”

“I won’t ask if you know my brother-in-law. James Mackintosh Bell.”

Not a familiar name. He shook his head. “Sorry.”

“My sister Vera’s become awfully Canadian.” Her tone was a little sarcastic.

“What do you mean?”

“She’s become so wholesome... she makes wifeliness into such a mission. Being a member of so many societies and good causes... She’s become so exemplary and middle-aged, it’s hard to imagine she was once such fun –”

“I know the type exactly.”

“Vera’s just what Mother wanted us all to be. She has two perfectly Canadian boys. My nephews, Andrew and John...You wouldn’t believe how many times I get cornered by someone convinced I must know their long-lost cousin in Wellington. Or, God forbid, Dunedin.”

He grinned. “You’re from New Zealand then?”

She gave a quick nod, a little impatient, as though he had jumped a few places ahead in the game. “Neighbourhood you grew up in?” she asked.

“Rosedale, Toronto.”

“Thorndon, Wellington. So — we’re both colonials. *Aliens*.” She pronounced the word with sardonic emphasis. “In London, they seem to think we’re all little savages. I left when I was nineteen.”

“Did you come over with your family?”

“No. I travelled alone.”

“That’s adventurous.”

“You think so?”

When young women left a country at nineteen, it often meant marriage. She might be married. Or a widow. He glanced at her left hand. No ring. She caught him looking and scrutinized him serenely, making him feel self-conscious.

“What was it like, growing up in Toronto?”

“Cold,” he said.

The way he said it cracked her up, and then he laughed, setting her off again, and they both found this ludicrously funny.

“What it was that made you leave? New Zealand, I mean?”

“Do you usually ask strange women such dreadfully pertinent questions?”

“Absolutely.”

“I was sure that if I stayed there, I’d suffocate. I’d simply curl up and die. I hated it. Loathed it. Everything about Wellington seemed so petty — provincial and small. I wanted to find ‘my’ kind of people, and everything that interested me was over here. London. Europe.

Staying there was never going to make me who I wanted to be.” She corrected herself. “Who I *want* to be. I’ve always wanted something else.”

“You made a good decision, then?”

“That’s a very big question for a short acquaintance...”

“So — when you came back, you came here — to Paris?”

“To London. Completing my education. That’s what my parents called it. I have lived here though, in Paris, off and on. I lived in the 6<sup>th</sup>, on the Rue de Tournon for a while, just near the gate to the Luxembourg Gardens...”

At his blank expression, she darted a quick, quizzical glance. “You don’t know Paris very well do you?” she said.

“No yet.”

To his astonishment, she began singing, quite softly, just so he could hear, in perfect Cockney.

*“And I’d like to go again to Paris on the Seine, for Paris is a proper pantomime. An’ if they’d only shift the ‘ackney Road and plant it over there, I’d like to live in Paris all the toime...”*

Her voice was unexpectedly clear and lovely, even while she had deliberately coarsened it.

“You don’t you know Marie Lloyd?”

“Where have I been?” He chuckled.

“She’s the queen of the music halls. I used to go and see her every chance I could. And Vesta Victoria. And Nellie Wallace...” She was a little tipsy by now.

*“My Mother said, ‘Always look under the bed*

*Before you blow the candle out...”*

*See if there’s a man about’...”*

She was a great mimic. He was captivated.

“We haven’t finished playing our game” she said. “It only works if you’re completely truthful... First *you* tell me something you’ve never told anyone, the most embarrassing thing that’s ever happened to you, then *I’ll* tell you mine... Come on, we’re supposed to be finding

out about one another.” She saw him hesitate. “I’ll go first. You know how sometimes there are couples, and you like one very much and can’t stand the other?”

He nodded.

“*We-ll*. I was living in the country, in Runcton, next to a watermill, in a tiny village near Chichester, miles away from anywhere. We were talking about a sculptor friend, Henri, exceptionally gifted, who we liked very much who had said he wanted to come down and see us. And I said I hope he doesn’t bring that ghastly woman, I can’t *bear* her...and I went on about what an emotional leech she was, how she’d follow me around and I’d never get any work done, how there was something *violent* about her.... We heard this screech of outrage from behind the hedge...” she began to chuckle as she talked “... and there was Henri, beside himself with rage. He tore us to shreds — and stomped off. He’d come all the way down from London to surprise us, and because he had no money, walked on foot from the station. No amount of pleading with him could get him to stay. Henri’s *hated* me ever since...I felt so *mortified!* Of course, after something like there’s no way to even apologise...”

Charles laughed. He was slightly disquieted by who she might be referring to casually as ‘we’ but couldn’t very well ask.

“Your turn,” she said.

Her eyes missed nothing. He decided, simply, to tell the truth. “I was sixteen and had just won champion oarsman at the Argonaut rowing club, and I was standing on the jetty. I noticed there was a lot of tittering...”

She began to grin.

“All the great and the good were there and the Club president was about to give me the cup. He said under his breath I’d stand to attention if I were you, you’ve got a ball hanging out. I stood to attention, hoping for the best. When I was able to check I saw that I had a split seam and one of my testes was very visible. A moment of excruciating humiliation...”

“Poor you!”

“For the next while I had to endure the nickname ‘Mono-ball...’

She had the most delicious laugh. He gazed at her in delight. It was such a relief to be able to laugh. Everything about her fascinated him.

“I’m Charles, by the way. Charles Jermyn.”

“Katie. Katie Beauchamp.”

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They’d talked all night. He wanted to know everything about her — and she seemed to want to know all about him. Katie announced she had a dream the night before about sailing to India on a very white boat. Had he read the Life of Buddha? – of Chuong Tsu? Had he read Nietzsche? What did he think? Because most people seemed to get him wrong.

The way Katie used ordinary words like *‘frightful’* and *‘idiocy’* and *‘awfully’* and *‘revolting’* and *‘pour rire’* made them sound charming. There was a conscription scare in England – had he heard? Was it a false alarm? How long did he think the war would last? Her brother Chummie had sailed from Wellington to enlist in the British Army and was on training exercises in Bournemouth. And her friend’s brother was on his way to Gallipoli.

He asked if she had a sweetheart or a husband. She looked at him straight. Gave a very demure shake of her head. No.

If her brother as on his way in, he was not going to spoil the night by telling her what was going to be awaiting her Chummie in the trenches. Poor bastard.

There had been a Zeppelin attack in Paris the night before. Parisians were used to the thud of distant artillery, but the Zeppelins created a new dread. At least two of them had drifted across the city, dropping bombs on the suburbs. The alarm sounded just after one in the morning, after what at first seemed to be the low rumble of distant thunder on an otherwise cloudless, clear night. He had rushed outside into the street, where a crowd had gathered, all heads craned upwards. Glimmers flashed like lightning to the north and east of Paris, followed by the far-off growl of heavy guns from the forts. Searchlights played in great

sweeping arcs across the sky, their luminous projections hunting their prey, then lighting up the enemy against the sky. The Ultimate Fish, Katie called it, its fins of silky grey.<sup>14</sup>

“When it passed, I felt such physical relief, like you do after an earthquake.”

“Cigarette?” she asked.

She bent to the flame in his cupped hands, so close enough he could breathe the scent of her body.

“Your perfume’s lovely, what is it?”

It wasn’t her perfume; it was her natural, animal scent.

“*Genêt Fleuri*,” she told him. ‘It means flowering gorse. Supposedly made with wild flowers from Corsica.’”

She was a writer, she told him, although she had been trying her hand at journalism; she referred airily to writing up “dispatches.” She was trying to finish a novel and had come to Paris to “kick it off.” In Paris, she had space to breathe. Her imagination took flight here in a way it couldn’t in England. Even with the war here, it was better than London. It felt more patriotic, somehow. Besides, the literary world could be how should she put it – full of such merciless warfare. And she was determined to get her novel written. Most of the time she shut herself away, tried to keep her life quiet and disciplined so she could follow a routine. When she needed to absorb life again she could just stroll outside her apartment and take inspiration in knowing she was sharing the same streets as Balzac and Stendhal and Zola and Verlaine...

“And go to music bars. And meet strange men...”

She looked at him sharply, her face all of a sudden hostile.

“I’m teasing you. I thought you might be an actress.”

“Did you...” She looked at him a moment. “I did think for a moment I might be on stage – you know, be the new Maud Allen,” she said, her voice dead-pan.

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<sup>14</sup> See Mansfield’s description of the Zeppelin attack and her coining of ‘Ultimate Fish’, CLKM, I, p. 159.

He realised she was teasing him. “I can see you as a stage siren.” Actually, he could. She did have something of that quality to her. It wasn’t that she was conventionally beautiful – well, that wasn’t true. She was *unusual*.

“I had a career on the stage of course... I was a very tubby, cross Bluebell... the Women’s Christian Temperance Union panto.”

He laughed, a real snorting laugh. “You weren’t ever tubby.”

“Oh yes — I *was*!... I grew out of it, eventually... I had this ambition for a while, to devise amusing and dramatic sketches... I got by performing at society soirees, even at a cabaret theatre... Sometimes I’d wear a man’s dress suit, with a stick and a long cigarette-holder. I had a Maori costume, the whole thing — I’d tell Maori stories. I dressed as a gypsy outfit, and pretended to read people’s fortunes, the only problem was, I was far too good at it...”

He chuckled again, and she looks as though she is enjoying all this very much.

“I was earning a guinea an evening, quite good money when my monthly allowance was only forty shillings...”

“But things are better now?”

“Quite,” she answered off-handedly. “I did try for the cinema too. Someone gave me a card. For a few strange weeks, I worked as an extra in a British and Colonial Film. I sat with the other would-be actresses in Lyons teashops, and decided I wasn’t cut out for cinematograph productions.”

“I don’t imagine it can be all that easy getting started as a writer —” He was humouring her, but also genuinely concerned. Was she telling the truth? Where on earth was her family in all this?

“No. At one point, I sold my cello for three pounds just to make ends meet —”

“You played the cello?”

She nodded. “Music was my first love. But my teacher warned me I’d never be able to write *and* play, and that if I chose the cello, I would have to give everything to it. When I first gave it up, it felt like losing a limb.”

“And your novel? Can you tell me anything about it?”



“It’s going to be about New Zealand. Growing up there. No one’s really written about New Zealand, not since dear Samuel Butler...” She trailed off vaguely.

“What did he write?”

“A very good book called *Erewhon*.”

He made a mental note.

She didn’t seem to want to talk about it. “I’ve begun to hate being in England,” she said. “There’s something so ugly taking hold. It’s not just the war. I spent months in the countryside last year, and had this real horror of being actually buried by stupidity and spite...”

Charles flinched. Did she realise how oblivious to the war she sounded? But he couldn’t bring himself to be angry with her.

“Such a pretty, idyllic little place. The Lee. All rambling roses and hedgerows. But you wouldn’t believe the cruelty to the few men who hadn’t enlisted. The women far worse than the men.” A peculiar look came over her face as if she was about to tell him something but stopped herself. “Have you got White Feather Brigadiers in Canada?”

He nodded.

He had been in his third year of medical school when Britain declared war on Germany. He had been stopped on the street by an angry woman who demanded to know why a healthy young man like him wasn’t serving his country, even though there was as yet no conscription. She had slipped a white feather, a symbol of cowardice, into his label buttonhole and spat on the pavement.

“When I came to England, it seemed awfully backward, very anti-Liberal — not to give women the vote. Everyone seems to want to look the other way – even now.” She looks around the restaurant, full of smoke but beginning to empty out. She gave him a laconic look. “I *do* actually miss New Zealand.”

“What do you miss?”

“So many things.”

“Such as?”

“The wildness, the sea; the mountains of wild greenery and bright gorse around Wellington, the flax bushes, the toi-toi, all the native flowers... The hot days full of cicadas, the wind making my hair salty... The feeling of being deep in the bush, the forest... The light, the *landscape*...”

She leaned back against the banquette and closed her eyes for a moment.

“Running across the hot sand in the summer, so hot so you can’t stand still for a moment, so you had to race to the wet sand. We used to lie on our tummies on the wooden planks of the wharf and watch the sprats shimmering underneath, in their thousands. The sea was so salty and clear-green and seaweedy... The only thing that half satisfies it is the smell and taste of the wonderful fresh oysters you can get here, in those places near the Rue de Bac, where they have sacks of them, sitting on ice... In New Zealand the light is so bright and clear that shadows looked as though they’ve been painted on... And the sounds, and smells, so different...”

What she said about her country reminded him of his own. The very opposite of where, in a few hours, he would be returning. Intimate knowledge of shrapnel wounds to the head and body. He dreaded having to treat men with their faces, organs and limbs torn out. Some died vomiting faeces as they struggled to breathe. She seemed so innocent.

“I miss the cicadas, the birds, the tuis and fantails. The call of the *kokako*...”

When he asked what that was, she described it as the most beautiful birdsong on earth. Knowing that he had to return to hell again in less than twenty-four hours felt unendurable all of a sudden, and he supposed it showed on his face.

“Are you alright?”

He shook his head. “What you’re saying reminds me of the places I went to growing up. I used to stay every summer with my grandfather. He lives on an island — Salt Spring — in British Columbia. He’s an ethnologist. He took me travelling up around the Pacific North West when I was a boy,” he said.

“He studied Indian tribes?” She leaned forward, curious. “How interesting.”

“He immersed himself in their culture. He spoke some of their languages, he was fluent in Cowichan. He took me with him exploring, meeting with the Cowichan, the Tlinget, the Tsimshian, the Nisga’a, the Gitksan, the Makah, the Kwakwaka’wakw, the Haida...”

“Really? How extraordinary. My best friend at school was a Maori girl. Maata. She was half Maori actually — her mother was European, her father was the son of a great Maori chief...”

“How old are you?” he asked her, suddenly.

“Twenty-five. You?”

“Twenty-three.”

She gave him a slightly superior, older woman smile. “You weren’t tempted to be an ethnologist then, like your grandfather?”

“I guess there’s still time. He started out as a doctor...”

“When I was ten I thought I wanted to be a Maori missionary. I wanted to go and live with the Maori. I’m not sure what I thought I could teach them. When I was a child people believed Maori were a dying race. I remember being told that almost half of them had died — there were constant epidemics of typhoid fever and tuberculosis. They had no resistance to European diseases.”

“Were there missionaries in your family?”

“Father liked reminding us that one of our Irish forebears translated the New Testament into Maori. He stayed with Maori on their pas, he learned Maori exchanging lessons for tobacco... The rest of us weren’t really missionary types. Not exactly all solemn and Sundayfied. Did you take me for being like that?”

## **8. Quai aux Fleurs**

He offered to walk her back to where she was staying – over on the Left Bank – but first they wandered through the streets of Butte Montmartre. She took his arm as they climbed up the cobblestones to Rue Norvins and she gestured vaguely – over there – to the charming little house where her friend lived, the South African with the cockatoo hat. They walked through

the little village to see the view across Paris from the platform of the gleaming, just-finished Sacré Coeur, and they watched the funicular crawl up and down, its clang-clang sounds cutting sharply through the dark night. It was his first sight of the Sacré Coeur close up. Her French friends, she said, hated this church. It stood for the brutal massacre of the Left, the crushing of the Commune. “People ate bread made with straw, and the going rate for a rat was twenty francs...” she said. “Rats, can you believe it? I’d prefer to die.”

They looked across the whole of Paris. Notre-Dame, the dome of the Parthenon, and numerous churches were clearly visible in the moonlight but the buildings were all in darkness; orders were in place for blackout.

There weren’t any taxicabs. Most of them had been requisitioned. They passed a small garden, noticed a pick-up. The man and woman a moving shadow. A tramp going through the trash, spilling foul-smelling rubbish out on the cobbles.

“How had you been planning to get back?”

“I had been going to stay with Beatrice but I won’t now. Anyway, I often go walking by myself at night. I don’t always sleep well. If that happens I get claustrophobic, I need to be able to get out and walk, even if it’s three in the morning...”

“You feel safe, walking at night?”

“In the middle of the war, you’re asking me whether it’s safe?”

He wanted to kiss her when she said that. But then he’d known from the start he wanted to kiss her.

“Sometimes I just have to walk and walk, that’s all... Paris is so different at night. It has such a life to it. There’s a whole night world, the underworld I suppose... I have to *see*, to be able to write, how could I if I didn’t *know*... it’s a little like having a secret life. *Que vive* – being alert, being on the lookout. One sees the most astonishing things ... The most surprising people look out for me...”

Just lately though, she told him, she had noticed something more feral in the air. It put her on edge. Civility was breaking down. Just the other night, she had been walking home and had come across a trail of bloody footprints on the pavement. Shockingly fresh, like from a

carving knife. And what was odd, was that although they were recognisably human footprints, they were set so far apart as to suggest that whoever had been set upon must have been running, even leaping, to get away. Evidently, whatever had taken place – a stabbing probably – had just happened. Fearful but unable to resist, she had followed the bloodied prints, to a large pool of blood – then nothing. The trail disappeared. No one seemed to know anything about it.

They found their way to the Rue des Abbesses, outside the Café Jean, which was closing up. They often met there, she said, she and her friends. She took his hand and said there's something I want to show you.

It was an Art Nouveau church, very modern, almost brand-new.

To his surprise, the door at the far left opened. No one was inside, but it was softly illuminated by candles. Inside, oddly, loomed a large clock, the type he associated with banks or railway stations. As their eyes adjusted to the gloom, Charles realised that the interior was all inlaid mosaic; it shimmered with what looked like thousands of colourful pointilliste buttons. The brightness of the moon allowed him to have a glimpse of the stained-glass windows. One of them, very striking, a grinning soldier, his skeleton and skull visible, clad in armour and chainmail, taming a white horse, while wild animals cowered around him, two tigers under his feet...

A horseman of the apocalypse, she said. And here's the other thing to show you...

She beckoned him towards the font, a white stone angel with wings. Look! Such a calm, beatific smile. It always made her feel peaceful to see it...

As they walked all the way from the foot of the Sacré Coeur to the Left Bank, she pointed out some of her other haunts. There was the small bistro on the corner near the bridge to Saint Louis where she often sat in the afternoons. The bird market she had discovered down an alley on one of the *quais*; the stalls behind the Hôtel de Ville where people went to feast on fried Polish pancakes and *petits gris*, tiny snails for a few francs. The *bouquinistes* on the Seine where she would browse for Verlaine, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Zola and Balzac and Maupassant, wanting to read them in the original. The flower market where she liked to

buy bundles of purple and white lilac. The bench where the chestnut trees were in bud in the garden of Notre Dame.

It was three by the time they stood outside her door. She was borrowing an apartment on the Quai aux Fleurs. Right next to the house where Heloise and Abelard once lived, she told him. It belonged to a friend of hers, a friend who wasn't there.

\*

He wanted to kiss her.

Instead he asked her if she would meet him later – today — for it was already the next day. They could – he thought wildly – go to the Opera. Or lunch. She told him the Opera was closed, due to the war. But lunch? Yes. Where?

“Wherever you like.”

“*La Closerie des Lilas*. It's in Montparnasse.”

He had not even reached the end of the *quai* before he missed her already.

\*

Spring sunlight. The sky was lavender blue. The green light of the chestnut trees on the Boulevard du Montparnasse and the planes in the Jardin du Luxembourg made him feel as though he was swimming above the gravel and pavements, everywhere tessellated with sunspots, the light making a crazy patchwork on the flowerbeds, making tricks of the eye, like suspended orbs and pearls, the people like goldfish... Today the bright shopfronts seemed abundant; yesterday they had not. He glanced at his watch – he wasn't late.

She was waiting for him, sitting under a striped awning in the front open-air terrace with flowering lilac trees. He caught a look on the waiter's face, as if to say, Ah, so it is you this *Mademoiselle* is waiting for.... As she smiled up at him, a gentle but direct smile, he felt his whole being suffused by a golden happiness, a glorious potent sensation. He had never imagined this disturbance, this strange feeling of enchantment, coming so easily. This tenderness. Something had begun – was beginning. He had no idea how it was possible to feel such joy.

“I thought it might be nicer, to be out here. It's perfectly sunny.”

He was even more struck again by how almost disconcertingly piercing and yet somehow soft her gaze was.

\*

After the plates had been cleared away, they drank what was left of the Chablis, and smoked cigarettes.

There really was no time to lose. No *time* at all.

A friend of hers had died in Greece just last month, she mentioned matter-of-factly. Rupert Brooke. He had looked at her, slightly startled. Yes — her answering look told him. *That* Rupert Brooke. Charles had read his poems. He wondered to himself what the relationship had been.

Brooke had died on Shakespeare's birthday, she told him. Pity he hadn't been able to appreciate the irony. And it hadn't been a heroic death or anything. He had been bitten by a mosquito, and it turned septic. He'd died, just like that. It really was incomprehensible. How an insect — a parasite — some tiny creature — could snuff you out. She kept seeing him with his rucksack and wide smile. It had felt inconceivable, but then everything that was happening was. It was important to remember how short life was, she told him. She had a fear of forgetting how important it was to live each moment... In London she had a ritual sometimes when she wrote — she would light a candle and place it in a skull...

“A *real* skull?”

“Yes, a human skull.”

The twinge he had felt yesterday returned: She seemed almost oblivious to the horrors of the war. To the reality of anything. Did she know what real fear was? Fear of bullet, bomb, disfigurement, disease, death — the consequences of the daily things that came his way. He felt himself blinking back tears, to feel, with sudden emotion, the wall between them. Perhaps it was better that way. He wasn't going to be the one to tell her. There was a huge unspoken curtain between those who knew and those who didn't.

She had to get on and wrote her novel, she told him. That was the main thing. That was the advice Lawrence had given her, and she knew he was right...

“Who’s Lawrence?”

“A writer friend. Someone I’m close to, and his wife...”

He felt awkward. Relieved to hear whoever this Lawrence was, he had a wife.”

“Are all your friends writers?”

“Well, actually yes. Mostly. And artists.”

“Who was that man last night. Who brought us absinthe?”

“Dedo. Modigliani. He’s Italian. He studied with Brancusi... I sat for him last week. It’s not done, he needs me to sit again...”

These names were unfamiliar. But he remembered the Italian. The way he had looked at her. Like a man who wanted to be her lover.

“Beatrice would be furious if she knew. But there’s nothing to it, and he asked me and – well – I want to see what he’ll make of me. Beatrice is obsessed with being his only muse. She’s five years older than him, and jealous if he even looks at another woman... But I kept my clothes on. In case you were wondering.” She gave him a pointed look as though she had read his mind and knew exactly what he was thinking.

\*

She led him through a narrow corridor, up little tiled mosaic steps, and through the iron-wrought hallway door which made a light but definitive click. She put her fingers to her lips and whispered. “The concierge is a witch.”

The apartment, on the third floor, had windows which she opened up so they could lean against the sill and see the view. It was all ridiculously, ludicrously beautiful. The afternoon light glittering off the Notre Dame, the picturesque bridges, the chestnut trees in leaf, the Seine flowing by, its swift, susurrating sound.

When she went to find some wine, he glanced around. Books, everywhere, and a faint odour of cigarettes and incense. The place was filled with Polynesian art, with more paintings and sculptures than he had ever seen, all jumbled together. If he could have ever tried to imagine the perfect bohemian lair, this was it.

In the bathroom, he noticed a pair of men’s slippers tucked beneath a painted wicker stand.



“Should I be jealous?” he asked.

Katie handed him a glass of white wine.

“It’s cold, it should be. I lugged a big block of ice up from the market this morning. This is a friend’s apartment. He’s a writer, he’s at the Front.”

He could hardly breathe. He was falling in love with her. He wanted to kiss her more than anything.

\*

He tried to remember the rest of their conversation that night. He could remember how alive she was, and full of life. He remembered she told him she liked living out of suitcases, that it suited her to be a gypsy, and that she wanted more than anything to be “a real writer.” The place she wanted to go most of all, she told him, was Russia. Aside from Stendhal, she admired the Russian authors the most. Chekhov, especially. And Tolstoy. She told him she had been translating the most marvellous letters by ...Blast it, he forgot exactly who.

He remembered something she said, before she kissed him.

“My sister says I’m like a moth to the flame.”

“Was she right — your sister?”

\*

They didn’t talk much after that. Instead, they kissed. They kissed until they couldn’t stand it anymore, and moved to the bed, where they kissed, fully clothed, until they were half-clothed.

He reached out for her palm, sliding his fingers up her wrist, feeling the soft underside of her arm, undoing the buttons on her sleeve. She closed her eyes. He was aware, but not aware, of their shadows on the wall, the rush of the river beneath the open window.

He’d met plenty of pretty girls at gatherings and dances, kissed a few and fumbled a little, but he’d only had one sweetheart, and she’d insisted they stick to strict rules about what they got up to. He’d never met a woman like Katie, who simply took off her slip and laughingly, frankly approved of his reaction.

He had always been raised to expect that women who wanted to get married stayed virgins. That she so clearly wasn’t one of those women excited and confused him.

Finally, she led him by the hand into the bedroom.

He noticed a very modern painting of a reclining nude woman, on the bedroom wall, half-visible in the moonlight. Unashamedly sexual, painted by someone who clearly loved women, yet the eyes were mysterious and unfinished, with no defined pupils. And other portraits, distinctive, angular. There were explicitly erotic Japanese prints. *Shunga*.

He wondered what had really brought her to live here, by herself, when the city was under attack.

When she was completely naked she let him look at her, turned herself to his gaze.

“You are like Velasquez’s Rokeby Venus. She’s you. She’s got your bottom.”

“I had that postcard on my mirror when I was sixteen... From the National Gallery. I always go and say hello to her when I’m there.”

He laughed, drunk on the feeling of adoring her.

He noticed the moon in its first quarter. They talked in murmurs and laughs.

Will you put the fire on? It’s gas...

He watched as she closed her eyes and drifted into sleep. He stayed wide awake, incredibly happy. She laughed at him. She laughed at herself, for how drowsy he had made her. She said she felt like a drunken bee.

She told him, you’re so beautiful. Like a god. Has anyone told you –

He laughed. People don’t say things like that in Toronto.

Day was night, night was day.

He was aware of the hours between three and five, as though in a dream. He didn’t want to go to sleep, to miss a moment.

In one of the moments when she was half-awake, he asked her, masking his serious question with playfulness: “Do you really always want to be a gypsy, living out of your suitcase? Don’t you want kids? A home?”

There was a long silence. She smiled at him, tousled and lovely, not a seductress at all, but a perfectly ordinary girl.

“Actually, I do. I want three boys, with beautiful round heads like apples...”

\*

At dawn, raw from briefest sleep, naked, she made him tea.

She went to the window and leaned out, to see the day. He watched her, from behind. The shape of her. Her physical beauty. The sensuous curve of her bottom, the extraordinary sculpture of her form. The firm legs tapering up, the ripe buttocks, the slim waist.

He goes to her. Embraces her.

The way she leaned further out of the window, seeming to not care that her breasts might be glimpsed by anyone happening to look up... She arched herself, just slightly forward, in invitation. He wanted to... But he didn't want her to be seen like that.

He drew her to bed.

There was such a ripeness to her. He couldn't help himself, he imagined her pregnant, her belly swelling.

There could only be one explanation. They were made for one another. To abandon all disguise, all pretence; not waste a moment... Imagine the terrible waste of it, if they had to take this slowly. There was no chance for a perfectly proper courtship, to put her in his dance card, to draw out, day by cautious day, week by careful week, the long fuse that could bring them together. Instead, she had presented herself like a match to be taken out of a box, a firecracker, a flare...

\*

They lay on their back, side by side, pillow to pillow.

“I like working very early... before I'm properly awake. Sometimes sentences form themselves like waves, or ripples; complete sentences unfurling themselves, I have to rush to catch them...write them down before they disappear...”

He's listening, his eyes half-closed.

Won't you tell me about yourself?” she asks. “Where are your family from, originally?”

“My grandfather on my mother’s side was from Scotland,” he says. “The Drummonds. The Jermyn side is from England. Cornish and Irish. My grandmother was German. From the Rhineland, near Cologne. What about you?”

“Both sets of grandparents came out from England and went to Australia first, then New Zealand. The Beauchamps and the Dyers. There’s some Lancashire blood. I was closest to my maternal grandmother who grew up in Sydney...”

He told her how, in Victoria, on his way to Salt Spring island, he’d seen the Canadian Australasian Line’s *Aorangi* berthed in the harbour, one of the ships that sailed out from British Columbia to Australia and New Zealand.

Katie told him that if she had to locate one place in New Zealand, the one place she to which she truly belonged, it would be where her forebears arrived, two generations before. The first Beauchamps settled near the tip of the South Island at a place called Anakiwa. They were both children of the Empire, just scattered at either ends of the Pacific, like those night stars in the wide sky. The familiar geography and lexicon of their childhoods, she had Picton and Queen Charlotte Sounds — and so did he. There was another Sound she told him about. A place she had loved as a child. Kenepuru. It was paradise, she said. The way she talked about it made him think it was a blind match for the island where his Scottish grandfather had chosen to live, from which he set off on his adventuresome expeditions up the northern Pacific coast. Where, every summer, between the ages of six and seventeen, Charles had gone to visit...

At this, she looked at him, and smiled.

He told her how you reached Salt Spring Island from Victoria, how he would always stand on deck and watch as they drew closer, gradually identifying the other inlets ringed with the same flame-fleshed *Arbutus* trees all over that coastline. How the boat would slow to a steady glide as they reached the small settlement of Fulford Harbour, ringed with painted wooden houses nestled in enfolding forest. Sometimes a thick mist would come down, and against the white sky, the rocks near the jetty looked almost black, rimmed with dark emerald moss. Then the rocks would twitch, then move – there were fur seals, a small colony of them.

He told her about the island. The steep, craggy promontories and heavily wooded forests. Sitting with his grandfather in a canoe; the fins of an orca pod slicing through silken water, a heron perched in the reeds. The smell of fir forests, the brine and tang of rotting kelp, the yelping seagulls, the seals surfacing in the cove outside his open window. How the stars at Salt Spring were like nothing he had ever seen before. How, lying out on the grass of his grandfather's orchard on Mansell Road you felt could just reach out and pluck them out of the sky.

"Tell me everything," Katie insisted. They could hear the boats churn past on the Seine as they lay together amid the morning sounds of Paris.

They used to go out to the island before his grandmother died. Then — later — nothing was said but then his father stopped going. His mother insisted on bringing them — her one act of rebellion. His grandfather teased his daughter — Charles's mother — that the famous Scottish stubborn dislike of authority and dissident streak in their family line must have skipped a generation and missed out the women. His parents allowed him to make the journey alone the summer he turned thirteen, and he went for five more summers. Marion — his sister — never came with him. According to his father, Grandpa Alexander had 'gone tropo.'...

"*Tropo.*" She savoured the word.

.... because when his grandfather had had come out from Aberdeen to Victoria as a young just-graduated physician, newly married he still wore stiff collars, strived for conventional acceptance. But that changed. While the children were still small, he had become fascinated by the peoples of the Pacific North West who had lived all along this coast for thousands of years. After his wife's death, he found a new life as an ethnologist and anthropologist; never remarrying... He had a deep love for the native people, and a fury for how they'd been treated.

He hated to think what his childhood would have been without his grandfather. The man who taught him to swim and row and fend for himself in the wilderness. To shoot and sled, to sail an ice boat, and to steer his black rowing skiff through the cold waters. He had been the one who encouraged hobbies — collecting coins and stamps, classifying specimens,

researching and labelling them. Coaxed him into Dickens, Tolstoy, Victor Hugo, Balzac, Thoreau...

Katie nodded, understanding exactly. Her Granny Dyer had been that presence. Mansfield was her grandmother's name. She had coaxed intractable knots out of her hair, sang to her, told her stories about fairies, bluebells, sea witches and Maori maidens with canoes, tucked her up in bed, taught her to knit, stitch samplers, press flowers. Let her eat her favourite biscuits, the ones with sweet almond marzipan paste, while her mother warned her – at nine – of the perils of running to fat. You don't want to become a porker. Everything about Granny Dyer was safety. She let her creep into her bed in the middle of the night when the wind frightened her. They didn't just have 'wind' in Wellington. They had 'gales', 'howlers', 'blusters', 'scowlers', gales and 'southerlies' coming off Cook Strait. There were ropes at certain exposed places along Lampton Quay for pedestrians to grasp hold of, to prevent them from being blown away.

Katie told him Granny Dyer used to say 'The world's wind starts at Palmerston North and blows down to Wellington.'...

"What's Palmerston North?" he asked.

"The most boring place on earth."

\*

She told him how she used to make up stories and pretend she was Pearl Button. The little girl who liked to make tea parties for her dolls with acorns as cups and nasturtium leaves for tablecloths and tiny felt jackets and imagine them waking to their transformed surroundings just like the shoemaker and his wife after the elves had disappeared. She could hear how they teased and shrilled over their seed pod cakes and daisy head sandwiches... In her story, her Pearl Button was 'carried away by the Maoris'...

"You know how children laugh at things?" she asked. Her Pearl Button for example, four and a quarter, had the most delicious gurgle-laugh when something delighted her, the very sound of the universe at play. That was still her truest, most trusting, most hopeful and delighted self. But being Pearl Button at twenty-five- that was another matter.

He thought about how she'd sung to him. What a voice she had, how it had affected him, along with everything else about her. In the few hours that he hadn't slept he had kept hearing it, her singing, talking voice. If someone asked him if a voice alone could make him swoon now he would say yes... He longed to hear her voice again, her warm, high, lilting mezzo-soprano. What the hell. He asked her to sing to him again. Anything...

\*

She put something around her neck as she dressed, something that flashed white.

"Can I?"

She held it up for him to look at more closely, looped onto a plain black cord. It was rather extraordinary, a strange totemic-like carved creature with round eyes and a protruding, pointed tongue.

"What is it?"

"It's called a *hei tiki*. Made of ivory. Keeps away the Evil Spirit..."

"It's Maori?"

"Father gave it to me. All we sisters had one. To show we were New Zealanders, abroad. This one's very old."

"It reminds me of a bit of a Haida carving."

She eyed him, blithe, and disappeared into the bathroom.

"My friend Maata also gave me a parting gift. A Maori cloak, made of feathers," she half-shouted through the door. He could hear a gentle tinkle, her urinating, behind the door, not quite closed. "Very precious. The type worn by high chiefs. Maata is what they call a *rangitera*, a princess."

The metallic clink of the privy, a gush of water.

"She told me it had been handed down through her family, but that she already had lots of these sorts of things. Before I left, she put it around my neck, pressed her face against mine and refused to let me give it back... I started wearing it, in London when people looked at me with this – disdain – I could see them thinking, poor you, to be from somewhere so superfluous and dull, to be such a nonentity... I thought, I'll show you, your *little Colonial*..."

“Will you wear it for me?”

“I would. But it’s in London. Packed away.”

She emerged. That look on her pink face.

“Kiss me, Katie,” he said.

\*

She had curled up against him again, half across his chest, her smooth, soft thighs and feet crooked into his longer, hairier ones. They chuckled, watching their toes make an idle, playful *pas de deux*. She rolled away from him and opened a packet of French cigarettes, Gauloises Caporal.

She’d asked him what he thought about psychology.

“What – you mean, in general?”

“Anything.”

“When I was nineteen my grandfather took me to Massachusetts to hear Jung and Freud – they were on a tour visiting America. Freud spoke in German, it was just assumed everyone would speak it — no translator. For most of the audience, it fell on deaf ears... But Jung spoke perfect English. William James was there —”

“I’ve been meaning to read him,” she said.

“My grandfather had a sort of ancestor cult with James and all his ideas about consciousness, we used to talk about the connections that link James to Emerson and Whitman and Thoreau... He’d read Tolstoy – *The Kingdom of God is Within You*... Have you read that?”

“No.”

“I remember he made a point of reading the people and ideas that Tolstoy referenced — like a shopping list — and that included Thoreau and the Transcendentalists...”

“I have those shopping lists! I started that with Wilde. And Pater. And Ibsen. And Tolstoy.”

She was sitting up warming her hands around her tea cup.



“Father let me leave New Zealand, on one condition. He wanted me to have a real sense of the New Zealand landscape, to love it the way he loved it. Father likes to think he is half fluent in Maori... He arranged for me and another friend of mine – Millie, to join a camping trip with her relatives — ultra-Colonial types — through the centre of the North Island, into a remote region, the Ureweras. Utterly impenetrable, except on horseback. Hardly any Europeans had ever been. The Tuhoe people lived there – the Children of the Mist. Maata’s grandmother was Tuhoe... she told me all about them. We went deep into the forest...”

Her shoulders and her neck were flushed.

“The birdsong, trees like prehistoric giants, cloaked in white mist... Even with the sunlight slanting in... I could spend my entire life writing about it.”

“You’re making me want to go to New Zealand...”

“We had hoped to see Lake Waikaremoana – people say it is the most beautiful and mysterious lake in the country. But we had to turn back – it rained so heavily... But on the way back, we came to the great sight of three great falls, each beside the other, noise like thunder, spraying the air with mist... Oh! You’re making me so homesick!”

“I’m sorry. For making you tell me these stories...”

“No... I can’t tell how much I want to remember, I’m glad to tell you –”

“Is there any more to tell about, how to pronounce it... the Ury-where-as?”

“At one point, our horses bolted for the river and had to be rounded up; we kept getting deluged by rain; we tried to roast ducks we’d shot, but even under a tarpaulin fire they were too sodden to cook. And we saw followers of the Tuhoe prophet Rua, who told them to resist and fight against the Europeans...”

He glanced at her. The far-away expression on her face.

“One of them looked at us with the most sinister, unsmiling face... Mr Ebett, who was leading our camp and a real Pa man, decided we had better not go further. There had been another famous prophet before Rua in the Ureweras – Te Kooti – he hid there too... He had led a rebellion against the government and the tribes that supported the government – he was like Ned Kelly, hunted everywhere, but they never caught him...”

They exchanged another glance.

“What’s a Pa-man?”

“You’re definitely one. I come from a tribe of them, so I can pick one at ten or twenty paces...”

“Is that good or bad?”

“That depends. My father is one, you see. Everyone says Chummie has the makings of one... My grandfather and great-uncles all were. Especially uncle Fred, the one who had a Maori wife. Though he did rather fall out of the family basket after that...”

“So what kind of man *is* a pa-man then? Sounds like I’d better know.”

“The type of man my parents always wanted me to marry. Staunch. Decisive. Reliable. Sporty. You can tell a pa-man from the way he swims, overarm with big virile strokes... Don’t think I’ve forgotten about ‘Mono-ball’ by the way.”

He grinned.

She gave him a sly look, adding “Good dancers, usually.”

He can’t stop grinning. “Anything else?”

“Pa-men are prudent... And good with money. If you met my father you’d think he was a typical colonial banker.” He couldn’t tell whether she was being playful or accusing. “The type who never agonizes over finding the meaning of life...”

“I see.”

“Straight as an arrow into the blue. That’s a Pa-man.”

He kissed her, glad she had seen that about him.

\*

He’d forgotten to wind his watch. It had been given to him by his parents when he was twenty-one. He had taken it off on her bedside table and was so dazed he almost left it there. It was Katie who gave it to him, reminded him the time had come to say farewell. They kissed and hugged goodbye as though they would meet again, very soon. As if he was only catching a train. Not a train that was taking him back to the war.

But when he was at the door, she changed her mind. “I’ll come with you. Gare du Nord, isn’t it?”

On the Metro, they kept hold of each other’s hands, palm to palm, not letting go of one another right up until the moment when they were on the platform, and around them, like salmon swimming upstream, jostling and shouting, at least fifty other men in khaki, saddled with kit bags, amongst the civilians. There was always this ebb and flow of men in uniform at the *grandes gares*, a mixture of conscripts, soldiers, officers, identifiable by their hats — British, Anzac and Canadian forces — alongside the French. Katie, suddenly self-conscious, stepped a pace back, as though to see him better. A moment later the signal sounded, and he held her very close for a long second.

“I don’t want you to go,” she said.

Her eyes had been bright with lingering laughter all morning, but she seemed anguished, unable to let go of his hand, like a child, blinking back tears.

“I don’t want to leave you”, he said.

“You do know you’re quite marvellous, don’t you know.” She half-whispered it. “I think you are.”

He felt the train jerk beneath him, beginning its slow shunt north, the door between them open. He felt the sudden need for certainty; a need to bind her to him.

“Marry me then!” The words flew out of his mouth. It didn’t matter. He meant it, utterly. She gazed at him, entranced, astonished. He knew she would – she *must* – say yes.

“I’ll write to you. I promise. Just come back... Come back *quickly*. You must!”

“I love you,” he shouted, not caring if anyone heard. He was past caring. He was sure, as the train rolled away, he could hear her answering, with one last shout, “I love you too!”

\*

At camp, everything seemed different, as though the very molecules of matter had subtly rearranged themselves. Even the surgical instruments looked oddly different; they could even, if tapped a certain way on glass, be made to produce sound, be musical. Digging into torsos,

his fingers nimble and alert with the scalpel and the needle, he felt as though he had somehow slipped unseen into a different country, governed by different laws, responsive to only one higher power... He recognised that what he felt was unmistakable: the first unmitigated symptoms. He had fallen deep and hard. He was in love.

One of his colleagues stared at him. “What’s happened to you? You look bloody ecstatic.”

\*

He had marked the date of their meeting with an ‘X’. March 22, 1915.

After this leave, he had been told he would be transferred. She had told him she would be going back to London soon, to see her brother. He could write to her there c/o Poste Restante, G.P.O. London. He gave her two addresses: c/o Base Camp, No. 3 Canadian General Hospital, Dannes-Camiers, Pas de Calais, Boulogne. And his parent’s address in Rosedale, Toronto.

He still remembered what potency and significance her initials – ‘KB’ – had for him.

\*

Within the week, he received a short but captivating — cryptic — letter from her. She said she hoped they would find a way to meet, very soon. Even her handwriting made his heart beat in a different rhythm. She told him she felt she had come alive, and that walking back from the Gare du Nord she felt as though flowers and leaves were dropping from her hair and from her fingers... When she returned to the apartment she had written non-stop, ever since they met she felt as though the Muses had descended, like the angels on the Botticelli nativity roof...<sup>15</sup> She had begun to feel such a longing for a home and children, to make the word right, a line he read over and over. She signed off ‘All Love, Your Katie.’

He wrote back immediately, to London, where she said she would be. But no more letters arrived. After that he wrote to the address he had memorized. 13 Quai aux Fleurs.

He wasn’t able to get back to Paris for another three months. By then he was desperate – and abjectly worried. Why hadn’t she replied? What could have happened? He wrote her

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<sup>15</sup> Paraphrasing Mansfield’s description of her heightened, joyous mood in this time period, *CLKM*, I, pp. 163, 167.

letter after letter in his head. In desperation, he wrote to her c/o Poste Restante, Boulevard St Michel, the one he heard most foreigners in Paris used.

In June, on his next leave, he went back to the apartment building on the Quai aux Fleurs, but the concierge shook her head at the name Katie Beauchamp. Then she told him *Alors, attendez-vous* and returned with four letters he had sent, all unopened. A Frenchman lived in that apartment. A ‘Monsieur Francis Carco.’ *Un écrivain*. Was he there? *Non*. Monsieur Carco might be in Turkey. The thought that he might never return seemed to cheer her up. *Il ne reviendra jamais!* At the mention of a Nouvelle Zélandaise she scowled and as good as shoed him away.

He went looking for her in all the places they’d been, all the places she’d mentioned. He roamed her neighbourhoods. Asked for her at Chartier and the Closerie des Lilas. The waiters remembered her – La Belle Nouvelle Zélandaise – but didn’t recall seeing her for a long time, perhaps several months. He walked late at night. Waited in vain in other places she’d mentioned: Café Nemours, La Rotonde, Brasserie Lipp... He searched, at every opportunity; everywhere. No one knew a Katie Beauchamp.

None of his friends in London had heard of a writer of that name, either.

\*

At first, he worried that something had happened to her. Later, despite all wartime improbabilities or perhaps because of them, he paired her off with someone he decided she must prefer infinitely to him. An artist. Another writer. Someone fabulously wealthy, talented or aristocratic. He knew he had no claim of any kind on her, none at all. He just wanted to know why she had chosen never to write to him, not even to break it off. Had she found him lacking? Had she only behaved like that with him because she thought she would never see him again?

It was almost a relief when four months later he was informed that he had been selected, along with staff from other Canadian Stationary Hospitals, Nos. 1 and 3, to be re-assigned to No. 7, and that on August 1, he would sail on the HMS *Asturias*, destination Alexandria. Among his transfer papers, was an order which read: “Proceed to Cairo.”

### 9. *The Fontainebleau Forest*

*Fontainebleau-Avon. December 11 1922.* He feels disorientated by the flood of memories, after so much time has gone by. This place is wrong for him; he is almost entirely certain he should leave. In any case, he had already arranged to meet a friend visiting Paris the day after next. There was that hotel in Paris on the Left Bank he remembered, the Strand, off the Rue de Vaugirard. This time tomorrow night he could be there. It would be the easiest thing to change his plans, to stay on in Paris for longer, then continue straight on afterwards to Marseilles where he would board the ship for Ceylon and his journey to the Far East.

\*

When he emerges from his room in the morning, Charles sees a pile of clothes and boots has been left outside his door. The type of clothes a labourer would wear.

It seems he has come too late for breakfast – everything has already been cleared away; only a few followers remain, smoking cigarettes over cold toast, speaking in Russian.

Orange's instructions had been clear – as was the message relayed by the bundled of work clothes – but he isn't in the mood to spend the day being an unskilled labourer. His stomach is growling uncomfortably. He decides to walk into the town, to shift his thoughts, to clear his head.

\*

Charles walks quickly, following the tramlines. From the hamlet of Avon, which had been long-ago swallowed up by Fontainebleau, the broad tree-lined avenue is lined with shops, a few hotels and little houses, with larger, grander 19<sup>th</sup> century houses set far back behind walls and wrought-iron gates.

On the Rue Grande there are shops full of provincial finery for the affluent bourgeoisie: mannequins in hats, rows of leather shoes and umbrellas. Even in Paris, he has never seen such a concentration of chocolatiers, and he marvels at the abundance and artistry of the cheeses, cakes and pastries, and in the market, the dead chickens, ducks and rabbits strung upside down, their fur streaked with blood. In the town square, there is a huge Christmas tree, awaiting the inevitable decorations.

On the sidewalk outside a café, Charles dips a croissant into coffee, and reads *Le Figaro*.

The news makes him feel queasy. The Italian government has just granted Mussolini and his Fascists dictatorial powers for a year. It is unthinkable — and yet it has just happened. The man was a bully and a fraud – the hatred and bigotry he stirred up was deeply disturbing and dangerous. Yet he had met no real resistance on his rise to power. The newspaper barons and even some of Charles’s friends in Zurich have shrugged off the growing popularity of Mussolini and his black-shirts. Even indulged the shamelessness of his own propaganda – ‘*El Duce ha sempre ragione*,’ ‘Mussolini is always right’— as though it were no more than an ironic joke.

He turns his attention to the rest of his croissant, a buttery marvel of golden wheat, dipping it in the last of his coffee. A warm ray of sunlight falls directly on his body, blinding him for a moment, brightening his mood.

The café proprietor, a rotund man with a gentle demeanour and nervous eyebrows, is doing the rounds with his tray of fresh, hot croissants. It is impossible to resist another one.

“*C’est le meilleur croissant que je n’ai jamais mangé.*”

“*Merci monsieur.*” The man beams. “*C’est de là.*” He points to a shop opposite. Boulangerie-Pâtisserie Nonnet.

Charles is enjoying the feeling of the sun on his face, sitting outside on a wicker chair. He takes off his hat and orders another bowl of *café au lait*. He contemplates the square, the others in the café, the passers-by going about their morning, the chestnut trees and the view across the road to a walled garden leading to the Château. He has barely been in Fontainebleau for twenty-four hours yet so peculiar is Le Prieuré, he feels almost overwhelmed with relief at escaping to the normality of an ordinary café.

From where he sits he can see the rotunda-style Postes, Télégraphes et Téléphones building and what looks like the entrance to a public garden, and the gold-tipped gates of the grand Château de Fontainebleau.

He asks directions to the Fontainebleau forest.

Although he considers himself reasonably able to speak French, he has not been able to follow the exact instructions of the café proprietor, who with energetic sweeping gestures seemed to imply that outside the centre, *le tout* Fontainebleau was forest, and that all he had to do was walk to the outskirts and he would find it. But the proprietor's wife waved him in the direction of the Château. There was plenty enough forest beyond that, she said.

He follows the clay and sand path through the Jardin Anglais, past the vast, pomp-filled spectacle of the grand Château and its ornamental grounds. He stops occasionally to contemplate the Château set amidst immense, manicured gardens: the gigantic pond, fountains, parterres and to one side, a glimpse of a thin canal that looked at least a mile long surrounded by colonnades of great trees. Everywhere it is geometric perfection, flowerless gardens studded with conical shrubs that might have been turned in a factory. There are almost no other walkers.

\*

When he first came home after the war, he'd found himself almost longing for the alien freedom he'd felt in Egypt. It had planted in him a taste to explore. The fierce bright sunshine, the intoxicating foreignness of Cairo, he would never forget. The experiences there, that by necessity, forced him to become harder-edged. Sights of grotesque degeneracy and debauchery. Brothers selling their sisters. Everything for sale.

For eight months, they took their cigarette breaks looking out to the Tombs of the Caliphs, and further on, the Pyramids of Giza and Sakkara. Their barracks on the outskirts of Cairo faced the boundless Libyan desert. Any leave he got, he cadged rides out with the Light Car Patrols. He saw Luxor. He went from Marsa Matruh to Siwa. In a room at Shepherds Hotel, he hoped he might be able to fall in love again, that the affair would make him forget Katie. For a few days, in a state of fever, he thought he had succeeded, but it didn't last.

A year ago, he had been working a gruelling schedule at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal. He took a short trip home to Toronto and on that trip, something possessed him to propose to Alice. They had known one another since they were children. Alice was beautiful and refined; the product of the best schooling money could buy. He didn't feel for her what he



thought he should, but he reminded himself that he couldn't seem to *feel* anyway. He was somehow numb. Acedia or anomie was his private self-diagnosis. He persuaded himself that marriage and time would somehow resolve this; he would be able to love Alice as she surely deserved.

Shortly after the engagement was announced, Alice's father had invited him to the Toronto Hunt Club and presented him with a hunting rifle on which his initials had been engraved. Both sets of parents intended to make a down-payment on the house he and Alice would share as newlyweds, somewhere in Toronto, somewhere not too far. It was expected that Charles would find a satisfactory new position with enough status and income to satisfy all concerned.

Strange to think he might actually have married Alice. He had been invited to dine with Alice's family, the day after the Federal elections. To his surprise, Alice declared that – unlike his mother who had championed for women's suffrage – she was not particularly pleased about it the election of Agnes Macphail — the first woman MP, a Progressive Party member and self-declared pacifist. Alice's father went one further: Macphail was nothing but a jumped-up, meddling school-teacher who shouldn't have been let anywhere near the House of Commons. If this was the kind of woman who entered political life, giving the vote to women had been a mistake. And everyone at the table seemed to agree on this.

That was the moment Charles had realised he was sleepwalking into a life he'd end up drowning in. When Alice opened her pretty mouth, out came the same unquestioning prejudices and certainties that underwrote the same mentality that had sent him and millions of men like him to a pointless war. Up until that point he'd felt an internal opposition, but he'd never taken an action that would send his life in another direction. He and Alice would have nothing in common except privilege. All there was between them was merely a superficial attraction that had been quickly cemented into parental approval, a sense of obligation and duty. He couldn't love her. He never would. He'd end up despising her.

He panicked.

He confided in his mother, who told him not to go through with it. Better to cause a bit of pain in the short-term rather than a lifetime of misery.

Even now he winces at the uncomfortable memory of Alice's indignant face, and the furious letter from her father denouncing him. But, at least, it was over.

His own father's grim anger was another matter. The broken engagement caused him considerable embarrassment at the National Club. He had been especially proud of the status and influence of Alice's family, related to Borden, the last Conservative Prime Minister. He could still hear his father's voice in his head. "You've had everything, every opportunity, every natural ability and you've just thrown it all away." His father bellowing: "Get out of my house."

That was the last time he had seen him.

In swift order, Charles had decided to resign from his post in Montreal, to leave Canada altogether, to cut himself adrift. He turned down the two safe and steady job, one in Toronto, the other where he had worked in Montreal. He wrote to Jung asking to enrol as a student of psychoanalysis, and told himself that, if he were not accepted, he would go to Mexico, curious to see with his own eyes what it was like after the Revolution.

\*

His eye is caught by a large statue wrapped in a fine white cloth, tied with rope at the base. He looks around the wide sweep of the Château grounds, realizing that all the statues dozens of them – were similarly wrapped, perhaps something to do with restoration or cleaning. He watches as the wind gusts the fabric in one direction, revealing hints of a face, a buxom breast, an outstretched hand — then, the fabric, ballooning the opposite way, reveals the curve of a marble buttock, an exposed thigh against the darkening cloudscape.

He takes out the new Sico camera he bought in Zurich, and looks into the viewfinder, carefully composing his shot, adjusting his movements to find the right effect between light and shadow, keeping his hands as steady as possible. Then he takes a notebook and a pen from his pocket, and jots down details: the time of day, the weather, the film speed, the lens magnification, so that he can look for ways to improve. He is enjoying teaching himself, methodically refining his technique, working by trial and error, intrigued by the challenge of

understanding what it took to compose images, freezing them in time – trying to distil the essence of a moment.

\*

He walks along the wide gravel path away from the vast, orderly gardens, following the path around the giant canal.

Wasn't he old enough to, as his father would put it, 'get a grip?' Why was it proving to be so difficult to know what kind of life he should make for himself? Lately, Charles has lost track of his internal compass. As fascinating as he has found him his time in Zurich, and, as much as he knows it has helped him, psycho-analysis is not for him.

He wants to be useful, to use the skills he already has. And he will. When it comes down to it, it's a very practical thing, saving human lives. It had been at least a year since he had used his hands for making incisions, feeling into bloody cavities, transecting arteries, dissecting out tumours, suturing... The mechanistic aspect of being a surgeon is one of the things he enjoyed: the way repetitive movements became ingrained as muscle memory. The ability to take risks, the instinct to know when to do so, was like this too, something learned after performing endless procedures, recognized simultaneously by his brain and his fingertips. More often than not, the trick was to be able to act without engaging intellectually, and he'd become adept at it, like a technician. Keeping himself immune to adrenalin – and maintaining an ability to shut down on empathy – he needed these things to keep his surgical responses intact. The problem was — he is all too aware — that he had trained himself too well not to feel. To control his feelings and push them aside, rather than live them.

Charles could never remember a time when his father was not largely absent, working. He had been remote and strict, a believer in strict discipline and toughening-up, a withholder of praise who set his own bar very high. This was a man who had held a professorship of medicine at the University of Chicago at the age of thirty. As a boy, he had always been told how much he resembled his father, in his tall and handsome youth, even if he preferred to think he took after his mother's side of the family. His father had been avid sportsman, a cricket man. But although Charles excelled in running and rowing and won prizes for his

academic prowess right through his years at Upper Canada College and then the University of Toronto, his achievements never quite seemed to satisfy his father.

The only question, now he had cut himself adrift for a time, was where did he belong?

The life of a surgeon was a race from start to finish. Taking time out – not keeping up with the latest training – spending nine months with Jung as he had just done, with more ahead — this was viewed with deep suspicion within the fraternity. Men his age were already married with children. He wasn't ready for any of it. As for going home, he was still undecided. If he was careful with his money he had enough to travel for at least a year. To take some time to himself, while he could. That was the way he justified it to himself.

\*

There is no sound but for the scrunch of his boots and the clink of a glass bottle against his pocketknife. Lemony sunlight filters through gaps in the trees and bracken. He has walked for an hour, leaving the man-made majesty behind. Around the Château, the woodland is cut into a triangulated grid pattern, laid out in wide *allées*, cut in swathes through the forest, former royal hunting grounds. Out here, the woodland is thicker, with great oaks, Scots pines, beech and birch trees.

In Zurich, Jung managed to cure him of his panic attacks, and the sense of dread that had haunted him since the war. These crippling sensations, and his disproportionate anger at his father, had been thoroughly thrashed out in the course of his analysis. Jung had become a sort of positive father figure, and it freed Charles to live his own life. Their conversations took place in the small but elegant Club library, in the lakeside garden at Jung's house in Küsnacht, and at the water's edge on the land where Jung told him he planned to build his tower retreat, at Bollingen. One day, in sharp bright light, they had picnicked on the sun-warmed stones amongst the reeds, eating chunks of bread and cheese, trousers rolled up, bare feet dangling in crystal-clear water. There was the lake's mirrored surface, and the layers of mountains and snow-tipped peak beyond. As they had talked, a white heron descended, fanning its snowy white wings, perching on a rock in companionable silence. They had watched the meditating bird, the only interruption to the silky breathing of the lake, the quiet

slap of water, the sound of birdsong. Finally, the heron launched itself into the air, close enough for them to feel the breeze of its flapping wings, Jung grinning with pleasure, like a boy. That heron knew him, he said. Herons were special, like messengers.

\*

The sound of a distant echoing gunshot brought his attention back to his surroundings. It was the season of *la chasse*. The forest here was beautiful, enchanting even still, something about it felt tamed. For the first time, Charles feels homesick for the vast Canadian wildernesses of his childhood, the rain-torn forests of Haida Gwai he explored with his grandfather. He thinks of his grandfather's wilfulness, his determination to follow his own path, to find a place in which to be completely immersed and rejuvenated.

\*

It is late afternoon by the time Charles finally returns to Le Prieuré. He goes through the kitchen entrance, which he has come to regard as the front door. It is alive with the voices of women. He hears a peal of laughter. Madame Ostrovska, standing with a turnip in one hand and a wooden spoon in the other, glances up at him.

And then he sees her.

It really *is* her.

*Katie.*

Her eyes are direct and composed, as though she has been expecting him.

"You don't speak Russian?" Madame Ostrovska is in a playful mood.

Charles is too stunned to answer. "Not a word."

"She is teaching me Russian." Katie says, matter-of-factly.

She is sitting demurely on a stool in front of a pile of carrots. She has kicked off her shoes; and tucked her stockinged feet around the foot-rest like a schoolgirl. Her dark brown eyes seem huge. She's not the way he remembers; she looks older than she should. Her features have sharpened, her lips seem thinner, a little hard. The vitality and hopefulness – the softness – it has gone completely. Even her graceful fingers are emaciated. How thin she is; perhaps she is convalescing or recovering –from what? She gives no acknowledgement that

she knows him. He supposes that unlike him, she has been certain of his identity since last night — she has had time to prepare her reaction.

He can feel Katie's eyes warning him, holding him at a distance.

"Perhaps just *Na zdorovie*," he says, finally.

"*Na zdorovie* is good start. Every day she speaks more. So many words, this Katinska."

Katie smiles at him now, but her smile is strained and remote. She looks pointedly at Madame Ostrovska, who is bustling between them, assembling the rest of the produce for a large quantity of borscht: ominous piles of potatoes, beetroots, and onions.

"Perhaps you'd like to help me." She says this evenly, as though he were any ordinary acquaintance who had just walked in.

He steadies himself, too shocked even try to understand. *What game is she playing?*

Madame Ostrovska hands him a knife and an apron, then tumbles a small basket of onions on the table in front of a spare chopping board. He takes off his jacket, rolls up his sleeves, and washes his hands meticulously, feeling suddenly self-conscious, as though he is preparing to scrub up. The other women watch him with amusement. He is intensely aware of Katie's scrutiny.

"She's testing you. To see if you'll cry," Katie says.

"Well let's see, shall we."

As he chops an onion, first making scalpel-like lines on its pearly flesh, then very quickly splintering it with sharp precision, his eyes begin to stream.

"If you run your hands in water and splash your face, it'll stop."

Before he can reach for the handkerchief in his pocket, she hands him a fresh tea towel. She is next to him, and has slipped her feet back into her shoes. He keeps his voice to an urgent whisper so that the other women will not overhear.

"We find each other like this and you pretend nothing ever happened?"

"Not here!"

"You never wrote back!"

"You never *wrote*."

“You can’t possibly think that I didn’t want to see you again. If you’d read my letters you’d know how much.” He tries not to make it sound like an accusation.

Her face remains a mask. She looks at him as though he ought to play along with the charade – that what was happening was quite normal. She piles the chopped carrots into a pot.

“Katie! Look at me –”

“It’s *Katherine* –”

“The concierge where you stayed gave me back my letters. I looked for you everywhere. I had no idea what had happened to you –”

“You wrote to me there?”

She drops her head, her face white as chalk. She looks mortified. They chop together in silence for a few moments. He sees that she is wearing two rings. One, unmistakably, a simple gold wedding band. The other, a very slight cluster of pearls around a ruby, shaped like a daisy, the sort of thing a young girl might wear. He wonders where her husband might be — if he is alive.

“I’m glad you survived,” she says. “The war and everything. I prayed you would.”

That polite smile again. His heart plummets. He doesn’t know how to begin to answer.

Just then, they are both distracted by a terrier running into the kitchen. Excited by the bangs of the saucepans and the clattering of plates, the dog circles Madame Ostrovská’s skirts, yelping sharp little rapid barks and comes to Katie – Katherine – he reminds himself. She crouches down, petting and calming it with her attention.

“Aren’t you lovely.”

“She’ll take no end of that kind of treatment.” One of the older women in the kitchen speaks. An Englishwoman.

“I like dogs. I keep meaning to have one of my own,” she says, still ignoring him.

Madame Ostrovská, hovering, waiting to scoop up their efforts, chimes in. “So, then you will be The Lady with a Lapdog.”

“No, *not* like The Lady with a Lapdog.” Katherine frowns.

“It didn’t end so well for the Lady. I’m not sure how it ended for the dog.”

She can't seem to look at him. He cannot imagine what she is thinking. Finally, she looks at Charles. "You've come to study with Gurdjieff?" Her eyes give nothing away.

"No, not really. I spent the last nine months in Zurich studying with Jung –"

"How interesting."

"One of my friends there said if I was coming to Paris I should be sure to visit Gurdjieff's institute. I wasn't sure what to expect." He tries to smile, still hoping to break through her solemnity.

"But you *are* still a doctor?"

"I completed my residency when I returned home. I was only part-way through my training when I, when we..." He sees how pointedly she gives her full attention to the carrots. "What about you? Are you one of his... followers?" he asks.

A quick furrow of her brow; she gives him a puzzled, pained look.

"Katia, *Katinska*?" Madame Ostrovska is calling her over to the other side of the large kitchen.

Charles puts the rest of his onions into a ceramic bowl. He almost wants to laugh. When he had imagined their meeting again.... This is appallingly, ludicrously – wrong. This isn't the way it was meant to happen at all...

She dallies, how she doesn't look back at him. He takes off the apron and leaves the room.

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There is no hot water in his room. He had discovered that at Le Prieuré, the plumbing, like the *chauffage* and the electricity, was eccentric. The refurbishments being carried out in the first-floor wing that day were probably to blame.

One look at the tub in the shared bathroom puts him off the thought of a bath. The tub has greasy smudges and he notices, although he doesn't want to, some stray pubic hairs that a less than meticulous follower has left behind. He is just getting ready to shave at the sink when, through the vented window, he overhears an Englishman speaking.

"I worry about her. She must be lonely," the man was saying. "Why the devil does her husband leave her alone all the time?"



“Murry?” Charles hears Orage’s distinctive Northern accent. “The man’s a complete jossler. He’s a bloody sardine. Presiding over those dreadful dingy Thursday *Athenaeum* luncheons, pontificating on like an academician... *She* always used to be so full of life, and *so* witty. A head-turner, a real beauty, and didn’t she just know it. But Murry just ate the soul out of her. She’s been through an awfully rough time, poor thing.”

“That’s a shame.”

“I don’t know how she’s put up with him for so long. She’s much better off without him. Serves him right. I heard the fool got some other woman pregnant a few months ago...”

Somehow, he knows, with a sinking heart, they had to be talking about Katherine.

## 10. Katherine

At dusk, he sees her at the far end of the garden with Orage, sitting in deck chairs. Orage had brought over a tray of tea. They seem to be deep in conversation. He seems to be consoling her. Charles sees him take her hand and hold it before she eventually takes it away.

The bell for dinner is not rung until 10 pm. Gurdjieff does not show up. Fortunately, the Lithuanian girl is not there either. The food is hearty and simple, no Armagnac or wine on the table. Charles pointedly chooses the other end of the table. Katherine has hardly encouraged him to seek her out. When she looks over at him, she gives him a distant nod. She makes a point of not letting him catch her eye.

He sits next to the two doctors mentioned by his friend: Young and Nicholl. Both of them had trained with Jung. Neither of them volunteer their first names, each man introduces himself as ‘Dr’. They have the same fervour as Orage – that there is not a moment to lose, not just for their own personal development, but for the fate of the world.

“You should read *Tertium Organum*,” asks Dr Nicoll, the Scotsman. “Have you read it?”

“Not yet,” says Charles, barely listening. He needs to get her alone, to speak to her properly. He is absorbing the shock of how altered she is. Nothing like how she was, in Paris. What happened to her?

He always thought she had received his first letters, the ones he sent to Poste Restante; he had received her letter, written the day he left. It was only after he didn't hear back from her again that he wrote to the other address, the apartment she had taken him to.

“Good grief man, I'll give you my copy,” said Dr Nicoll. “You can't be here and not have read it. Did you hear, there's a rumour going around that Ouspensky may be arriving tonight!”

Charles stoically sits between the two doctors as they vie to explain Gurdjieff's principles. The last thing he wants to do is discuss Gurdjieff. He has heard of Ouspensky – the Russian intellectual Gurdjieff has allowed to translate his teachings, the author of *Tertium Organum*. At this moment, he couldn't care less.

“Gurdjieff's system is a teaching unlike anything known or heard of in the modern world...” began Dr Young.

“He spent twelve years travelling throughout the East – as far as Tibet – on a quest for ancient knowledge...” interjected Dr Nicoll.

“He was in contact with the Sarmoung Brotherhood in Afghanistan –”

“Esoteric Sufis –”

“Very interesting,” Charles says.

He looks at Katherine, and she turns. Her expression softens and she gives him a small wave. Like a fool, his heart stirs, beats faster.

Dr Young is in his ear. “He calls them the enlightened ones. Gurdjieff's teachings and movements are based on what he learned from them...”

Charles watches as Katherine talks to a woman who can only be Russian, one of the dancers. In this place, beauty has a power of its own, he sees that. He sees what care Katherine has taken with her appearance, how exquisitely dressed she is for dinner.

“They go back to ancient Persia and Babylon, Egypt at the time of the Pharaohs... Pre-Christ. Their teachings are based on Zoroastrian, Manichean, dualist beliefs –”

“Sorry, who?” Unwillingly, Charles is drawn back into the conversation.

“The Sarmoung Brotherhood,” said Dr Young, tetchily.

He glances across again. This time Katherine gives him a real smile and makes a comical wry face. Part of him wants to be angry at her but the other part of him is back on that street in Montmartre, knowing he is falling in love with her, his heart resurrected by a glance, thrumming with tender excitement. He can't help it, he cracks a wide grin. Her expression is so absurd he has to stop himself from laughing.

“And the harmonics of the music Gurdjieff composes with Hartmann come from their sung liturgies and hymns...”

“Its structure incorporates mathematical codas – sequences — that reverberate in the nervous system, are amplified by the dance postures that harmonize the body, the mind and the spirit, the idea is it helps bring us into a different, higher state of consciousness...”

At another time, this conversation might interest Charles, but his thoughts are on Katherine. This place, this bizarre place – what circumstances had compelled her to leave whatever her life had been, and come here? Oh God, *Katie. What has happened to you?*

“Most of the time...in what passes for our normal state of waking consciousness, we are not in fact *awake*...Gurdjieff's methods teach us to be fully present...”

Now he feels her gaze on him again. It is no good trying to hide his feelings from her.

“Gurdjieff believes we have to push our bodies and minds to their limits, to be shaken out of our routines, to stop our sleepwalking...” interrupts Dr Young. “Where something is habitual or expected, it is denied, and conversely, when it's unexpected, it should be indulged...”

Charles wonders what is being indulged at Le Prieuré.

Dr Young turns to him. “Mrs Murry seems to have caught your attention,” he says dryly. “Think about it Charles. When was the last time anything truly unexpected happened to you?”

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At 11 pm the first solemn, ethereal chords of Hartmann's music reverberate again throughout Le Prieuré. Charles comes in late and sits quietly towards the side of the salon.

He sees her sitting cross-legged on the Ottoman carpet in the third row, holding herself still, her eyes closed. He closes his eyes too, some of the time. When he opens them, he looks at her, and the fire's dancing flames.

Hartmann's compositions have an ethereal, complex quality. Like ancient hymns; also, he thinks, a quality that reminds him of Chopin, a sparse majesty. He looks at Katherine, how she is holding herself very still, her eyes closed. A tear settles on her right cheek, and falls. He doubts anyone but himself notices. He feels an aching loss; he fears he has been misunderstood by her.

Hartmann ends his performance, and bows his head for a few moments, as though giving thanks. There is no applause, just silence.

Dancers, men and women, come into the room. All wear white costumes, tunics buttoned up to the neck. The men have loose white trousers and the women wear white skirts over white pantaloons, all with different coloured sashes. No one speaks. They dance as though oblivious to one another, but perfectly choreographed.

When Gurdjieff enters the room, accompanied by a tall, stern-faced blond man – it has to be the man Orage mentioned, Ouspensky, Gurdjieff's chief communicator – the dancers arrange themselves in six lines. The dance at first seems very simple, almost like gymnastics. Each series of movements lasts one or two minutes. The action grows more and more intense, and the straight lines are broken up as the dancers arrange themselves in an intricate pattern.

Then one of the men announces the dance, in Russian and English: "The Initiation of a Priestess."

The part of the priestess is danced by a tall, strikingly graceful woman, the woman he noticed Katherine had been talking to at dinner. As she dances, the woman seems unaware of the complicated weaving movements of the men and women surrounding her, and the music becomes more and more strangely dissonant as it builds to a crescendo. The other dancers keep their faces still as masks. Only the sweat patches at their armpits betray their effort, and their barely audible intakes of breath.

Charles stands a little distance away. He watches Katherine's face, the restless tableau of

expressions on her face as she watches with great concentration, as though if she herself were dancing all the movements.

\*

“Let me walk you back?”

Katherine hesitates. Then smiles.

\*

“I’m staying in the outside quarters. Sharing a room.”

Outside, a soft mist has gathered in the darkness, releasing the smell of freshly raked-up earth and dead leaves. He helps her on with her big fur coat which seems too large for her slender frame. They walk together in the garden. The moon is bright, and the sky black-blue.

“I didn’t come and find you tonight. I thought you might think I was being... Well – *forward.*” He means to be sarcastic.

“Such an old-fashioned expression,” she says, sardonic.

“You made it obvious this afternoon that you don’t want people here to know –”

“What exactly?”

“That we’d met. More than met. Before. You’re married now?”

She gives him a long ironic look which he can’t decipher.

“I didn’t know what you might do. You might have tried to kiss me...” Her glance is sharp, and she shrugs – “Or *slap* me.”

They walk in silence, further into the gardens, through the leafless arcade of lime trees. At the very end of the path is another fountain with a stone statue of a laughing child. There is no water, and this part of the garden is overgrown with weeds.

She pauses in front of the statue. Holds up the sleeve of her fur coat in the moonlight.

“Look...They nibbled it today, Gurdjieff’s naughty goats. It looks as though it’s been set upon by rats... I was lost in my book and didn’t notice. I’ve been told to look after the cows now. I don’t know how Gurdjieff knew, but I’ve always had a phobia about cows so no doubt he intends to cure me of it...”

“A New Zealander with a fear of cows?”

“I know. But I think I’m starting to love the ones here. They’re very sweet. I’ve learned their names. Equivoqueveckwa, Baldofim, Mitasha. Bridget... Really!”<sup>16</sup>

There is that glimmer of the old Katie. Despite everything, she’s charmed him. He smiles.

“I’m quite serious,” she says, but the comic expression on her face makes him laugh. “Gurdjieff has given me a breathing technique which I’m meant to do in the hayloft. He says the smell of healthy manure is very beneficial...” She looks greatly amused by his incredulous expression. “Oh yes. They’ve got rugs and cushions up there. Actually, it’s warm, rather a nice place to read. Sometimes I’ve just fallen asleep there and had the deepest rest I can remember. Gurdjieff told me he likes to go there to meditate. He’s encouraging me to do the same –”

“You’re having me on!”

“Something they do in the Caucasus apparently. Cow breathing. Don’t they have that in Canada?”

He is relieved to realise that she’s teasing him.

The moon is now bright in the sky. She has walked them in a wide circle back to the outbuilding Orage had shown him the day before.

“This is where I am. Well... Goodnight, I suppose.”

“Katie. *Katherine*,” he corrects himself. “Don’t be ridiculous. Please – just *talk* to me. You *know* me.”

“It’s a long time ago now.”

She speaks with such precise gravity. Her expression – she has guessed what he has been through on her behalf. His instinct tells him that her reasons, if she gave them, might only confuse him more; nonetheless he longs to hear them. She’s hurt him, yet she looks so pale and vulnerable in her fur coat with its frayed sleeve. He wants to break down her reserve. He tries to keep his tone light.

“What do you say if I go and find some of that brandy, and we have a drink out here? Do some moon breathing. Will you be warm enough?”

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<sup>16</sup> *CLKM*, V, p. 339.

An approving half-smile. "Go on then."

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When he returns, she is sitting on a bench, bundled up in her coat. In the château, when he found what he was looking for, he'd run upstairs and the quilt off his bed, and now, as he sits down, he offers it to her, draping it over her.

"I thought you might need this to keep warm."

Katherine, grateful, offers him the other side of it.

They sit next to one another, straight and stiff as pikes all of a sudden, like two eight year-olds. Despite the cold, the night is beautiful and crisp. They can see the vapour of their exhaled breath and hear the shifting of the trees. He notices her impractical shoes. Elegant, slightly smudged-looking black satin, each with a pearly button. Where she has walked in the wet grass she has mud on her heels.

"I recognize this quilt. You must be staying in the room I was in when I arrived. It's the nicest room of all." She pauses. "You're not married, are you?"

"No."

Her eyes flicker over his watch. The rather unearthly light it gives off, luminous in the dark. He's used to it, but even so, it does seem particular bright – almost like electric light – in such darkness.

"It's the radium-based paint," he explains. "On the hands and dial."

Another long silence.

Charles fills the glasses he brought, from the bottle he salvaged. "Armagnac. Pilfered from a case under the stairs. There must be dozens of them."

They clink glasses.

"Orage told me Gurdjieff inherited the cellars when he took on the lease here," Katherine says. He's buying the place, and everything in it, did you know? It costs 700,000 francs apparently. Lady R intends to be very generous. He doesn't want the books, though. The house came with a library. Haven't you noticed there's not a book here? Where they have gone, no one knows." She is silent for a moment, her skin luminous in the strong blue

moonlight, and then she looks at him with a little frown between her brows. “I am sorry about before. I wasn’t sure – how I should feel...”

Neither of them speaks for a few moments. Black clouds drift across the skies, across the moon.

“It’s alright,” he says. “As long as you stop pretending nothing happened between us.”

“It was a shock to see you. The last thing I expected.”

“Why on earth didn’t you answer – why didn’t you tell me – if you didn’t want me in your life? Didn’t I have the right to know?”

She pauses for a long time. Her face is pinched with something he can’t read.

“I’m sorry. I’ve had a very peculiar life I’m sure it would be rather difficult for you to understand.”

“Do you have any idea how long I searched for you? I went everywhere, asked everywhere... Every leave until I was transferred. Why would you say something like that to me? Why wouldn’t you even try to explain?”

“You searched for me?” She sounds incredulous and shakes her head, as though all of this is impossibility and she can’t believe him.

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*Well! – who could believe it – who could ever imagine such a thing!*

*What a marvellous, what a miraculous thing to happen! I’m shaking... I feel quite... But I mustn’t get too overwhelmed... I must keep a sense of proportion. Be calm! I can’t, I can’t! Not just for the moment. If you could feel my heart... It’s beating very fast, not racing, but simply quivering – an extraordinary sensation – and if I am quite sincere I feel such a longing to kneel down. How can this be possible? And what am I to make of it?*

*This tenderness, this longing... Even in the dark I feel there are new leaves on the trees, new seeds being planted and everywhere there is a gentle stirring, as though the universe has*



*ever so slightly, shifted, to rearrange everything. I have never been very good at imagining the future...<sup>17</sup>*

*All I know is that I want to cry and pray and laugh at the same time.*

*Is this what G means, to trust Life?*

*I had never dared wish for this disturbance, for something so frightening and wonderful to happen.... I almost feel distraught, it makes me cry, for everything I have lost, for everything I cannot hope for...*

*I long for –*

*But no, I mustn't say what I long for...*

\*

*Fontainebleau-Avon. December 12 1922.*

That night, around three in the morning, Charles woke to frantic cries of “*Voda! Voda!*”

When he opened his door, he saw people – some half naked — snatching at night jugs and basins, running towards the end of the corridor. Grabbing for his dressing gown, he had gone to see what the matter was. Acrid smoke stung his eyes before he saw any trace of fire. Inside the room – Gurdjieff’s private quarters – he saw a line of fiery orange, blue and purple flames blaze up a flimsy dividing screen in the bedroom, which Gurdjieff was frantically trying to knock down with a hammer before it could set anything else ablaze. Charles rushed to grab heavy carpets off the floor and walls, using one to wallop at the screen, trying to starve the fire of oxygen, feeling the rush of fierce heat and burning cinders against his face. A human chain had formed, with people passing utensils filled with water from the nearby bathroom.

The fire was extinguished before it could cause more significant damage. Gurdjieff’s room had come off badly — his bedding and his nightstand were charred. In the chaos, he had seen Katherine with the woman who had danced as the Priestess the previous night; they were at the top of the stairs, looking alarmed. But when he emerged, stinking of smoke, his bathrobe singed, thinking he might reassure her, they weren’t there.

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<sup>17</sup> Inspired by and paraphrasing Mansfield’s notebook entry ‘Room 135’, *CW4*, pp. 429-430.

He left early, getting the first train to keep his appointment in Paris with his friend Douglas MacFarlane.

Before the fire, his conversation with Katherine the night before ended so abruptly...

She had suddenly said she was tired, it was too late. She couldn't have this conversation now. If he didn't mind, she'd walk back by herself... It really was a shock to see him again, she said, she hadn't realised how much.

He had watched her disappear into the moonlight.

He'd spent time exploring Paris with Douglas, a friend from his Toronto University days, now a successful lawyer, returning to Europe on holiday with his wife. Douglas had served as a major with the British Expeditionary Force, and had been wounded in the war, then invalided home. He still walked with a pronounced limp. They'd visited the Louvre and walked in the Left Bank and the Luxembourg Gardens, dined at Foyot's.

Charles must have been to Paris at least a dozen times since 1915. He knew every corner of the Luxembourg Gardens. He had been to the Paris Opera. Several times he had returned to Chartier and he couldn't help looking at the table where he and Katie had sat. He nursed a whisky at Le Closerie des Lilas. He had combed – endlessly — the streets of Montmartre, hoping for a glimpse of her, and often ended up in a little dive bar on Rue Gabrielle, sitting on a terrace on a cobbled street, with a view of the Sacré Coeur.

This was where he had brought Douglas, to this noisy blue-collar atmosphere with its good cheap red wine. Douglas was one of his oldest friends and it was on the tip of his tongue to tell Douglas all about what had happened, but somehow, he couldn't. His feelings for Katie – *Katherine* he had to keep correcting himself — had been – and still felt — so intensely private. Douglas talked him into staying overnight, so they could visit the jazz clubs in Montmartre. They'd gone to see Sidney Bechet perform at the Casino de Paris, and other black American musicians at Mitchells, where they served an all-night breakfast, eggs, bacon, grits and pancakes. On impulse, after hours of walking, they'd gone to the cinema to see *Nosferatu*.

On the train back to Fontainebleau, he thought about the film, how disquieting it was. The cargo of coffins on the ship, all filled with earth. Count Orlok, the vampire, his bat-like head, claw-like nails and fangs like a rat's... the good wife, offering herself in sacrifice. They had laughed at the risible bits, but he felt haunted by the film's startling artistry; its montage effect, its suggestion of fear in every shadow of the frame; the use of the photographic negative to create landscapes of white trees against a black sky.

Despite how distant and strange she had been with him — he could scarcely contain his feelings of wanting to see her again.

### ***11. A Path in the Woods***

*Fontainebleau-Avon. December 15 1922.*

There is a loud knock at the door. It is still dark, but he can hear the sound of swift movements through the corridors, voices raised. He glances at his watch. Exactly six o'clock.

Orage is already descending the staircase when he opens the door.

“Those should fit. Hurry — practice has already begun downstairs. Everyone has to do it here...”

Charles glances down. A rough white cotton shirt and a pair of trousers. He groans. There seems to be no such thing as having a choice here. If he chooses not to join in, then he should leave...

When he puts them on they come up to his elbows and calves. He must look a sight.

Hartmann is thrumming the piano keys as though to warm up them up, then playing simple repetitions of the same chords with only slight variations up and down the scale. It is still dark outside, near freezing in the salon. Russian women are lighting the fire in the salon as the rest of the inmates — as he now mentally refers to them — file in.

Gurdjieff is there. And Ouspensky and the doctors Young and Nicoll, and Madame Ostrovska and the woman who had danced the part of the Priestess and the blonde woman who might be Lady Rothermere but who looks as ordinary as a bus conductor in her white

tunic. At least forty others are milling around, a forest of moving bodies all in white. Orage appears beside him. "Don't watch me, I'm hopeless. Watch the others and try to follow."

They begin on the mats. As soon as they are seated on the floor, Charles sees Katherine, but she's not taking part. She sits alone on the carpet in one corner of the room, her stockinged feet curled up underneath her. She darts him a quizzical glance.

Along with the others, he follows a series of complicated exercises. If anyone lags, Gurdjieff raps the floor with a wooden stick. Charles concentrates hard to keep up, feeling self-conscious, aware Katherine is watching. It is hard work. He admires the athleticism of anyone who can master these movements to Gurdjieff's exacting standards but he has no intention of being one of them. He can't help being amused by Lady Rothermere's utterly assured, exaggerated seriousness, the way she adds swooping flourishes to each movement, and leaves a heavy waft of gardenia perfume in her wake. They are ordered to run, then to walk and then to "Stop." The pose of the Priestess woman, with one foot forward for the next step, her head erect and arms outstretched, is so striking and statue-like that Gurdjieff tells them all to look at her.

As he is trying to balance, motionless, Katherine catches his eye. He pulls a face, and she smiles. It's not any smile, it's tender and lingering. Feeling reckless, he adds silly flourishes to his twists and bounces to make her smile more. She tries to pretend she isn't amused, but he can see that whatever else, he has cheered her up. They recognise one another again, he is sure of it.

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Afterwards he goes over and sits on the window ledge near her, joining the group as they have plum tea from the samovar, with lemon and sugar, and black Russian bread with honey.

"This tea is from Armenia apparently. I'm desperately craving proper *English* tea, with milk," she says.

"You seem to have a dispensation. Lucky you."

She has an elegant way she has of sipping her tea, her little finger curled up, her delicate wrist, her arms, the line of her neck. He remembered that from when they met.

“When I didn’t see you anywhere these past two days, I thought you might have left,” she says.

“I had someone to see in Paris for a day or two. I couldn’t find you to tell you. The way our conversation ended the other night... I wasn’t sure you wanted to be found.”

With a little nod she acknowledges his point. Today she seems grateful – even eager? — to see him.

Gurdjieff claps his hands, and beams at them as though they are children, about to play some kind of game. Hartmann takes his seat at the piano and a dozen or so of the followers break away from having tea to form a small group in the centre of the room, as though about to perform a demonstration. One of them brings in a blackboard and sets it up on a stand.

Katherine lowers her voice, conspiratorially, as the room hushes and everyone turns to watch.

“This is Gurdjieff’s little trick. He plays it on important visitors...”

Gurdjieff is telling Ouspensky something and gives him a sheet of paper. Ouspensky looks at it and makes a mark against something on it. Gurdjieff then commands one of the followers to step forward a few paces to stand with his back to them.

“Gurdjieff has told Ouspensky to select an animal or the name of an opera from a list... “

Gurdjieff is speaking.

“He is saying that the power of the pupil’s concentration will allow them to telepathically convey it to Saltzmann” – she glances towards the man at the front – “who is deliberately standing with his back to us ready to draw the animal on the black board, or to Hartmann at the piano, who is ready to play the opening bars of the opera. Watch...”

Charles observes everyone but sees nothing unusual.

“See? Madame de Hartmann”— she nods at a refined-looking woman about her own age — “communicates the selection by sign language to one of the watchers...”

Now that she has pointed this out, he is aware of small gestures that could easily be missed.

“Usually it is Tchekovitch who signals it back to Saltzmann or Hartmann. No one’s ever the wiser.”

Charles looks at her curiously. How long has she been here, immersing herself in all of this? Whatever great wisdom Gurdjieff is teaching, some of it is pure charlatanry and Katherine seems to know it. Why, he wonders again, is she here?

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They set out to find the river, wrapped in their winter coats. As they amble along the garden path, they fall silent. The sky is just beginning to lighten. The morning is very still, almost unnaturally quiet, amplifying the soft scrunch of their footfall on the leaf-strewn path. There is nothing man-made about it. The real forest, where nature has the guiding hand, is right on their doorstep at Le Prieuré.

“It’s not as cold as I thought it might be. It feels as though nature is holding its breath before winter,” Katherine says. She keeps glancing at him.

He realises he is walking too fast for her and slows, letting her set the pace.

She gives him a curious look. “I was just thinking.... “

“What?”

“You remind me, ever so slightly, of my brother Chummie. Leslie. I know it sounds a strange thing to say. It’s not a physical thing I’m talking about, more a sort of presence.”

“I hope that’s flattering.”

“Chummie would be twenty-eight now. I sometimes wonder about the kind of man he would have become if he had lived. He had such goodness to him.”

“Ah. I’m sorry.”

“He was positively elated, going off to war. certain only good would come of fighting the war, or I suppose that good would prevail. I don’t he thought it possible he might die. Never that it would happen the way it did... He was so... upright, so enthusiastic... he told me before he left he was thoroughly enjoying soldiering... those were his words. He used to sign off ‘Ever your devoted...’”

He can see how hard it is for her to talk of him.

“I suppose, when I met you, I thought the same of you,” she says.

He's not sure whether he likes what's she's implying. "What had you hoped for him, if it's not too cruel a question?"

Katherine frowns. "Whatever anyone hopes for someone they love. For them to be happy, to be able to use their talents... For them never to come to harm. We became very close again, just before he died. He came and stayed with me in London. We had such a happy time together that summer, just before. I know it sounds strange, but when we were younger and he was little, I never imagined being able to love my own child as much as I loved him... He was so perfect and golden. I'd read him stories, and his eyes would be so wide and wondering..."

She's made no mention of children. He guesses there aren't any. He's arrested by a thought, something he'd never considered. For one crazy moment, he thinks, if she'd gotten pregnant – imagine — if they'd had a child, its birthday would be in April, it would be six by now...

As they walk beyond the wall and the ragged hedges behind it, the path becomes more overgrown, a dark, narrow track they can only pass through one at a time. When they come into a clearing that leads to a wider path, the rising sun sends a shimmering patchwork of piercing light through the chilled shadows. Even the way she walks has changed; she is uncertain and pained, like someone trying to avoid a catastrophe.

"Chummie wanted to please Father," she says. "He joined the South Lancashire Regiment. So he could get there sooner."

"Where did he die?"

She goes very still. "October 6<sup>th</sup>. 1915. In Flanders, in the woods somewhere near Messines. They weren't even fighting — it was just a training exercise, with the new Mills bomb. They were taught to throw them just like bowling in cricket. One exploded while it was still in his hands. He knew perfectly well how to throw them safely. It was faulty, that's what his friend said, but the army never admitted it." He can barely hear her voice. "They buried him the same day. In the place where he fell. Along with the man who died with him. In a place called Ploegsteert..."

“I’m so sorry.”

She makes a helpless gesture with her hands. He wants instantly to comfort her, and she sees it, but her expression grows more guarded.

“I should like to go there sometime — I must go, in fact. I’ve had dreams about it, tried to imagine how it was for him, the exact place where he left the world. It happened in a clearing. Probably it was just like any forest clearing, maybe even like this one.”

Charles had seen men blown apart by dud hand grenades. At such close range, it was never survivable. He wasn’t about to share any details.

“I couldn’t bear to stay in England after he’d been killed. At least, being in France, I felt I was with him somehow...” She falters.

“You came back to France?” She had been in Paris, throughout the war, and never tried to find him?

“I came to France often during the war. Mostly each winter.”

“You’re full of surprises.”

“They say you go numb with grief. It wasn’t like that for me.”

He looks at her, wary, aware that he is incapable of emotionally steeling himself against her. The old pain of longing for her, the old hurt he thought he had buried.

“When I got the news, I went into an awful panic. I couldn’t breathe, I had to get out of England straight away. I felt I’d go wild. I couldn’t bear to be in the house. I could still see him in the bedroom where he stayed... I didn’t know if I could live with the pain of it. And then when I got to France, I felt, very powerfully, that I *had* to live. For Chummie. Because he couldn’t.”

Charles is realising, in this moment, how little he understands who she really is.

Finally, she asks: “Were you over here for the whole time?”

“More or less.”

“You were in Pas de Calais — Boulogne — when we met...”

“That summer I was transferred to the outskirts of Cairo. In Abbassia. Egypt. We treated a lot of New Zealanders and Australians, many of them evacuated — ”



“Gallipoli?”

“Yes. We were shipped out to get closer to the line, but once we got out there, it was decided it was too dangerous. We were moved back to France in the spring of ’16, to Le Havre, to set up the Tent Hospital at Étapes. We were there, all through the Somme offensive until ’17...”

She doesn’t seem to want to hear any more about the war any more than he wants to talk about it. They walk in silence. He had people he had loved who had died in the war, too. He wants to push those memories far away, to somewhere where they could not intrude into this quiet place with her.

“How long are you planning to stay?” he asks.

“That depends...”

“On what?”

“When I’m ready to leave, I want to go South. Not back to England.”

“Not back to your husband, then?”

“No.” The look she gives him tells him she doesn’t like him mentioning her husband.

“Flying South? Like the swallows and the swifts —flying to Africa?”

“Most likely I’ll go to the South of France. I was thinking of Sanary-sur-Mer. I’ve stayed in Bandol. Do you know that area, up the coast from Marseilles? Or maybe I should go somewhere completely new. I was thinking Lago di Garda. Or Majorca, perhaps.”

Charles doesn’t answer. How long can this talking around everything go on?

“It’s not properly winter yet, is it? It’s been such a strange year. When I arrived, there were still blossoms on the almond trees. I’ve never seen such a beautiful autumn,” she says.

“It was a very hot summer in Zurich. I had such wonderful swims in the lake, and off the little islands in the river Limmat –”

“I love the sea – I miss swimming.” She gives him another of her surreptitious glances, as though she can’t decide how much to reveal. “I went to live in Bandol for a while after Chummie died. It’s a little fishing village, with a beautiful protected bay for swimming. Oleanders and lavender everywhere. It was very peaceful. I used to walk down from the

house I rented through a little headland full of pine trees going down to the sea. The smell of them was heavenly..."

Where might he have been then, when she was there? Egypt, probably.

"All I could think about was Chummie..." Her voice grows quiet. "My baby brother. I felt he was a seed to be planted, for something wonderful in the world that had never been allowed to grow... and that I had to try and express what that beauty and goodness was..." She hesitates. "It wasn't just his death. I found myself beginning to *hate* humanity, the great brawling mass of it, as passionately as I loved the few, the very few... The world could be so ugly and corrupt and *stupid*. The war had made everything loathsome. Everything was tainted, even *I* was, my own soul..."

He hadn't expected this sudden vehemence. She had always seemed so detached from the war.

"Why did you decide to come here?" he asks

She pauses. "Because lot of what used to matter to me doesn't seem to matter to me anymore..."

"And you need to find what does."

"Exactly."

"Did you write your novel, in the end?"

"No."

"But you kept writing?"

"Yes."

"I did look, you know," he says. "In bookshops. To see if I could find your book. In case it was published."

She gives him a slightly pitying look.

"What do you write? Poetry?"

"Not so much. Short stories. And reviews of course. That's how I know Orage... I wrote for *The New Age*, you see. Until just recently, my husband edited *The Athenaeum*."

“Ah.” Charles had seen it. He quickly adjusted his opinion. *The Athenaeum* was considered the most scholarly – the most modern — of the British literary magazines, representing the best of the literary and cultural culture. The University of Toronto library had a subscription; he’d never actually read it, but always meant to.

“My first *real* book came out this year...*The Garden Party*. The reviews have been mostly favourable. Although there was one by a fierce lady in *Time and Tide* that makes me think I should never dare set foot in England again. But it’s been nominated for the French *Femina Vie Heureuse* prize...And my publishers are talking about other translations...”

He’s impressed. “You’re being very modest. When you say ‘real,’ do you mean there were others? You write under your own name?”

“I use Mansfield. Murry is my married name. Actually, I’d already published a small book of short stories when I met you...”

He’s struck by a thought. Perhaps she is at Le Prieuré in order to write about it. Not as a follower at all.

“Are you working here? Writing something, I mean?”

“Gurdjieff’s put me under strict orders *not* to write. Not my usual kind of writing anyway. He’s set me writing exercises instead.”

“What kind?”

“To remember the most important experiences of my life. Then ask myself whether I had *consciously* made them happen... Or whether they had simply happened to me. The same with the worst moments. Had I caused them? Could I have changed them? He says we use our daily routines to sleepwalk through our lives, so that we live closed off to the world.”

“What about me?”

“What do you mean?”

“What kind of ‘*moment*’ was I?”

She looks startled. “I hadn’t had time to think about it since then. Not until I saw you the other day. But yes, of course you *mattered*.”

“You just can’t say how.”

She's silent.

"How long have you been married?"

She averts her eyes, seems to reconsider whatever she was about to say, and looks at him in the eye. "Four years. My marriage hasn't been the happiest for some time. We're on perfectly good terms, but we've separated. I think that's what people say."

"And how long have you been here?" he asks again.

"It's been almost eight weeks. It feels like eight months. Eight years even." She looks slightly sheepish. "When you weren't here, I looked for you. I thought you'd left?"

They have reached the river, and they stop to take in the expanse of it. The sun is high and bright, flickering off the water's surface. Set back from the river is a pretty-looking hotel, painted apricot pink. There is a small sign above the doorway. Hotel de Fleurie.

As they meander along, Katherine stoops lower onto the shingles to pick up flat stones. The surface appears placid, barely moving. She begins skimming. Ripples flicker across the surface of the water where the stone had sunk. He looks at her concentrating on throwing the stones. She's inscrutable.

"Is your husband a Pa-man?" Charles asks.

"You remember that?" She looks at him, startled. "Jack's never been in the Pa-man mould, not remotely. Jack's utterly impractical. He relies on *charm*." There is something acid in the way she says 'charm'. "Father never took to him. Even when I did want them to get on."

He joins her at the river's edge, stooping for some stones, taking his time, before joining her in the skimming game. Fifteen skims on the calm shallows before it sank.

"You're good."

"It's all down to choosing the right stone," he says. "It's physics. The hard object, skimming off the surface tension of the water. Like the insects that can walk on water. Gerridae. Water striders. They used to fascinate me when I was a kid. Jesus bugs we called them..."

“Actually, I’ve begun to see my youthful rebellion against Pa-men in a very different light just recently.” This tumbles out, like a confession. “It could be that you’re only part Pa-man,” she concedes. “Seven-tenths Pa...”

“What’s the rest?”

“Wandering jazz-lover, investigator of philosophers and mystics...” She smiles.

“Does that make me more acceptable?”

“You do look ridiculous in that tunic, by the way. Quite a sight!”

Charles is still wearing the tunic under his full-length coat. He sticks out a bare calf and waggles it. They both laugh – the tension, broken.

“I meant to ask you”, she says. “How long are you going to stay?”

“I’m here another week. I have a passage booked, sailing on the 22<sup>nd</sup> for Ceylon. I suppose there’ll be some kind of Christmas aboard ship.”

“Oh,” she murmurs, turning again so that he can’t see her expression. She seems very interested in the reeds by the riverbank, and by the cloud of starlings overhead, shaken out by their laughter, twittering in the sky.

“My plan is, to cross to Madras and explore India a little. Travel to Rangoon. Perhaps Tibet if I can arrange it. I’m booked through to Japan.”

“You’ll sail from Marseilles?”

“Yes.”

“I always wanted to travel to those places...”

“Then I’m sure you will.”

She says nothing.

“When was the last time you went home, to New Zealand?”

“I’ve never been back. I can’t possibly just now. Maybe in a year or two.” She glances at him. “After Jack and I were married my father offered to buy us a farmhouse and some acres; he had a property in mind, outside Auckland. I think it was what he had always thought he would do for Chummie...”

“Jack didn’t want to accept your father’s offer?”

“Jack couldn’t understand why he wouldn’t buy us a place in East Sussex instead. I mean — Auckland?” She laughs. “Safe enough distance from my family, I suppose. But no one lives there... I thought, what would we do, keep cows and chickens? But I’m beginning to have an awful feeling my father might have known what was best for me, all along. He just has the most insufferable way of showing it. He’s not really forgiven Jack. I doubt he’d forgive him for anything much if he knew how things really were. But divorce – he wouldn’t approve of that.”

She pauses for a moment, standing still in the path.

“Jack’s been unfaithful to me,” she says finally, abruptly. “I finally couldn’t stand it. He said he couldn’t help it if Asquith’s daughter was in love with him and needed his help with her literary career... He’s absolutely hopeless. He thinks he can tell me these things, as though I’m not a real woman, not even his wife. He actually told me about this horrid Bibesco woman -”

“Bibesco?”

“Princess. She’s an Asquith, married to a Romanian prince.”

“Ah.”

He had vaguely heard of this woman. Her wedding and her travels made the newsreels.

“He confessed the affair, by post... He told me I had to understand how impossible things were, my being... elsewhere. Women constantly finding him attractive. Needing him for things... It’s extraordinary the things Jack thinks I should know, in the name of honesty. He even confided to me once that he planned to go to bed with a prostitute, but when it came down to it, decided he couldn’t. Instead he took her out to dinner and spent the whole evening discussing her life over stew and potatoes...” She laughs bitterly.

“I always used to think I could trust Jack. That he loved me, as well as he could. We always had told him he could have his freedom, as I would have mine...”

He looks at her, baffled. “And now?”

“I want to *kick* him. Of course, I don’t tell him that...”

She still has, he thinks, the most beautiful eyes. But her gaze feels too serene for what they're discussing; it's disquieting.

"How did you meet him?" He is curious, despite himself. Wondering how long after him she had met this Jack.

"He was my lodger, at first. In Bloomsbury. He'd been at Brasenose, on a classic scholarship; he was ferociously ambitious, he wanted to set up his own magazine. He'd seen a story I'd written, and asked Orage for an introduction... We made a pact never to compromise, to live for writing... he was so full of ideas and plans... I did *love* him then, very much... We did make quite an exciting life for ourselves..."

Charles feels a stab of pique, almost fury at her for saying this so pointedly. He frowns.

"It's just —"

"So — you married him..."

"Not when we first met... Jack's mother was horrified..."

To his surprise he sees a mischievous look on her face, as though she knows she is deliberately going to shock him.

"... Jack grew up in Peckham, very conscious of... *class*. His parents didn't know what to make of me. Can you imagine, when we'd first begun living together, the pair of them, his mother and his aunt, came to our apartment, determined to rescue their beloved Jack from my evil clutches once and for all. They actually grabbed him and tried to heave him away... They wouldn't take no for an answer. It took all our strength to wrestle their bosomy bodies out. I bolted the door and Jack cowered on the armchair pretending to faint..."

He can't help it, he grins. It almost surprises him to find Katherine's chuckling laughter hasn't changed, is as warm and gloriously full of life as ever.

"There's a song I used to sing to annoy him that sums it up. Do you want to hear it?"

"Do I have a choice?"

*John took me round to see his Mo-ther*

*His Mo-ther, his Mo-ther*

*And while he introduced us to each other*

*She weighed up everything I had on*

*She put me through a cross examination*

*I fairly boiled with aggravation*

*Then she shook her head, looked at me and said*

*'Poor John, Poor John.'*<sup>18</sup>

Within moments, slipping into broad Cockney, Katherine has managed to make him laugh until his stomach hurts, a glorious feeling. He's shocked, but also glad of the way she speaks about Jack, with a frankness that can only mean one thing. Her marriage is over.

"Just imagine. I've always tried to make everything in my life as exquisite as I can, to the minutest detail, yet certain moments in my life are just pure farce. You know like a Charlie Chaplin film..."

"Sounds more like Buster Keaton..."

"We did have to leave that apartment, in the end. Somebody reported us to the management because we weren't married. We have actually had happy times together... Working like two timetables, talking books and writing, with our jokes, our walks, our plans for the house we were going to have, all our friends to entertain... I always used to think, how can one let all that go?" She shook her head. "I think sometimes you just *absent* yourself until you can decide what to do. It might sound odd but I worry more about what my leaving would do to Jack's younger brother Richard than Jack himself... We still write, as we always have. I've always thought we *needed* one another..."

Charles is feeling distinctly talked *at*. They exchange a strange wary glance.

"But the more I see it now, we've been like a brother and sister — we're Tig and Wig... Like children playing at being grown-ups and never actually having an adult life together at all."

Charles is quietly aghast. He's never liked babyish nicknames for adults. What on earth happened to her?

"Sometimes I think Jack wants me to be his mother."

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<sup>18</sup> 'Poor John', Vesta Victoria (1873-1951), British music hall singer and comedian.



Another revelation he isn't sure what to make of. He stays silent.

"I can't remember the last time he ever took me in his arms or behaved tenderly with me. I think he's only really happy when I'm not with him. When I ask myself what we actually share, the answer is, other than talking about writing – which I suppose for me sometimes has been everything — almost *nothing*. We came to an agreement in the end that it was better for us not to live together anymore." Her voice has become detached. "I came here to change my life. End my attachment to him. It's not easy, you see. Breaking the habit, of being married."

He stares at her. To find her after all this time and to accept that she must have found someone vastly superior to him was one thing, but to hear how unhappy her marriage had made her is another. He is shocked to see how acutely lonely and demoralised she is.

"I was just thinking." The idea occurs to him. "What do you say we get away from here today. Go to Paris, have lunch."

Katherine hesitates and he is sure she is going to say no. But then, very unexpectedly, he sees something of the first smile she ever gave him.

"Yes. I'd like that. Very much."

\*

At Katherine's insistence, he asks Gurdjieff's approval for the proposed outing. But Gurdjieff merely shrugs. He says "Take her to *L'Ecrevasse*. For the crayfish."

Katherine seems almost disappointed by this. "That's all? He didn't say *no*?"

Charles doesn't elaborate that perplexingly, Madame de Hartmann had added a mild "Look after her, won't you."

"Gurdjieff said to watch out for the *piquers*, the needle-demons. What on earth did he mean by that?"

"Apparently, over the last couple of weeks, dozens of women Christmas shoppers have been attacked randomly in crowds, on auto-buses, in department stores and in the subways... They're being jabbed with poisoned needles. No one has any idea who is doing it or why."

"How odd."

"I'm not afraid of the needle-demons," she says.

“How soon can you be ready? If we leave now we can have the whole day. There’s a late train back. Moustache offered someone to drop us at the station.”

“Who?” Katherine looks mildly shocked, but just as quickly delighted.

“Gurdjieff.” He’s glad to hear a trace of mockery in her laugh.

\*

He waits for her in the hall, in the same chair on which he sat the first day he arrived. No one is around. Everyone else seems to have been assigned to their tasks. Only Gurdjieff’s boy scurries out of the kitchen bearing a tray of Turkish coffee. Charles has the obscure feeling that they are truants at some peculiar boarding school where permission slips are needed to secure release.

She comes in, encased in her fur coat. A coral necklace, matching lipstick. A warm, Russian-looking red scarf around her shoulders. A dark felt hat which suits her very well. She looks beautiful – more like her old self.

\*

The sun is out. The December morning is cold, but bright and clear.

They take the tram from right outside Le Prieuré directly to the station.

The train pulls into Fontainebleau-Avon, heaving to a shuddering, steaming halt. As they sink into their seats, lucky to find an empty carriage, Katherine looks almost giddy at the novelty of their sudden escape.

With a loud screech whistle and a series of jolts, the train jerks into motion, beginning to pick up speed. Smoke billows past the window, sending cinders of smut through the half-open window. Charles tries to shut it but finds it wedged stuck. Wrestling with it for a few moments, applying a combination of force and skill, he slips it back into correct position with a good sound tug. Katherine gives him a look of amusement, as though she isn’t used to a man who could fix such things.

They sit together, side by side, a little self-consciously. He notices her white calfskin gloves are stitched with black at the edges, like a delicate lacy suture. She looks chic. But – he sees — she also looks fragile.

As they speed towards Paris, the low-angled winter sunlight traversing on the horizon pulses warmth on their faces, splintering light through the trunks of plane trees parallel to the track. There are glimpses of river and open stretches of country, as they thread through one small station after another.

\*

“I was thinking...” he ventures, “we could start with the Opera. Perhaps see if we could manage to get tickets for this evening? Whatever else we do, let’s make sure we go to that Shakespeare bookshop — or Smiths. I’d like to buy a copy of your book.”

Charles begins fishing in his suit pocket for his battered folded Paris map, the same one he had brought on his first visit.

“Is there a particular place you’d like to go to for lunch?” he persists.

“Why don’t you surprise me.” She sounds as though she doesn’t want to be burdened with any decision-making. A lengthy pause, as they adjust to the swaying of the train, hurtling through the countryside now. “How is it *you* haven’t married?” she asks.

“I broke off an engagement. Earlier this year.”

She looks at him sideways. An expression he can’t quite place. And he thinks, even though in her looks she is much changed — certainly thinner, and her features have become tauter— he still desires her, in a way he had never desired Alice. Seven years since he watched her come across the room towards him, the night they met; he doesn’t feel cured at all.

“What was her name?” Katherine asks.

“Alice. We’d known each other since we were children.” Even saying her name gave him mixed feelings of guilt and relief.

\*

“Did you travel anywhere other than Zurich?” she asks.

“I went to Bern. And Basel.”

“Never up into the countryside?”

“Not properly.”

“I spent most of last year in Switzerland. Up in the mountains.”

He almost can't believe this new coincidence. She had been in Switzerland at the same time as him?

"Where?"

"First in Montreux, by the lake. Then in the Alps, in the Valais. In a place called Sierre. A very sunny, pretty little village in the valley... The sunniest part of the Switzerland apparently. You feel perched on top of the world. Completely surrounded by snow. *Intense* blue light, a wonderful clarity, so that you see people from far away, all sharp-cut and vivid... The hotel where I stayed had been a seventeenth century château –"

"Like Le Prieuré?"

"Grandeur. But it had fallen on hard times, because of the war. It was like something out of a fable, or Alice in Wonderland.... Sometimes I was sure the foliage on the painted walls seemed to *move*, like a forest, and it had seven doors – but only one was the actual real door, the rest were *trompe de l'oeil* and went nowhere, or were strange little wardrobes..."

He smiles because it's as though no time has passed, and they are back picking up where they had left off.

"It had a ceiling painted like the star-studded night sky. From my window, I overlooked the most incredible range of snowy mountains, and the station. The Orient Express would swoosh past, a blue streak, almost at the end of my bed, on its way back to Paris or going towards Constantinople..."

She speaks very fast, like someone who is breaking out of practised silence.

"You've been on it, I suppose?" he asks. "The O.E."

"No. I want to go to Venice. I'd love to *know* Venice —I'd love to see the Carnival."

"So do I."

"By the way, one of your compatriots had an extended stay in that hotel –"

"What was it called?"

"What?"

"The hotel."

“Oh. Hotel Château de Belle Vue. Some Canadian disciple of Turner’s, who’d run out of money and had to paint his way out. The owner of the hotel let him pay off his debt by painting huge scenes of snow-capped mountains in the *salle à manger*, which was as big as a ballroom... It must have taken him months. Not a relative of yours, I suppose?”

Charles chuckles.

“I sympathise — I was writing stories by the yard myself, to keep the wolf from the door. Even so, some of the stories I wrote there were good as I can do —”

“I’d like to read them.”

“But others, I’m ashamed of and wish I hadn’t sent... They ended up running alongside ghastly illustrations like — well — those advertisements for Harrods 29/6 *crêpe de chine* blouses or suits for young gentlemen. But they paid so well — six guineas a story.”

It pains Charles to think of her — even as a married woman — still having to think about money like that.

“Most of the time I spent in the Alps, I was up in the heavens, in Crans Montana. My cousin owns a fine chalet there, and I rented a little chalet nearby.”

“He’s there for the walking, I suppose. And the skiing...”

“*She*” — Katherine corrects him. “She built a retreat, somewhere she could write, and invite friends.”

“She’s a writer too?”

“Elizabeth von Arnim. She wrote a book called *Elizabeth and her German Garden*. She used to be a Beauchamp, like me. Her success was probably one of the reasons my parents eventually took me seriously when I said I wanted to write as well...”

Charles is genuinely surprised to learn this. Elizabeth von Arnim is one of his mother’s favourite writers — in one of her recent letters she mentioned how much she had enjoyed her last novel — April something.

“My mother thinks she’s very good.”

“Dear Elizabeth, I’m very fond of her. I gave her that title for her last book by the way — I told her she should write a book about spring. She has everything really. Her books are

bestsellers... She has grown-up children; houses and gardens... But I can't help feeling sad for Elizabeth. She craves love and fun – but life has been so generous with her in everything else but that..."

"She married a German?"

"Her first husband was a German count. She's Lady Russell now – she married Bertrand Russell's brother, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl. But he's been rather horrid. All the more reason for her to escape to her chalet..."

"You must know Bertrand Russell then, I suppose".

"I did," she says, deliberately vague. "Poor cousin Elizabeth... Her husband seems to prefer the hired help. It's not that she doesn't have admirers. H. G. Wells was madly in love with her. Lately she seems to attract a certain type. Attractive, ambitious and young, with one eye on her fortune. Jack, of course, thinks she's marvellous..."

He's taking in her easy familiarity with these famous authors.

"She's older than you, by the sounds of it."

"In her mid-fifties now. She always used to insist, by the way, on having very embarrassing older woman to younger woman talks with me about sex after I got married. 'Physical Love,' she always calls it..." Katherine mimics an affected, musical voice. "What a traagedeee for a woman if she never gets transported to such a state of ecstasy..." She's testing him, to see if he reacts. "Unkind of me. I shouldn't mock her really."

Thank God, Charles thinks, she is finally talking like the woman he remembers. But she's still behaving as though they haven't seen each other naked. This exchange is starting to exasperate him. He wants to get to the point. To tell her every impulsive, passionate, crazy, despairing thought he's ever had about her.

But Katherine has turned her head to the window. The forest has given way to nondescript two-storey houses, tenements and factories, and they clatter across the bridge, under which snakes the Seine, much wider here. For a few moments, they are suspended over its brown, churning waters. Unseen, in another carriage, comes the sound of a baby crying. Squalling;

refusing to be comforted. The noise is jarring, putting both of them on edge, and they wait until it dies down so they don't have to talk over the baby's cries.

"Elizabeth says I'm foolish not to forgive Jack. And that for a writer, having a semi-detached husband is a blessing." Finally, she looks at him. "But then, Elizabeth hasn't ever had to financially support her husband. For one reason or another Jack has always behaved as though I was the man and he was the woman... The first time we separated was after he he went bankrupt. I'd signed over my all allowance for the next four years over to pay off his debtors. We barely had anything left to live on. One night I overheard him telling a friend that what he really wanted was a woman who could keep him, then he could write his novel, not have to scramble around reviewing other people's work —"

"What a loathsome bastard."

"I was so furious I read his diary. He said he was trying to decide whether I was "more to him than a gratification." That was the exact word. I thought he meant it *that way*, then I realised no, he was blaming me for how he felt, having to take money from me... When I confronted him, he said I mustn't mind about something scribbled in private, that I of all people should know that... That was the first time I left him..."

They exchange a tense glance. Charles recognizes the anger and hurt in Katherine's eyes. He'd seen the same expressions flit across his mother's face. Nothing she tells him about this man is good.

He changes the subject. "What made you stay so long, in the Alps?" he asks.

"I went for the air of course," she says. "To be somewhere I could write."

"Must be wonderful. For walking. And skiing."

She gives a short laugh. Shakes her head. Settles her face as though she's about to read a child a story.

"You're ringed by snowy mountains — at night, under the moonlight, the snows are magenta. You feel so high, right up on the roof of the world. The troposphere they call it. Literally in the clouds. There are mountain springs and the taste of the water is so pure. The

air tastes of pine and snow. It was about half a day's hike to get to the lookout to see the Matterhorn. I went up once, in a donkey cart..."

"I'm beginning to think I managed to miss the whole point of being in Switzerland."

"You do realise, the real symbol of Switzerland isn't the Matterhorn. Or even edelweiss or chocolate. It's actually the large butter and cheese-fed female behind, wrapped in tweed..."<sup>19</sup>

He laughs.

She blushes. "You mustn't encourage me...I'm really *not* a very nice person. I just pretend," she says. "That's why I'm here. To understand how to become thoroughly better. I am *appallingly* intolerant. I suffer from a sort of near-constant aggravation. 'Acute nervous strain', apparently. *Violent* impatience. I get enraged... at myself, at situations, at people. It's a torment, like not having a skin..."<sup>20</sup>

Charles is reminded of something he learned from Jung, several months before. What Katherine says about herself – this kind of anger. The soul as anima. How the animus of a very feminine woman can be a masculine soul in their inner lives. A woman might appear to be traditionally compliant but they can privately demonstrate an obstinacy and a wilfulness usually characterised as a masculine trait... Could this describe Katherine? He's not sure.

He is thinking, it surely boiled down to only one thing. Her terrible husband. Why on earth should she have to stick herself up a mountain – or come away to this strange cultish place with Gurdjieff — to get away from him. Surely it should be the other way around?

"Were you alone, up there in your remote mountain chalet?" he ventures.

"Sometimes. Mostly I was often on my own."

"Did you mind, being so isolated?"

"I was prepared. I had an automatic pistol, in case of intruders –"

"Resourceful of you."

"I'd learned how to use it shooting at bottles lined up in the garden. That, along with Shakespeare and Chaucer, and I was quite well equipped for the snows."

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<sup>19</sup> Mansfield on the middle-class female Swiss 'behind', *CLKM*, IV, p. 243-44.

<sup>20</sup> Mansfield makes sporadic reference to her 'fits of temper' and depression. See *CW4*, pp. 257, 288-89.



He wonders whether her husband had been with her any of that time. But decides, on the whole, if she doesn't bring him up, he'd much rather they didn't have to talk about the bugger at all.

## 12. Le Train Bleu

"Do you mind if we..." Katherine puts her hand on his arm. "Perhaps we could just have some tea before we go on."

"Of course," he says.

They step onto the platform, almost blinded by shafts of sunlight in the cavern of the Gare de Lyon. Light pierces the crisscrossing girders of the hundreds of glass panes, giving the illusion of trapping them in a lattice of shadows. He sees her flinch at the dark grey smoke, the noise and crowds.

They are underneath the great clock tower, close to the cast-iron steps up to the station restaurant *Le Train Bleu*. It is just before noon. The entrance looks particularly festive, draped in Christmas holly and elaborate red bows.

As they pass through the wooden revolving doors, Katherine lets out a small "oh" as she gazes around. Every spare surface of the walls and ceiling is adorned with paintings of cities and scenes from the destinations of the PLM trains: Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Orange, Villefranche, Nice, Monaco-Monte Carlo, Menton as well as Saint-Honorat, the Mont-Blanc massif. Gilded carvings, mouldings, frescoes and giant brass candelabra explode with lamps fashioned as glass lilies.

In the foyer, fashionably-dressed women eye up each other's outfits. There are family groups and children with whatever luggage could not be left with the porters. Waiters dart about like blue dragonflies, in uniforms trimmed with gold buttons and brocade. As in the station itself, there are large clocks everywhere, to ensure that one could never be so distracted as to miss a train.

Katherine seems on edge. A waiter whisks away their coats, hangs them on a glass-topped stand, and seats them at a banquette table with a view overlooking the Hotel Terminus du

Nord on one side and the moving tableau of the station platforms on the other, leaving them with a large tasselled menu to ponder.

Without the furry rind of her coat, Katherine looks curiously undefended. Now he sees she wears a mauve dress, a soft brown velvet jacket with silver buttons. She settles herself against the blue banquette, aware of his attentive gaze.

“If you’re hungry and want something here. It’s awfully busy, I only thought...”

“Yes. Why don’t we. It’s fine. More than fine.”

With a swell of confidence, he suggests they order champagne instead of tea, along with oysters, which arrive on a platter of ice as large as a Chantilly hat. He sees how she glances across at the group of glossy, well-nurtured young women noisily flirting with their young men as though they come from another country she had once inhabited.

Charles raises his glass. “To staging a successful escape from the serious business of self-knowledge. And to you, for overcoming a lifelong fear of cows!”

That makes her smile. “To cow conquering!”

They clink their glasses.

The champagne hits his bloodstream quickly, the sensation expanded by the painted scenes around them, these earthly paradises: Antibes perhaps, the sky and sea Mediterranean blue, terraces with oleander flowers. The room is full, a concentration of civilization; sunlight glinting on the silverware and through the crystal carafe of wine, all trembling once in a while, ever so slightly, with the motion of each great train shunting in and out of the station. To be here, in this station, reminds him so powerfully of their farewell seven years before. She seems softer in this setting, and more hesitant and shy, in a way she never was before.

Their reunion is miraculous but there seems no real prospect of him being anything but a friend now to Katie – to Madame Murry. He is certain of this, although he isn’t sure why he is certain. It’s in the way she she sits, carefully holds herself back from responding to him. She is so reduced – *bruised* is the word he reaches for... But when his knees accidentally touch hers, she doesn’t move away. She flushes pink.

A waiter goes by carrying what appeared to be huge inverted crustacean in a large silver bowl, swimming in a coral-pink puddle of sauce. They watch it being presented to a large man who is dining alone, who looks around furtively before he tucks in.

Katherine leans forward and whispers conspiratorially. “Do you suppose he has left his wife at home? And comes out secretly to dine by himself?”

“Yes. I think she makes him a perfectly proper lunch. And then he sneaks out and eats another one...”

“Meanwhile his wife is convinced he has a mistress...”

“Judging by the size of him, I think he might have eaten his wife.”

She covers her mouth, laughing. “Are you going to finish those oysters or shall I?” she asks.

He’s relieved to hear the old imperious, playful edge to her voice is back. “Shall we order?”

\*

“Do you think you ever get used to feeling that peacetime will last?” she asks abruptly.

Her knife and fork are resting on her plate, she has barely eaten half her *sole meuniere*.

“That it won’t end, and you might find there’s no food again, or you won’t get stranded somewhere?” She looks about, as though everything around them might be a mirage. “I got stranded here once, during the bombardment in ’18. I couldn’t get back across the Channel. There were shortages of everything. The hotel had no heat. We had to burn books. We insisted on only burning second-rate novels, we absolutely refused to burn Montaigne...”

She fiddles with her champagne glass, her gaze fixed on the miniscule bubbles swimming to the surface, as though she is remembering something.

“You know Marie Lloyd died a month or so ago...? And Proust... I suppose I should care about him... I don’t though. But when I heard the news about Marie Lloyd... I felt quite affected...”

This, he has realised, is her pattern. She darts around to other subjects, and the time gets swallowed up by discussion of other people, other places. Their history left untouched, unremarked upon.

He tries again. "I've thought so much about that night we spent together, during the war. It was all I ever dreamed of... I couldn't stop thinking about you..."

"*Dear Charles.*" She doesn't look at him.

"I thought you were wonderful..."

"Did you?"

"Beyond wonderful. Yes. More than anyone," he says recklessly.

"I feel about a hundred years older since then."

He just smiles at her.

She takes a reflective sip, a long pause. "What made you decide to come to Le Prieuré? What did you think Gurdjieff might offer you, that Jung hadn't? Why didn't you just go on your travels?"

"I was coming to Paris anyway, on my way to Marseille, and I was curious. But I'm only staying now because of you..."

She looks out across the crowd and doesn't answer.

"I just had a hunch, somehow, that coming here might be important." He feels his smile might shatter into sadness. "And so it has. Very."

When she looks at him her eyes are grave. She doesn't reply.

"When I told my father that I intended to come to Europe and to study with Jung, he threatened to disinherit me. We haven't written to one another all this time..."

Katherine scrutinises him. "Why?"

Charles takes a while to answer. "It took me almost ten years of training to become a surgeon. Because of all the years interrupted by the war..."

Her jaw tightens a fraction.

"Even after the war, my father refused to acknowledge that so much of what had seemed 'the right thing to do' led directly to industrial-scale slaughter, the ripping out of everything

that was decent and good in human nature... How can you pretend anything is normal after that? I can't, and won't, live that way anymore..."

Can he tell her that Jung told him this was his real problem, not the war, but his huge, negative father complex? "My father wasn't much a fan of my studying with Jung. He particularly hated that at university I read Nietzsche and Marx..."

"Orage thinks we shouldn't even express an opinion until we've read *Das Kapital* and absolutely everything by Plato," she says with smile. "He thinks all of life can be found in the *Mahabharata*."

"Good for Orage. Anyway, I had no intention of inheriting my father's life."

"Your father didn't want you to lead your own life?"

"He's angry with me for a lot of reasons."

"Name one."

"He wasn't too pleased I broke off my engagement."

"*Profiteroles? Mousse de chocolat?*" The waiter had barely cleared away their plates before returning with a huge dessert trolley. Katherine looks but with the eye of someone who has decided such things are off-limits.

"Yes?"

They watch as the waiter makes a show of transferring profiteroles to a dish, then pouring chocolate sauce on them with an impassive flourish.

"It wasn't only the broken engagement. He was furious because in order to go to Europe, I turned down two positions I'd been offered, one in Chicago and one in Toronto. A university scholarship that would be a swift route to a professorship – his alma mater, exactly what he had done..."

"What made you do that?"

"I didn't want to slip back into a life I was no longer sure was right for me."

"What did you do, when the war ended?"

"Immediately after, while I was demobbed, I was offered a surgical internship, at the Hospital for Sick Children, in Great Ormond Street."

Now it's her to be astonished. "You were in *London*? After the war?"

"I loved it. I had rooms off Red Lion Square... I went to art galleries, the theatre and exhibitions..."

She looks very solemn.

"... But when I was offered the chance to renew my contract, my colleagues also made it clear – in subtle hints — that I shouldn't expect quite the same prospects as an Englishman... I remember someone telling me I was really very good, for a *Canadian*... So, you see, I do know exactly what you mean about feeling marked out as a 'colonial'... Anyway, I hadn't seen my family for five years... I went back to medical school..."

"And what did you specialise in?"

"I followed what I was good at. General surgery. Obviously, it was all trauma – mostly emergency surgery... Each summer, until I finished my residency, I volunteered to work in The Ward, sometimes in Cabbagetown... So many people, but especially infants and children, had entirely treatable diseases... No one in my family could understand why I put myself through it—no reward or recognition, and always the risk of infection. But for me it was simple. I didn't want to spend an awful lot of time thinking about myself – in fact, I needed *not* to do that.

"What's The Ward?"

"Toronto's ugly secret – not so secret. There've been slums there since the late nineteenth century. First the Blacks who escaped slavery on the Underground Railway, then the Irish after the Great Famine, after that, Italians, Jews, Armenians, Chinese, Russians..."

She gives him a curious look, as though she is seeing that he is, after all, more than she thought he was. "I meant to ask. What's Jung like?"

"Fascinating. Complicated. A complete visionary... Interpreting him is not a straightforward matter. To begin with, I thought, completely wonderful, unexpectedly so. I had certain preconceptions about him from reading his work, but to my surprise, I found that he was also someone with a sense of fun and wit and spirit — he has the most wonderful, memorable laugh..."

She smiles.

“You are always aware, with him, of being in the presence of a rare and extraordinarily searing intellect, yet he has another side to his personality, almost boyish, a deep enthusiasm, an amazement and reverence for life, an impatience, an impulsivity...He’s written a book. *Psychological Types*. It hasn’t been published in English yet.”

“I know.”

“Your German is good enough to read?”

From the way she nods, he guesses, rather well.

“When I was twenty I wrote *Schriftstellerin* under ‘occupation’— in a hotel ledger in Bavaria... I loved the word – shrift like shrew or ‘short shrift’ and steller like star...”

“I took German at university. I was good at it. My middle name is German...”

“What, you mean your name is German Jermyn?”

They chuckle.

“It’s Lange. There’s a German side of the family. It was my grandmother’s family name. So – back to Jung... I expected to be most interested in the practical applications of psychology, to understand what happens with the psyche, rather than the narrative underpinnings of his ideas, or his philosophical ideas... he’s deeply interested in the ancient Gnostic myths and Eastern religions instance... and as you know in medicine, all the emphasis is on scientific rationality, empirical evidence... but he gave me a way of understanding the gap between science and religion... as well as — of course, his investigations into the ideas of the personal unconscious, collective unconscious, individuation, animus/anima, persona, the psychological types, all those things....”

She’s watching him as he talks, and he’s distracted, feeling acutely aware of what had struck him about her when they first met: the intensity of her spirit, how un-ordinary she is. How the expressions that flit across her face can appear at times serious and tragic, then just as easily become joyful. It was disturbing – in a way – for him to rediscover this again. He could just feel – perhaps it had already happened – he was going to fall in love with her again.

“Sorry, I lost track...”

“Jung’s investigations,” she says.

“Ah.... Well. Jung is fundamentally absorbed by the idea of transformational crises, both the inner psychological world, and externally...

Katherine looks as though she’s waiting for him to continue.

“Interestingly, I did notice, the people who revolve around him — a lot are Americans — quite often are people who have come out of the war, who, in some way or other have ...” — he pauses, and she waits expectantly — “what, I suppose, you could call... a desperate need for reconnection...”

“Is that how you would describe yourself?”

“Yes.”

He watches her absorb his confession.

“Jung takes Nietzsche’s comments about the death of God very seriously — you know, the line of thinking that empirically leads to the conclusion that everything is of equal value — there’s no good and there’s no evil — that man in effect must create his own values... the kind of thinking that is essentially, nihilistic, encourages people to turn to ideological systems as a replacement... Easy to mock people for believing in God — or myths, or anything. But where does that lead? People start to find it easy to disbelieve anything, believe in *nothing*... for humanity, that’s terrifying, don’t you think?”

She nods.

“Jung says *no*, we have to be aiming at something that’s better than what we have now — the problem is that creating new values for mankind is easier said than done...”

She smiles at him, a touch knowingly, as though she is already ahead of him.

“But you don’t want to be a psychoanalyst?”

“I decided, in the end — no. To be a Jungian analyst you have to have succeeded in an academic profession and undergone a longer period of analysis which helps define all kinds of things, including whether it is the right choice... To make sure you are a ‘stable person’ too, I suppose... if that is ever possible. But it was still one of the best things I’ve ever done.”

“What was the most valuable thing he taught you, do you think?”

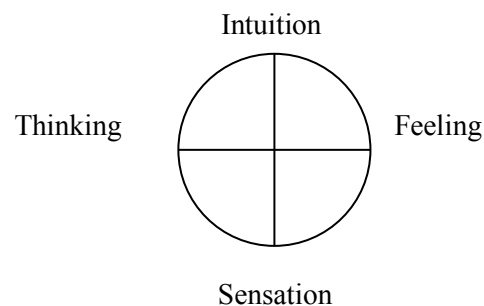


He hesitates.

“I’m not sure it was one specific thing. Overall, I think it was his complete distrust of everything that represents an inherited imposed structure of thinking, starting with the self... He told me what he wanted to achieve most in his own life was to have all parts of himself active and alive, what he calls individuation –”

“What do you mean exactly?”

“Let me draw this for you...” Charles fishes his notebook out his pocket, and opens to a fresh page, and with his pencil, and draws a diagram:



“See? Jung calls these the four functions.... Thinking and feeling are opposites, and intuition and sensation are opposites, so if you are a thinking type your feeling is weak and if you are an intuitive person your sensation is usually quite poor... Individuation means becoming the most integrated, whole version of ourselves... Consciously understanding who we are, and what we are capable of.”

“Do you think you achieved it?”

He smiles. “Even Jung says he hasn’t... He says it’s an on-going, lifelong process. Someone I spoke to said it was like peeling an onion, layer after layer... Anyway, Jung says it’s a big mistake to think we should try to think we can live all the time in some kind of perfect state of balance and harmony... in fact, he says, that would – in actuality — be a fate worse than death... Imagine....” He pulls a mock-beatific face, putting his hands together in prayer position, making her laugh.

“Jung says in his experience the hardest people to heal are liars and intellectuals.”

“Why?” she asks.

“Because they are by nature, compartmentalisers. Always consciously omitting whatever doesn’t fit their argument. Liars are the worst: they start to believe their own lies.”

She considers this for a moment. “But how did Jung actually analyse you? What kind of questions did he ask?”

“He can be very blunt; he hates being compared with anyone – I learned never to mention Adler or Freud! He told me there’s no universal recipe or solution to the problems of life; what can work for one person might not for another... The thing is, to find a way to listen the unconscious psyche. We mostly talked about dreams, in great detail. He insists on absolute honesty, and no judgement... I was lucky, Jung took me on personally, on a whim I think. Some people have to wait a year – and he travels, at least several months a year... I had no idea how he would be with me... I heard plenty of people complaining that he could be very arrogant, sometimes outrageous, even spiteful if he was crossed... I didn’t see that side, thankfully... “

“Perhaps he liked you.”

“I had bought him an offering, a Haida carving, in argillite, of a raven, one of several my grandfather had given it to me. The first time I met him, he accepted my gift with barely a word — we had a fleeting conversation about how I might conduct my studies — nothing was arranged. But then the next day, to my complete surprise, he invited me to come to his house – a very beautiful house – his wife’s family are from the extremely wealthy *bourgeoisie* — and we talked, for several hours, walking by the lake. He asked me a great deal, about native traditions, what I had seen and witnessed, on my visits to places with my grandfather which few Europeans, other than traders, or ethnologists like my grandfather, ever went to. Jung wanted to know what it was like, to camp alongside them; be invited into their plank-houses. He wanted to know how they made fires – like my grandfather taught me — they used lichen and cottonwood... He asked for stories behind the giant totems, the faces of their masks... We talked about sailing and Thoreau and civil disobedience and pantheism... I told him when I was a child on Salt Spring, I went to sleep with James Fenimore Cooper’s forest in my head,

dreaming of being Natty Bumpoo... He liked that, said he didn't much like adventure novels but he must read it..."

"Chummie adored those sorts of books..."

"I told him about the *potlatch* ceremonies I'd seen as a boy – the *potlatches* were outlawed by the government around the time I was born — but some are still held in secret, which because of my grandfather, we were invited to — stories are told, assuming animal forms, and tribes and people are identified and named for particular creatures; *narnauks*, shape-shifters..."

"You mean, like gods?"

"Beings – supernatural beings – tricksters, who transform from humans to animals and back again, changing skins, masks... Raven, Crow or Eagle for instance, and Wolf, Deer, Bear, Coyote, Beaver, Moose, Whale...." He smiles. "Mouse Woman. I'd almost forgotten about her."

"Mouse Woman?"

"She's the mother of Raven – and a keeper of memories, a guardian of the earth, very powerful. She's the one you go to for protection before embarking on a journey, crossing into the unknown... All the stories are little morality tales, always teaching one lesson or another, usually animals visiting in human form to teach how to call on them and use their special gifts. They believe in the existence of spirits in all of nature, everything – and that all living things are equal – and that everything — the sea, the trees, the river, the grasses, the mountains, the wind, shadows – and every creature, even a tiny little plant or snail, has its own spirit – and that everything in nature is closely connected, to disturb one is to disturb the nature of everything... Anything that has to be hunted and killed or harvested has to be treated with respect, with the idea that everything goes back into nature, and it renews itself in new life and new physical form... In Saanich tradition there was a whole race of tree giants – people who had become transformed into trees – some were punished by being turned into rocks..."

"Like Lot's wife..." Her smile is strange, and bitter.

“But a powerful chief could be transformed into a mountain...They’re very funny, these trickster tales – stupid, selfish or destructive human ways are always punished... Humans are always being put in their place by the spirit gods.... According to the Haida, the first humans were found by a raven in a clamshell, who coaxed them out to join his world...”

They share a quick smile.

“Shall I keep telling you about Jung?”

“Please.”

“When I saw him, it was mostly privately, in his study at his family home — it was very informal, often early in the morning. He also invited me to the land he has right at the far end of the lake, where he’s planning to build a little sanctuary. A tower. It’s an idyllic spot.”

“He’s building a tower?”

“Yes, a small stone tower. There’s a clearing right on the lakeshore, surrounded by tall reeds and high trees. A small wooden jetty – he has a sailboat. We camped out there, slept in tents. Rowed out to an island. Cooked over a fire like Indians...”

“So — what’s Jung like, as a man?”

“He’s big, built like a bear. Tall, handsome... He’s an Anglophile, speaks the language perfectly, with real love for the language...”

“Ah.” She looks thoughtful.

“How old is he?”

“About forty-five.”

“There’s nothing pedantic or pompous about him, he’s a celebrator...” Charles remembers something: “Once he gets started on a subject, he completely forgets the world around him. He has the most appalling eating habits — his wife pretends not to notice, but he’ll eat, slurp up soup, smack his lips... Once over lunch, he was so intent on what he was saying—waving his fork about to make his point – he absentmindedly let a large piece of wiener schnitzel drop onto the lapel of his jacket, and he was completely oblivious that it was dangling there...”

The sudden bark of her raucous laugh delights him.

“And he’s the most wonderful story-teller. Immensely charming... Women particularly, are drawn to him. The first few rows of his lectures are always taken up by women in furs. *Jungfrauen* — Valkyries, that’s what they call his female followers.”

Katherine’s eyes flicker. “What are they like? These Valkyries?”

“All a certain type, I suppose. Well educated, highly intelligent, introverted... Aristocratic, or from wealthy families. Mostly American, a few English. Edith MacCormick, a Rockefeller, put up all the money for the Club.”

“Like Lady R.”

“He has quite a complicated personal life.”

“How so?”

“He brings his mistress to the family home for Sunday lunch, to the obvious discomfort of his children. He spends Wednesday lunching with his mistress and her mother. He’s scrupulously honest with all of them, and they seem to just accept it.”

She meets his eyes, her expression cryptic.

“I’m sure he’d love to analyse you.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You’re just his type.”

“Which is?”

“Brilliant. Beautiful. Complicated. Secretive.”

She makes a half-pleased face and says nothing.

“Anyway — my time in Zurich, changed me.”

“How?”

“Well. For one thing, I’m cured of wanting to be a psychoanalyst. There I was, thinking my typology was introverted thinking intuitive — that’s what Jung is himself. But apparently, it seems I’m an extroverted intuitive feeling,” he says, self-mocking. “I can’t tell you what a relief it was to know that for sure.”

Katherine picks up her fork and poaches one of his profiteroles. “You don’t mind, do you? So — you wanted to change your life?”

“What terrified me most was the thought that there would be no escape. I could see it all laid out ahead of me. Big house in Rosedale. Respectable wife. Children. Golf. Death.” He watches, amused as she massacres the profiterole with her silver fork. “I wanted time and space and solitude to think. My father thinks I’ve lost my marbles...”

“My family already think that where I’m concerned. Mad and bad — that’s me.”

Impulsively, he takes her hand — she does not withdraw it. His fingers interlace hers, feeling the delicate underside of her fingers. He is sure that in the way she lets him hold her hand, and the little squeeze she gives him back, that she is not at all indifferent to him after all.

“Charles...”

Her tone is both kindly and uncertain, and he feels a tenderness. “You’re the sanest person I’ve met. That is — since I last met you,” he says.

That seems to amuse her, to cut through something between them.

“Definitely the sanest person at *Maison de Fous*,” he adds.

Charles is acutely aware of the electric effect Katherine has on him. To be close to her again answers to a longing he had buried, a joy and expectation that somehow all his searchings had led to her, that he had always been right to recognise it.

“Why didn’t you reply? Why didn’t you let me come and find you?”

The waiter returns. “*Un café filtre, Monsieur, Madame?*”

Katherine asks for *thé Anglais, s’il vous plait, avec du lait froid*.

“I do miss proper English tea. Mother always said it tastes so much better out of bone china. I hate to admit it but she was right...”

He can see that, for whatever reason, she’s not ready to talk.

“I admit that Le Prieuré is the most completely mad place I’ve ever been,” she says. “It’s completely barking. But wonderfully so.”

He’s glad they can agree – on ‘barking’ — at least.

“All the same, I’ll never go back to London. I’d much rather stay in Fontainebleau.”

She lets go of his hand, and glances outside at the wintry crowds scurrying in the street; the cars and horse-carriages. The afternoon light is already soft grey, heralding the end of the abbreviated day.

“I don’t miss the world at all.”

“No?” he says.

“No.”

### 13. An Old Friend

As they descend the high marble staircase with its ornate stone lions, below them a throng of people rush through the concourse, and the station echoes with strident shouts and whistles. She takes his arm as he looks for the passage leading to Place Louis Armand where there should be plenty of taxi-cabs waiting for customers.

But she stops all of a sudden, and they stand together like boulders in a fast-flowing river, much to the annoyance of the bustling travellers around them.

“I hope you’ll forgive me — would you be offended if we came back and did our exploring another day? Please don’t think me rude. I feel a bit light-headed.”

Charles hides his disappointment. “Of course,” he says. But then he looks at her and sees she doesn’t look quite herself. She really doesn’t look very well at all.

He looks up at the clock. They can just make the 2.17 pm Paris-Lyon-Mediterranée train. He already has their *allez-retour* tickets.

“There’s just one thing, I wouldn’t mind getting the newspaper. Hang on —”

She hovers by a news-stand, reaching in her purse for some francs. He glances at the small row of English newspapers – *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* —positioned to catch the eye of passing English speakers. *Mrs Thompson Found Guilty!*

“Katherine! My word, it can’t be. Is it really you?”

A woman emerges from the crowd. Clever-looking, but hard with sharp, darting almond-shaped eyes. He thinks he’s seen her before, he just can’t think where. The face of a drinker, a heavy smoker, a little puffy around the edges. She is exotically dressed in a way that looks

defiantly shabby, with a rakish hat and bright scarf that somehow makes the whole effect shambolically charming. She must have been rather attractive once. A porter trails behind her with her luggage.

“Darling! Katherine! What are *you* doing here?” says the woman, propelling herself towards Katherine, lunging at her, but he notices, not quite kissing her on both cheeks.

It is obvious Katherine is not remotely pleased to see her. He can feel her antagonism — just as palpably as he is aware he is being given a sly once-over. The woman’s initial spontaneous pleasure at the chance meeting evaporates at Katherine’s cool response.

“Beatrice.”

“I thought you must have disappeared down a glacier in Switzerland. Goodness, don’t you look rather well. Much better than what people have been saying.” The woman glances at Charles as though he is somehow responsible. “I’ve been in Nice — did you hear...I wrote to you, thinking I might find you somewhere round there. Perhaps you didn’t get my letter?”

“Actually, I did.”

“I wrote to you care of Murry —”

“Jack told me.” Katherine’s voice is pure carbolic.

“Such a shame about the demise of *The Athenaeum*... It’s Eliot’s *Criterion* that everyone’s fussing over now... All that lovely money from Lady Rothermere.” Her gaze is shrewd. “I don’t suppose you’ve crossed paths with Orage?” she asks pointedly. “I hear he’s committed himself to some kind of lunatic asylum. No doubt you know...”

The woman extends her hand to him with practised charm. “Beatrice Hastings. One of Katherine’s old *confrères*.” As he releases his hand, her wide mouth gapes slightly. Her eyes are calculating. “Where are you two off to? We could share a cab, if you’d like. Come on, Katie. Let’s all go and have a drink. Share our war stories. And then you can introduce me to your friend. I take it you are just a *friend*?” This woman has the dangerous, ingratiating, insinuating manner of an on-the-make lush, he thinks.



Katherine cuts her dead. To Charles's surprise, she puts her arm around him, resting on the small of his back. "You'll have to excuse us Beatrice, we'll miss our train." Her voice is hostile and clipped.

As they walk, rather quickly, towards the train, she takes his arm again.

\*

They board the main-line train. The Paris-Lyon-Méditerranée train to the Cote d'Azur that stops at Fontainebleau-Avon. Most of the passengers look as though they are going on to destinations in the South, some bringing tennis rackets and various exotic species of dogs. They hurry aboard, and all the time Katherine looks anxious, as though she half-expects Beatrice to hove back into view. She visibly calms only when the guard blows his whistle. They make their way through the carriages to reach the first-class compartment, looking for an empty compartment, and as Charles looks back towards the receding Gare du Lyon, the massive illuminated railway clock dominating the platforms appears to rise on the skyline like a bright full moon in the Stygian afternoon. The sight of it somehow makes him disquieted; the feeling that they had only got to the threshold of the day they could have had and that somehow, as a result, they had lost some kind of chance.

They don't have first-class tickets for this train, much grander than the train they had arrived on. He leaves her for a moment to search out the conductor to pay the fare difference, and quickly returns. He sits opposite her, then thinking better of that, switches sides, next to her, unable to stop himself from beaming. Unexpectedly, she leans lightly against him. He doesn't want to adjust his body, or do anything that might cause her to move, and break their intimacy. But he notices that much of her earlier vivacity seems to have evaporated.

"Katie, are you alright? Is something the matter? Are you unwell?"

She doesn't answer immediately.

"That woman used to be a close friend of mine."

"I gathered."

"It was a horrible shock to see her. Goodness, she looked dreadful. We were awfully close once — a long time ago. I fell out with her." Katherine's face is pale.

He catches her eye and waits, curious.

“Oddly enough, I was with her the night I met you. And Dedo, her lover. You probably don’t remember...”

“I think I might.” Does she really think he doesn’t remember everything about that night, and the next...

“Beatrice worked on the *The New Age* with Orage. Around the time I met them both, and began writing for them, Beatrice decided I needed taking under her wing... She took me to parties, introduced me to all kinds of people. She was different, then. Men found her very attractive.” Katherine glances at him as if deciding what precisely to tell him. “We had a strange sort of rivalry, it ended up being very nasty, almost dangerous...”

This, Charles now sees, is her pattern. The mention of something from her past could set her down a on a very detailed train of thought...

“Orage even took up the suffragist cause because of her — he was the only man arrested along with seventy-five women who stormed the House of Commons —they sentenced him to fourteen days in jail...”

This was a revelation about Orage.

“Impressive.”

“Orage was hypnotised by Beatrice. He gave her free rein on his precious magazine... She immediately reinvented herself as *The New Age*’s war correspondent, sent herself to Paris, met Dedo and ended up in bed with him the next day. She broke Orage’s heart. He’d left his wife for her. He changed after that. Became bitter.” Katherine’s face is closed. “She began to drink far too much, she and Dedo. The last time I saw her she accused me of trying to steal Dedo away from her. She called me a tart in front of a roomful of people. When I think how naïve I was, how much I trusted her...” She shudders.

“Had you?” Charles is on alert, wanting clues. “Tried to steal her man?”

Katherine looks out the window, as they shunt past the more shabby, dismal outer Paris suburbs. “I heard, by the time Dedo died, all his teeth had fallen out...” Her voice is distant.

“What happened to the painting?”

Her face, which has been so transparently expressive, is inscrutable.

Just then a well-dressed, middle-aged woman with a sullen-faced adolescent boy, most likely her son, hover at the entrance to their their carriage. It occurs to Charles that to the outside world they must look like a married couple. To their relief, the woman herds her son on.

Katherine looks away and there is a long silence as they rattle along under the quickly darkening, leaden sky. She eventually reaches for the newspaper folded in her bag, the one she bought just before they boarded the train, and smooths it out. Most of the front page is taken up by the banner headline and an array of photographs. Head shots of a young man and woman – both of them strikingly attractive in an every-day sort of way. The woman's hair is bobbed, rather like Katherine's. Under the headline *Mrs Thompson And Her Lover Found Guilty* there is another photograph of a woman emerging from the court, escorted by a policeman, hiding her face, so that only her cloche hat and fur-rimmed coat – also not unlike Katherine's — and her neatly turned ankles are visible.

“Oh God! They've sentenced her to hang! — can you believe it? She's been found guilty of conspiracy, of foreknowledge and incitement. There isn't any actual evidence — other than her self-admitted fantasises of wanting her husband dead so she could be with her lover. She's just received the death penalty for adultery.” She eyes him as he tries to read over her shoulder. “You haven't heard about Edith Thompson? The Ilford murder?”

She sees by his face he hasn't.

“I have a morbid fascination for this case. It's like a Dostoevsky story. She's like a Thérèse Raquin. I'm sickeningly up to date — thanks to Lady R's *Daily Mails*. Her lover stabbed her husband — and even though he says she had nothing to do with it, she's been on trial as an accessory to murder. The papers have been in a frenzy, printing her love letters, all brought out as evidence in the trial. All very salacious... Because she is pretty, because she was fashionable, wore daring clothes – because she found her husband *dull*. Wanted more from life, and worked her way up to become the manager of a millinery company – her employer, by the way, said she had an exquisite eye for hats...they sent her on buying trips to

Paris... Her husband refused to divorce her — she was utterly miserable — she told her lover she couldn't bear to live without him, that they should run away together, that she'd rather commit suicide with him than return to her husband. All the details came out... She'd fallen pregnant, gotten rid of the child..." He can feel Katherine giving him a sidelong glance, curious to see his reaction. "She wrote that she fantasized about putting powdered glass in her husband's porridge so she wouldn't have to put up with him any longer..."

"Did she?"

"They did an autopsy. No trace. It doesn't seem — as far as I can tell — that she was actually guilty of anything. Her lover testified she had nothing whatsoever to do with what he did, and witnesses said she was terrified and distraught when it happened. The *Daily Mail* published her letters... When she wasn't telling him her lover how much she adored him she wrote to him about books she was reading — what books he should read and why — long notes on themes and analysing fictional characters and whether or not she believed them capable of their actions —"

"Really?"

"She had a surprisingly good eye for plot detail and characterization."

He snorts.

"I was so struck by something she wrote I even made a note of it last week."

"You really *are* taking an interest —"

Katherine fumbles in her handbag and brings out a black notebook, and flicks through it.

"Here."

Aren't books a consolation and a solace? We ourselves die and live in books we read while we are reading them and then when we have finished, the books die and we live — or exist — just drag on through years and years, until when? Who knows — I'm beginning to think no one does — no, not even you and I, we are not the shapers of our destinies.<sup>21</sup>

"And this..."

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<sup>21</sup> The Trial of Frederick Bywaters and Edith Thompson, Full text, Notable British Trials Series <[https://archive.org/stream/trialoffrederick015894mbp/trialoffrederick015894mbp\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/trialoffrederick015894mbp/trialoffrederick015894mbp_djvu.txt)> [accessed 2 March 2017].

The endings are not the story... Do as I do. Forget the end, lose yourself in your characters and the story and in your own mind make your own end.

“Oh – and here’s another thing she wrote to her young man: ‘When you’ve got something that you’ve never had before and something you’re so happy to have found – you’re always afraid of it flying away – that’s how I feel about your love.’”

“It’s upset you, this case...”

“I thought I might like to write about it, but I’m not sure how... She destroyed his letters, but he’d kept all hers. The *Daily Mail* editorials condemned her. And so now, she’s going to hang.” Katherine returns to the newspaper, having wiped the grime off her spectacles with her handkerchief. “Listen to this — in his summing up, the judge addressed the jury: ‘By all means try to understand what the letters mean but you should not forget that you are in a court of justice trying a vulgar and common crime.’”

Katherine sits very still, reflecting. “On the stand, she pleaded her innocence but the jury had already taken against her. Her lawyer said she read books and imagined herself as one of the characters, that she wasn’t an ordinary woman, she lived in her imagination, and not many could write the way she did. That while her lover was away at sea – he worked for P&O — she was afraid he didn’t love her anymore so she wrote to win him back, that she told all kinds of lies to exaggerate her feelings...”

They sit, as the train picks up speed, and then with unexpected velocity, hurtles forward, and the carriage jerks. Their knees touch again, as they did over lunch.

Her face becomes tight. “I suppose it *has* upset me.”

“Surely her lawyers will appeal. She’ll be reprieved. She’ll get a commuted sentence. Lloyd George won’t let her hang. It would make England seem uncivilised.”

Her look is ironic. “God forbid that should ever happen. They’d rather let millions of men die, defending the ridiculous honour of a few stupid old men.”

They fall silent for a few long moments.

“I happen to agree with you. You know that, surely.”

Another silence.

What he means is, he thinks they have come to the same point in their lives – not just seeking a recuperation from the world, but because they both want a new way of life, to cut superfluous ties, to concentrate on what is actually meaningful. But before he can articulate this, she turns to him.

“Can I tell you something?” she asks.

“Go on.”

“One of the things I’ve talked about with Orage is how very few of the people we thought were good friends in London are actually true friends. I never want to go back.”

“What happened?”

“In September, I went to a lunch arranged by friends for me to meet someone I’d always rather admired. They told me he might want to paint my portrait.” She frowns. “This is rather embarrassing.”

“Who was he?”

“Wyndham Lewis.”

“The writer?”

“Yes. He tore me down, to my face, in the nastiest, most priggish way. He ridiculed me for attending Ouspensky’s lectures – said Gurdjieff was a Levantine psychic shark. He said I put on far too many airs for someone who was a magazine short story writer. That my two books had in any case been praised out of all proportion to their merit, and that he found them — and me — and I quote, ‘vulgar, dull and unpleasant’. And — I almost forgot! — I was, he said, ‘irrelevant’.”<sup>22</sup>

“I wish I’d been there — I would have punched him!”

“And Jack still invites him to lunch! It was like hearing something very nasty that’s been said behind your back, but he said it in front of everyone. I had the clearest feeling it was the kind of thing certain people were saying about me generally. Because my book has done rather well. People are actually buying it...”

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<sup>22</sup> *CLKM*, V, pp. 268-269.

“Oh — but you can’t mind about those sorts of people!”

“Yes, but you don’t realise who those sorts of people are...” She smirks in a slightly superior manner. “I’ll let you into a secret. The other day Orage told me something that made me realise I’d been quite right to feel that among people I knew, there *was* a certain nastiness in London about me, people resenting my book getting some attention...”

“What did he say?”

“He had gone to Paris to see Ezra Pound —” She pauses, to see if he reacts.

“*Stop* doing this to me...I’ve read his poetry.”

“Ezra told him that Eliot —”

“You mean *T.S. Eliot*?” Now he sits back, slightly surprised. She knows absolutely everyone. He wasn’t sure anyone else had read ‘Prufrock’ in the whole of Canada. But he had managed to come across a small volume of Eliot’s poems, given to him by his Hampstead friend, and had loved it, everything about it.

“Yes — Eliot had specifically confided how fearful he was that I must have turned Lady R against him. He convinced himself that that she was planning to stop funding his new magazine —”

Now he understands. Eliot. Who was now editing that new magazine, Beatrice had mentioned.

“— either that or sack him. Apparently, Lady R wrote to him just recently, complaining about the first few issues of *The Criterion* — then went on to sing my praises, telling him I was the most intelligent woman she’d ever met, lecturing him that he really ought to take some of *my* stories...”

Charles starts to grin.

“Eliot had gone to Ezra with an offer — saying that Vivienne — that’s his wife — was willing to put in half her dowry — five hundred pounds — to try to buy the magazine from Lady R—and would he come in with him to run it together...” She pauses. “It gets worse — I forgot to mention — Vivienne wrote Ezra demented, frantic letters *denouncing* me, warning him what a very dangerous woman I was, reminding him that *at this very moment* I could be

pouring poison into Lady R's ears, that I had the most devious, ill-intentions towards Eliot and wasn't to be trusted...'<sup>23</sup>

She said this in such an amusing hyperbolic way that Charles was shocked, momentarily lost for words.

"And you think Orage was being a good friend, telling you this?"

"Of course. He was telling me to protect me. Letting me know who my enemies are."

"I guess so."

"I'd much rather know than not know — I thanked him. I disliked Eliot's wife immensely. Some people, like her, I took her against, *instantly*... Jack thinks her pretty... but it's a cheap prettiness, the kind anyone could have... Such a common, silly, teashop creature. I suppose I didn't hide the fact that I dislike her very well —"

"Mmmm."

"Jack, annoyingly, insisted on paying her attention. He even takes her out to tea... I wanted to get away from all of it, you understand. But it seems that even when I try, it follows me. You see? All that constant cleverness, and nasty erasure and belittling of other people... It disgusts me. *Re-volts* me. The thing is, we always lived off that world — Jack and I — feeding off it, and it fed off us... But I don't want it this in my head anymore."

He squeezes her hand, to reassure her. "Sounds like you're well shot of them."

She sighs, still a little agitated.

"Part of me can't help feeling sorry for him. Eliot had a breakdown. It's all so odd. People being horrid to one another, yet privately, exquisitely, catastrophically, *suffering*."

They exchange a look. The way her glance skitters, he thinks, *is she in any way speaking from experience?*

"That's one of the things I like so much about Le Prieuré — being around people who aren't ashamed to be themselves, who don't spend their time going around judging others. No one trying to be more important than anyone else. Life shouldn't be all this horrible worrying

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<sup>23</sup> *CLKM*, III, pp. 268-269n. Also, C. K. Stead, 'Battle of the Wasps', *London Review of Books*, 33, 5, 3 March 2011, pp. 19-21.



about what other people think.” She looks pensive. “As for my very few close friends, it’s as though I’ve fallen out of their lives so completely I might never have been in them. It’s not that I don’t love them. It’s more that I feel as though I’ve already passed into another sort of life. I might have gone off to darkest Africa or India – gone off to sit by the Ganges or wherever — but I came *here*... To be trying for a change of heart... it feels like such a private thing, I don’t want to have to explain it to *anyone*...”

Moved by her confession, Charles thinks how vulnerable she is really. What a mixture of bravery — and uncertainty.

“I can’t understand the way both Eliot and Ezra have let themselves be seduced by the Fascisti. They actually seem to believe in them. It’s ludicrous, it’s dangerous. It’s weak, I think to give your power away to such beliefs, to pretend they have a nobility – *amour sacré de la Patrie* — I really feel — like Gorky said — that one has a duty to what remains of civilisation to care about these things – and that writers who don’t are traitors. But the ones who use their talents for the dark side...” She shakes her head, despairing. “Mostly, at Le Prieuré, I’ve been trying to break my habit of not hanging on all the newspapers. I used to have days when I dared not miss a speech, what might happen without me *knowing*... Jack was always at politics, always opinionated, the worse things got, the more he’d be almost in a state of high exaltation, a bit like a Prime Minister ...”

“You’ve been following what’s going on in Italy, with Mussolini?” Charles asks.

“Of course.”

“What worries me is how it could spread... I loathe Mussolini, what he represents...”

“Like Lenin. I feel this – *revulsion* — whenever I see his photograph. His horrible cold eyes, so cold they are almost reptilian... no pity or compassion in them.<sup>24</sup> Power has gone to his head. Olga says quite aside from all the violence and everything else he’s created, he has no respect for culture, and most dangerous, no sense of humour –”

“Olga?”

“Olgivanna. We share a room. She danced the Priestess the other night.”

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<sup>24</sup> *CLKM*, V, p. 110.

“Ah.” The striking-faced woman with long dark hair.

“She says what frightens her most is how intoxicated ordinary people have become for blood... All these purges, persecutions... You know, most of the Russians here had to flee for their lives? She showed me her sealskin coat, which used to be valuable, now all threadbare and horribly grubby. When she escaped she used it as bedding, sleeping in the forest, on freight trains and on ships’ decks. She can’t bring herself to throw it out — it’s all she has left of her beloved Russia... I always longed to go there. But now I feel I shall never go... But I do feel – almost – that I’m in Russia, at Le Prieuré... I’ve begun to take lessons every day...”

What she says triggers him into a thought about something that’s preoccupied him after Russia imploded.

“It’s impossible to argue about some of the essential principles of Communism — the fact that wealth and capital dominate and control the lives and rights of individuals, and that the world needs to change, of course these things are true, but I could never support a regime that won’t allow freedom of speech and has a propensity to make up facts... which insists on instituting a whole new arbitrary vocabulary. I mean, I’m a rationalist, a scientist. You know, black can’t be white, blue can’t be green...”

She doesn’t answer, she just heaves a sigh. Sends him a sad, defeated look, as if this is a problem too large to ever fix.

“I see more corruption every day,” she says. “That’s why I want to be somewhere like Fontainebleau – to be away from it all.”

They are some distance outside Paris now, with the skies already beginning to darken. The motion of the train is lulling. He reaches for her hand and holds it, and for a few moments their two hands entwine on his thigh. He wants so much to reassure her. But she moves her hand away and shifts her body. A reminder, an accumulation of all his old sadness and heartbreak.

“Tell me about this – here,” she says. She touches the place above her left brow, mirroring the place where he has a noticeable scar. A soft indentation where the flesh was a slightly different colour.

“Oh, that. My sister accidentally took a swipe at me with a cricket bat when we were kids. It was less the whack she gave me than the fact that I fell into the greenhouse.” He smiled. “She’s a very respectable Toronto matron now. Doesn’t like to be reminded of her murderous impulses.”

A look of shared amusement.

“Are you close?” she asks.

“No, not at all really. We’re very different.”

Silence descends again but this time it is comfortable. He can see their reflections nestled together in the window, and behind them the silhouette of a church spire against the inky-black clouds in the darkening sky.

The door opens, startling them. A moustached man about his own age, elegantly dressed – minus an arm, a terrible scar on one side of his face — steps in, only to realise he’s intruding on a private moment.

*“Pardon. Monsieur-Madame. Bon après-midi. Excusez-moi.”*

Before they have a chance to say anything, he’s gone.

“He was rather gracious,” says Katherine. “Poor man.”

Charles thinks of the countless times he had to cut off a young man’s limb – sectioned to the wrist, elbow, knee or thigh bone. How many millions of men were there, suffering daily from their wounds, quietly going about their lives? He sneaks a glance at her, while she stares fixedly out of the window, thinking about what the war had done to both of them, taken from them.

As they approach Fontainebleau-Avon, under the dark cover of twilight, they can just make out the shapes of the thickly enclosing forest. Her face softens at the sight of it and it makes him think something odd. That there might be something enchanted about the forest of Fontainebleau. He wonders what the stories about it might be.

He leans forward and clasps her hand.

“You look beautiful,” he ventures. “I thought so, all through lunch.”

She shakes her head. “I look in the mirror, and I don’t recognise myself. Not the way I was. That person I was when I met you – quite gone.”

“Don’t say that. You’re beautiful.”

After a long pause, she looks at him as though she regrets something.

“I’m sorry. Charles, thank you for today. I *am* awfully glad you know –”

“Glad about what?”

Katherine gives his hand an affectionate squeeze. It seems a conciliatory gesture, as though she wants to apologise, not only for the jarring scene at the station — but for everything. Then, without warning, very slightly she leans against him again, and closes her eyes. He feels the soft pressure of her slender body. Her hair smells of flowers – he tries to remember of what, then he does: Corsican broom. Wild gorse, that flaming yellow flower, that flourishes indecently – promiscuously – wherever the sun is strong. He closes his eyes too, and breathes, and feels for her hand.

\*

At Fontainebleau-Avon *gare*, the wind is rising, and there is a smell of rain and a chill in the air. Although it isn’t yet four, darkness has already pressed in.

Katherine asks for the taxi to stop near Le Prieuré, not directly outside it. When they stand at the locked gates, the windows of the château are lit up like yellow-orange beacons. The Russian boy has his feet up over a small wood stove in the guard’s room; he lets them in with his bundle of keys, greeting them in his awkward, adolescent way. Charles notices he is young enough to have acne; he finds himself wondering whether he has a parent here somewhere keeping an eye on him.

They pause by the large fountain in the courtyard at the front entrance, where earlier inhabitants of the house would have alighted from a carriage. She looks as though she has remembered something.

“Probably not a good idea if we’re seen arriving together.”

“Of course. You go on. I’ll wait a while.”

She turns to him, and by the way she hesitates, he is sure she is waiting for him to kiss her. Her face upturned. So unfeasibly sad – *resigned* — he can’t stand to see it. He leans towards her, very tentatively. But just as he moves to kiss her, she turns her face, so that awkwardly, his lips brush her cheek.

“I’ve offended you,” he says.

“No, you haven’t. It’s just —”

“Don’t explain. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have...”

She steps a pace away. Reverts to gracious formality.

“Sorry we didn’t end up going anywhere. Just the station, I mean.” Stiffly, she holds out her gloved hand to shake his. “Still, I did enjoy it. Very much.”

“Well then,” he says, feeling stupid.

They smile despite the awkwardness that has overtaken them, as though for a moment they both accept this is some kind of game. Then she turns and walks on ahead towards the outhouses, giving him the tiniest of waves before she disappears.

\*

In his room, he lights a fire, his movements mechanical, trying to push aside his feelings of hurt. He glances at his watch, too preoccupied to even think about dinner, and after their lunch, not remotely hungry.

The warmth must have made him doze. He woke at eight, although it could just as easily have been midnight. His sense of time had become confused by the Le Prieuré, where people rose and danced and talked and ate at all kinds of upside-down strange hours.

He stays in his room, and sits in the armchair by the fire, watching the embers burn, brooding. The question of why Katherine is here is starting to clarify in his mind. She needed this place, needed the insights and strange freedoms of this place, in order to finally end her marriage.

He wonders what kind of writer she is. Clearly one who got under the skin of other writers, whatever that meant.

He pokes the flames, wondering what she might be doing and thinking at this moment. He can't think of anything else but the puzzle of her. He still knows so little about her; he has many more questions than answers.

He feels utterly turned about.

His last thought before he blows out the candle: is Katherine playing at being a Sphinx? Or is she as much of a riddle to herself as she is to him?

\*

*Seeing Beatrice again – on top of everything else, what a shock.*

*It took me right back to that time of such subterfuge with Carco, just before I met C. I hadn't told anyone about my plan, only Beatrice — she encouraged it, lent me her Burberry coat, gave me advice. I remember her telling me how much more of a man Carco was than Jack...*

*And Chummie giving me the money to go to France, wanting to make me happy and my lying to him about the reason... He was so precious and dear about it and I lied.*

*I've begun to think that lies always get punished one way or another.*

*I must have no more lies in my life – not a single one.*

*If I were to say to C — Forgive me! To say, my Darling. But I should cry if I said it. My Darling! My Darling! To put out my hand and know that he will touch it again, just like that... No, no. It's fatal to think such things. And I can't. I mustn't...*

*Today... if a flash-light photograph had been taken at that moment, or if a fire had broken out and we had been unable to move and only our charred bodies found it would have been the most natural thing in the world for people to suppose we were – together. That everything between us was just – natural.<sup>25</sup>*

#### **14. The Ritz**

*Fontainebleau-Avon. December 16 1922*

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<sup>25</sup> Inspired by and paraphrasing Mansfield's notebook entry 'Room 135'; See footnote 17, p. 104 of this commentary.

From the window in the salon, he catches a glimpse of her in the garden. She looks such a formal, humble little figure, sitting erect. She isn't wearing her fur coat today, but a plain brown overcoat and grey felt hat, like any ordinary woman he might see on any street. She is basking in the strong morning sunlight, a book in her hands.

He'd gone downstairs in search of breakfast, relieved at the thought that he must have missed the morning exercises. But he was spotted by Madame Ostrovska on his way to the empty dining hall, and there was no escape.

The whole intense ritual as a group feels alien. Charles has never thought of himself as a dancer. The last time he'd had to take part in any kind of group physical exercise was when he was in training for the rowing championships – and then for the Olympics —with the Argonauts. The war had interrupted that. Hardly the same thing anyway.

The 'Obligatories' are based on simple movements, but become increasingly complicated, when the sequences for arms, legs and head are combined. Hartmann is playing, and one of the dancers is keeping tempo with a tambourine and sonorous little bells. The movements are structured around the numbers three, seven and nine. It is a mental and physical challenge, and the more the sequence goes on, doing them properly requires a lot of concentration. Olgivanna, giving commands in Russian and English, leads the exercises, which the dancers amongst the group execute beautifully and harmoniously — in stark contrast to the ungainly, inflexible, poorly coordinated more recent English arrivals.

Olgivanna demonstrates new movements, then steps and turns, combined with new body positions. As Hartmann changes the tempo of the exercise and the melody, Olgivanna urges them to integrate all the separate movements. There is something strange and wonderful about being amongst the real dancers of the group, able to contort and control their bodies with such grace and ease. They live entirely in their bodies and dedicate themselves as instruments to this dance.

"Inhabit your bodies," Olgivanna commands, over and over. "All movements from the pelvis, the centre!"

Gradually, Charles's muscles adjust to the unfamiliar movements. He is soon drenched in sweat from the effort and loses his feelings of self-consciousness as he allows himself to be carried away by Hartmann's music and Olgivanna's incitements to turn like dervishes with their arms outstretched. As he turns with the others, reluctantly at first but finally letting go of his usual inhibitions, he experiences a strange sensation of weightlessness and well-being.

The experience leaves him with a feeling of light-headed release, different from anything he'd ever felt rowing or running. He imagines such a feeling must be addictive. Because the more he had begun to dance, to spin into the music, the less he felt like himself. This is a process you could lose yourself in.

\*

Outside, Katherine looks as if she hasn't slept well. She had moved her position to catch the sun and is sitting in a deckchair by the fountain near the front of the château. Her hat is on the ground, her hair has a few strands of straw in it. There is a letter by her side, the envelope has fallen to the ground. She has been writing, and hurriedly tucks stray pages into her notebook.

"Hello." A distracted smile. Perhaps conscious that she might not be looking her best.

"Morning." He smiles back.

"I suppose you think I'm always just sitting about. I was up at five this morning, feeding the cows and the pigs and collecting eggs from the chickens...."

"No, actually. I was thinking how much better the day is for seeing you –"

He had brought two teas with him, one with sugar for her, and he sits nearby on the stone rim of the marble fountain. They He sits nearby on the stone rim of the marble fountain and they are silent a few moments. As he sits, a couple of speckled doves scatter.

"Did you know that the female turtle dove never drinks clear water but always muddies it a little with its foot, to better suit her pensive mind?"

She gives him a level glance. He looks at her, quizzical. Was she trying to give him some kind of coded message?



“Are you being pensive, yourself? Or are you thinking about what is keeping *you* from being happy?” he asks.

“Both. Constantly.”

They smile; she takes a sip of her tea and looks away. He follows her line of vision to the large Lebanese cedar tree near the château wall. It is in fact two cedars that have grown together.

“One of the trees looks as though it is putting its arms around the other. Husband and wife trees, I think they’re called. Gurdjieff said when he saw that tree he knew he had to buy Le Prieuré...” she says.

“Inosculation.”

She looks at him, puzzled.

“The medical term for skin grafting. Same principle. Same word for when branches or roots of two trees grow together. Sorry, I must be boring you...”

“No. I’m completely fascinated by science. And medicine... I have all kinds of questions for you...”

“It’s what you try to encourage with graft surgery. Blood vessels from the recipient site have to connect with those of the graft for the tissue to take ...”

She smiles.

“You know — I’d like to take your photograph, if you’d let me,” he says.

She gives him an odd, pleased look. “I haven’t been able to take a good photograph for as long as I can remember.”

“Sounds like you’re fishing for compliments...”

“I suppose I used to be rather vain. When I was younger —”

“What do you mean — *younger!* I’m sure I can take photographs of you that you’ll like. In Zurich, I actually wondered if I might want to chuck everything in — become a photographer.” This seems to shock her. “After qualifying as a surgeon? Why on earth would you do that?”

“Why settle for being a mechanic of body parts?” He keeps his face straight. He is having fun teasing her.

She scoffs, amused, but then looks serious. “Charles. There’s something I must —”

The sound of wheels on gravel makes them turn their heads. At that moment, the Bentley swerves into the driveway with considerable speed. Four figures clamber out of the car, taking off their driving goggles: Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, Lady Rothermere and Orage.

“Aha, Katinska! *Ma belle!*” Gurdjieff eyes them both. He makes a theatrical gesture towards the sun, spins with a flourish and comes to a precise stop. Gurdjieff comes over and pats him on the shoulder.

“Isn’t this warm weather awfully wonderful?” breezes Lady Rothermere. “Well! Whizzing to Paris and back smoothed me out darling — we raced the train. G *will* insist on drinking champagne while driving...”

Ouspensky, strikingly large and blond with a beak-like nose, extends his hand, introducing himself. “Sorry, we haven’t met. Pytor Ouspensky.” His voice is severe and oddly uninflected. There’s a severity, a self-importance. No sooner has he shaken Ouspensky’s hand, Orage hovers at his elbow.

“Charles. Good man. I’m going to grab you now you’re here — I’m relying on your help.”

He looks at Katherine, curious to know what she had been about to say. Curious also, about that letter she had been writing with such intensity. She gives him a nod, as though to say they could speak later. He can feel her watching him as he leaves.

\*

*Just as I am thinking what to tell C, out of the blue: an unexpected letter from home. The zig-zagged Par Avion envelope. The New Zealand stamps. A Maori girl with a white-tipped feather in her hair. A tui, a lizard. Snow-capped Mitre Peak. A whare. Kot forwarded it from Acacia Road in St. Johns Wood, where he lives now. The last address Maata had for me.*

*‘Matengatenga’ Homestead*

*Gladstone,*

September 29 1922

Dear Katie,

*Yesterday I didn't really mean to write to tell you that my life wasn't worth living. Today I have got a lot more confidence in myself.*

*But yes .... Aren't I lucky to have such a nice maintaining husband!*

*Anyway – typical: Nothing from me for years, and now two letters in a month! Did you get my earlier one? But I also want to send you a hoo-roo for your birthday (I haven't quite forgotten) and wish I had something to send you. I haven't a feather to fly with, I'm afraid. Sadly, my bank account does not reflect what it should after eight years of married life with Tom, not including all that was put on hire purchase.*

*On the bright side, you can imagine how relieved I was to know I now have custody of my Dickie. Ever since he went missing when he was in his father's care. George lets him run wild. I've been so worried about my boy, he's still only 14. He was miserable and wanted to come back to me — he wasn't looked after properly and kept running away — and I could do nothing about it until now. He was acting up – to make it worse he and Tom can't stand each other. He's safe at Scots College in Wellington but he's crying out for discipline. Tom says send him to the Royal Navy or the Mercantile Marines — I'm less keen. Huiakama is living in Kilburnie with Aunty Raukura and Rereomaki is at Miss Currie's School in Wanganui but I get so little word from her I have to write letters via the lawyer to George to find out how she is. My girls by Tom – Nani and Pat are with me here. The doctor tells me Nani, who's 5, has a chest weakness with potential TB – and that I should get her to a more equitable climate. Things are so tight, I'll have to sell off the Waikikino block. Scots College is £28 a year – I've had to ask for a loan.*

*Worse, I had to sell my beautiful house — Elmswood — at Kuratawhiti Street. You must remember it – the day we stood outside... I miss being in that house terribly. The copper beech tree I planted for Nani's birth is getting very large – all the children had carved their names in the stables. The row of lime trees in the Memorial Park across the road,*

*one of them for John Grace. Going with the children to cool off in the deep brown pool just down the road in the bend in the river...*

*If I could, I'd run away from everything. I've been tempted these last few days just to pack my belongings and get away somewhere with the children where no one could find me. But I might make an awful muddle of things again. You would think that at 32 — after five children and two husbands — I ought to know how to manage at least one! You'd think I would have gained a lot of wisdom — and I have of a kind. Meaning that I shall have to sit tight and wait this testing time out. If it weren't for the children, there's a good chance I'd be divorcing again I'm sure. But I don't want to go through all that again.*

*I know I've written out of the blue — after such a long time. You asked me — years ago — for the novel, or half-novel, you sent me that I was meant to help you with. I'm embarrassed to say I don't have it at the moment. Not long after you sent it to me, before we were divorced, George went looking through my things and found it. It sent him into a fit and he never gave it back to me. I didn't know how to tell you at the time when I knew you had enough problems of your own. It's partly why I never wrote — I'm sorry.*

*Aunt Niniwa asked after you especially when I told her about your book being published. She always had a soft spot for you. Remember what she said. That I should be more like you, with my head in the skies, dreaming of big ideas, not running after parties and good times. And that you could do with being more like me, with some solid ground under your feet. I shall try hard to be content with simple things, such as the children, the green things that grow, the one cat, the one dog. Perhaps I might even write my own book one day!*

*I almost forgot to say that I saw a grand display of your book in the window of Nash's Clarté Book Room on Dixon St.*

*The early spring here is so beautiful — we are always ahead of you! Daffodils everywhere. Soon the flowering manuka, rewa-rewa, hebe, kowhai and heartsease... There I go again — I miss my garden!*

*I didn't mention – Tom bought a rather splendid new car – on my money of course. It's such a beautiful day, I going to take it for a spin around Lake Wairarapa today. There's no one on the back roads — I can go very fast...!*

*Please write again.*

*Ta chère amie toujours*

*Maata*

\*

*I sit for a while, grateful for the distraction – farce — of Maata's letter.*

*I had just been on the verge of telling him. What exactly? Where even to start? I thought he knew – someone must surely have mentioned? My illness. But the way he looks at me, I'm not sure he knows*

*What good are illusions to me now? It's not that I think so little of myself. There was a time when I would have done anything to get my man. But now there's a part of me that feels three thousand years old. And I have to ask myself — why is he here, making me feel things I can't allow myself to feel...?*

*Oh Maata, between us what a fine mess we have made of things...!*

*That charming skunk, Izzard. I thought her Greytown house beautiful – enchanted, even — the perfect New Zealand house. We only saw it from the outside, in its park-like grounds of lime and chestnut trees, its path lined with camellias and roses, its stables... It had one of those wide verandahs, all feathery with jasmine bowers. It was the kind of house Mother would say – in a certain admiring voice – that it was 'well-appointed' and you would know it was really rather magnificent. And then, later, when I was in London, and she wrote to tell me it — Elmswood — was hers.... Izzard had been forced by the Court to hand it over, as well as the house he owned next door, the two roods of land, in restitution. How ridiculous it was for people to assume a mayor was far too respectable to do something so criminal, blowing all her money on the Races...*

*Would we still be friends? That question has no point. She's like no one else in my life. Some people in your life just are. You just accept them as being in it. She just pours things*

*out, not expecting any judgement. Just thinking of all the unblushing things Maata used to say still makes me laugh. She wanted the best of everything, all the clothes, the hats, the shoes, the jewellery she would have.... The worst thing – she used to say – was for life to be dull – dull – dull. Parties were life!*

*All the things we did and talked about... Everything we were in such hurry to find out about... She'd tease me and say she was going to pray to the Lady Virgin for my soul...*

*We used to roam, blithe – anywhere! Down by the port, to watch the crates being unloaded, to see the passenger ships come in, from China, from Buenos Aires... We went to the Chinese settlement on Haining Street, to sniff around the opium dens and buy preserved plums. We climbed to the top of Tinakori Hill, a wild, windy and rugged spot, where we lay under the pine trees with the city and the sea far below us... When I got home, Father asked me why I had pine needles on my back – I lied and said I had been standing next to a man carrying a Christmas tree on the tram....*

*To hear from her now is a kind of balm. When I think of her, I feel I am looking into a far-away reflection of who I was. If I forgot her, I would forget a part of myself. What would she think of my 'marital predicament'? That my dear English husband, so clever and handsome, never wanted or knew how to make love to me, never told me I was beautiful, never properly kissed me, even before I got TB? That our goodbye reminded me of a brother and sister who aren't even each other's favourites? What are you waiting around for then? I can hear her say. And if she knew how sick I was? Come home, she'd say. Just come home.*

*We played a game of suppose when we were girls. Suppose we went to the Carnival in Venice, what beautiful revellers we would be, what masks and costumes we would wear... Suppose we went to Padua and saw Giotto's frescoes.... Walked the streets of Rome and Florence, saw the Santa Croce and the Uffizi. Suppose one day we sailed for Tahiti, Ceylon and India...*

*She teased me, once. Her bare feet as she stood on tiptoe. Without speaking she let me see her, let me lie in the shelter of her arms, my head on her breasts, her hands around my body. Her hair fell back, her eyes half-closed, her lips parted... my heart was beating almost*

*unbearably. And when I told her how beautiful her skin was, all brown golden and soft as velvet, that perhaps we were not flesh and blood but made of star dust, and our bones were not bones but liquid light, she laughed....*

*You can touch me if you want, I won't bite.*

*I always knew how little she would think of Jack, and he of her.... She sent me money to get me through that awful time—refused to let me repay her. But we stopped writing.*

*If I told Maata about Charles she'd have two questions: Is he handsome? Does he have enough money to look after you? Make that three: If you were keen enough on him before, why in God's teeth didn't you go off with him when you had the chance?*

### **15. One Step**

Charles and Dr Nicoll, along with a group of burly Russians, have been assigned by Orage to the Turkish baths. The day's task is to dig out a large amount of earth beyond the already existing storage cellar, using pickaxes, shovels, hoes and wheelbarrows. The back wall of this enlarged room is to be used to accommodate a water tank on one side, with the sectioning out of what will be a steam room on the other. At first, the earth is relatively soft, but small rocks begin to appear; it is back-breaking work but by the end of the afternoon, stopping only for bread and cheese, they have achieved a surprising amount.

By four o'clock, Charles expects that might be as much work as any man might be reasonably expected to put in on one day, with darkness setting in. But women appear, holding lanterns, and work alongside the men, building the walls with clay and bricks. The Russians are mixing cement now, to lay down the floor and to line water channels and drains.

By six o'clock Charles has had enough. His good boots are caked with cement and mud. His hands are cold and his back sodden; he is ripe with sweat and utterly exhausted. He catches a glimpse of Orage, still working like a man possessed. Past caring, he decides enough is enough. Without a word to the others, he climbs out of the trench and leaves.

\*

Hoping to find her, he goes to her room and taps lightly, but no one answers.

The outbuildings look particularly shabby. The servants' quarters – used perhaps for visiting coach men in the old days and drivers until recently – have not received any of the refurbishment being lavished on the main building.

Tapping again, he opens the door, enough to have a glimpse inside. There are two rough wooden beds, neatly made, and near one of them, a large stack of books and a little bottle of sleeping pills, a tumbler of Veronal. He sees *Twelfth Night. Letters of Anton Chekhov* and Sherwood Anderson's *The Triumph of the Egg*.<sup>26</sup> A number of other books with titles in Russian. There are Russian icons and candles. A line of undergarments, knickers, and yellow dancing stockings are drying on a perilous string arrangement between one of the bedsteads and a rock on the window ledge. An explosion of clothes bursting out of suitcases and a haphazard arrangement of firewood that was far too large for the tiny grate.

\*

It has begun to rain, thin but insistent. He has just got back to his room, washed and shaved, and has lit the fire and is listening to 'One Step' on his portable HMV gramophone. It crosses his mind to wonder if it will disturb anyone, but it's not that late. He's not sure he can face another communal dinner and is wondering whether he has the energy to go to the Café Mallet. As he is buttoning his clean shirt, he hears a knock at the door.

"It's me."

He opens the door to her sweet, pale face and his heart lifts.

"Come in if you don't mind me putting a shirt on."

"I looked everywhere for you."

"Eleven hours of hard labour," he says, dryly. "We've been constructing the Turkish baths. They're still at it."

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<sup>26</sup> At the time of her death, *The Triumph of the Egg* was among several books Mansfield had on loan from Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare & Co. in Paris. Chris Mourant's talk, 'Reading Katherine Mansfield in Shakespeare & Co', Katherine Mansfield, New Directions conference, Birkbeck University of London, June 28-29 2018.



She laughs. She steps in, standing at a deliberate distance, glancing around. With the brocade drapes closed, the room looks even more like an odalisque's boudoir. She hesitates, her head cocked as she listens to the exuberant carefree jazz.

“This song always makes me want to dance...!”

She looks so serious, standing there and Charles takes her hand. She gives him faintest upturn of a smile, her startled eyes intent on his face as he draws her into a gentle embrace, attempting to sway her into a dance. How slender she is now! He feels the warmth and lightness of her body through her woollen dress, her smooth thin arms around his waist. But she seems reluctant.

“Shall I turn it off?”

“No don't ...I like it. It's just...”

She steps out of their embrace.

“I want to tell him you something. Last night when you wanted to kiss me, it wasn't that I didn't want you to – I've never wanted to be kissed more... Not since...well... *then*.”

He watches her, happy and surprised, waiting.

“But surely, you do know? Charles, I'm recovering from tuberculosis.”

He's thrown. Shocked. The startled look on his face clearly disorientates her.

“I'm sorry — I thought you knew. Orage and Dr Young know. And Gurdjieff of course.”

“I didn't.”

She tried to smile. “I'm so much better, just lately. But I tire easily. Very easily. That's why I couldn't manage to go gallivanting around Paris...”

“Why on earth didn't you say?”

She shrugs. “I *am* on the mend. The last time I saw my London doctor, he assured me that I was suffering from only a minor inflammation of my heart and my lungs and this was quite treatable with rest and diet and a change of climate.... And I underwent treatment this autumn. In Paris.”

Charles looks at her carefully. He had thought she might be anaemic. He had noticed her thinness, her pale complexion. But he had not allowed the thought that she might have TB to enter his mind.

“Who treated you? In Paris?”

“A Doctor Manoukhin.”

“He’s Armenian?”

“Russian Armenian. He’s cured many people. He cured his own wife. He cured Gorky...”

Her eyes return to his face. “I haven’t scared you off then?”

“Don’t be silly.” He doesn’t want her to see his concern, although it must be obvious.

“I’ve been told I’m not contagious.” Her tone is tight. “Dr Young examined me, before I came here, to certify it.”

“You had an X-ray?”

“Stethoscope.”

“When was it discovered?”

“Four years ago, when I was thirty. They found a spot on my left lung. I put myself in the care of an excellent doctor in London. He’s always told me I have every chance of making a full recovery. I’ve always followed his programme precisely.”

She doesn’t meet his eyes. She’s glancing around the room, not wanting to discuss it, he can see that. She is a proud person, but he’s not going to let this go.

“So, this doctor Manoukhin. He treated you and discharged you?”

She doesn’t answer.

“Katherine, you’re a highly intelligent woman. I assume you have a doctor who knows your case intimately and has advised you of your best –”

“What makes you think you can make assumptions?” Now she is angry.

“What is their assessment of your current condition?”

“My current *condition*?” Katherine reacts as though she has been stung. “What gives you the right to pry, to ask such me such intrusive things?”

They stand awkwardly, still close together. Disturbed at the sudden way the conversation has taken a fractious turn. The silence lengthens.

“Look. I’m not trying to interrogate you –”

“I can see that!”

“I want to help you. I’m sure I can help, if you’ll let me. In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m a doctor.”

“What if I don’t want you to be a *doctor* with me. And now you are being so – *doctorish*.”

She looks crushed. He longs to take her in his arms.

He tries to make his voice light-hearted. ‘Let’s not let that get in the way.’”

She looks close to tears again. Twice in two days. “The way we talked, yesterday... to see you again. After the war, and after all these years, I don’t know what to make of it.”

He nods, unable to speak because of the lump in his throat.

“And now... my stupid... *illness*. But since I’ve been here, I’ve been feeling much better. Barely coughing. No symptoms. I haven’t needed even a single day’s bed rest. If you’d seen me even a couple of months ago you’d know how remarkable that is.”

He frowns. “We have to get you out of that room.”

She doesn’t react.

“You’re moving back here. This was your room before, wasn’t it? When I saw your room today, I was going to suggest it anyway –”

“But Gurdjieff says –”

“No buts. I’ll arrange everything. Get your things together and I’ll bring them over. Alright?”

She gives the tiniest assenting nod, grateful. But when he sees her face she looks as though she has accumulated a lifetime of sadness. The light in her face — gone.

The song has finished and there is the hissing sound of the needle spinning off track on the gramophone. He goes over, lifts it back into fixed position. and now the room seems unnaturally quiet, with just the crackling of the fire in the grate.

He puts on ‘All that I Need is You.’

He has no clue as to her thoughts. She stands, waiting for him to come to her. He places his right hand gently on the small of her back and holds her close. She feels so light in his arms. They dance, not saying a word, watching each other. He feels the warmth of her body in her green dress. Her illness was a carelessness, and it would be overcome. Of that he was certain. He would see to it.

\*

Charles found Madame Ostrovska and despite the fact that they could barely communicate aside from charade-like gestures, she had understood at the very least that he was a Canadian gentleman who wanted to make sure Katinska was to stay well and warm, and that he would pay.

“*Da, da...* Is nice for Madame Murry. Very good,” she beamed approvingly as he handed across more money than was needed for the room in advance. Charles will share with Orage in the meantime.

Shortly afterwards, as he is packing up, Adele materializes at his door with a stack of fresh linen, a basket of firewood and a coquettish smile. He consciously avoids her flirtatiousness as she makes the bed, hitching up her skirt a little to show a well-turned leg, trying to catch his eye. Adele irritates him — there she is, so young and healthy, and rather stupid, oblivious to her luck.

Adele is gone when Katherine arrives, her typewriter in one hand, hat box in the other, clearly pleased he has insisted. He helps her off with her fur coat and hangs it for her on the back of the door. The Russian boy follows with Katherine’s black tin travel case and suitcase at the foot of the bed. He notices that they have the initials ‘K.M.M’ and ‘K.M. Murry’ painted on their lids.

“Keep the gramophone – then you can listen whenever you like. There’s Beethoven. Mozart. Mahler. Schubert, Chopin... I got some jazz recordings when I was at Mitchells the other night. How about ‘Montmartre Rag.’ Or – ‘Indecision: Big or Small Hat’...”

She rewards him with a light laugh. “I love the sound of that one.”

“It’s the Mitchells Jazz Kings...”

“The bed’s all fresh, clean sheets. You’ll need more wood for the fire though, I’ll see it to it. I should let you rest,” he says, although he doesn’t want to let go of her hand.

\*

The hallway is empty. The lights are out in the salon and dining rooms. Someone – probably Lady Rothermere – has left yesterday’s *Daily Mail* on the hallway chair.

He glances at the front page. ‘London Conference: France or Germany —Whose Side Will Mussolini Be On?’ He reads a few lines.

When asked which side he would take if France were to carry out its threat to occupy the Ruhr in response to Germany’s failure to pay any more reparations, Mussolini replied: “Wait and see.”

When he walks out into the gardens, he sees lights and activity over at the study house and theatre. The push to complete the buildings demands round the clock work, and at least forty men and women are busily carrying out tasks, working by gas lamps and candles and torches.

He finds Orage’s dismal room in the men’s quarters. Blankets are not enough to keep out the dampness from the poorly sealed window and the chill seeping up from the earth through the meagre layer of tiled floor. There is a pervading smell of mould.

He puts his suitcase down and sits on the bed, his mind racing. How is it even *possible* he saw nothing in her appearance to put him on alert? He has been trained to routinely screen for tuberculosis and is familiar with all its stages. If, as she said, she is recovering from TB, then she has not been pronounced cured. If so, shouldn’t she be in a sanatorium? What on earth is she doing here? He is trying to understand her asymptomatic state. To even guess at whether she can be completely cured, he will need an accurate history of her symptoms. He must have been so preoccupied with his feelings for her, he just didn’t see what was right in front of him.

His minds sifts through everything he knows about TB. Any potential progression or spread of the disease depends on whether or not her lungs are actively infected with the

bacilli. If the symptoms – the night sweats, the coughs, the sputum, the lack of appetite — are not present, there is a good chance she is not in an active infected stage.

He doesn't want to see her differently but he can't help it. His desire to be close to her again, the pent-up force of longing for her that has lain in wait for him all this time, it has – in an instant — been replaced by a different desire. He wishes to save her from harm, to make her well again.

He returns to the château, a specific thought in mind. In the downstairs office – empty and unlocked — it is not difficult to locate the *Annuaire Téléphonique de 1922*.

\*

“Decent of you to give up your room for Katherine.”

“I hope I'm not putting you out. It'll just be for the night.”

“You're not staying on with us then?”

He's not going to stay on here. He's already decided. Charles is profoundly disturbed that Orage and Dr Young or anyone else hadn't thought to warn Gurdjieff of the obvious common-sense dangers of allowing someone with TB to stay in a cold, damp room like this one. But Charles is also certain that Katherine won't thank him for bringing this up, and that if he asks Orage anything about her, she'll hear about it.

He and Orage are trying to be comfortable, in their little beds, side by side.

“She's a bloody fine writer you know,” Orage says. “Ridiculously gifted. I was first to publish her. She was twenty-one when she came in to see me, to show me her first sketch, and I put it in the next edition. You should have seen how she was. What a force. Half the office was in love with her. Have you read anything she's written?”

“No,” he says truthfully.

“She writes short stories, reviews, articles... she used to write satiric sketches for us. Her book this year – a collection of her stories – had very favourable reviews. The extraordinary thing is – and she and I have talked about this — since we've been here, we've both been quite content *not* to be writing – barely even reading — when literature used to be all that ever seemed important to both of us...”

Charles wants to ask other questions but holds back, mindful that Katherine has asked him to be entirely discreet. Anyway, he guesses Orage will immediately sense exactly how interested he is.

Orage is fidgeting a pencil with his tobacco-stained fingers, twirling it about. “Did you see in the paper this morning? The prime minister you kindly gave us thinks Germany’s on the verge of a revolution. Or complete economic collapse, at any rate. What do you think about what he said?”

“Mackenzie King?” says Charles. “He’s trying to make London aware that Canada isn’t necessarily going to be subservient. I think Germany should be let off their reparations. We can’t allow all these people to starve... It will just lead to another war. Surely we’ve all had enough of that.”

“Are you a Pacifist, Charles?”

“I suppose I’ve become one. The war cured me of any trace of nationalism.”

Orage gives him an approving smile. “Socialism or barbarity. That’s what Rosa Luxembourg said.”

“Before they beat her to a pulp and threw her in the river.”

“True. Oh well. Forgive me, I must get some sleep. Gurdjieff has me waking up at five at the moment.” And with that, and a harassed sigh, Orage turns on his side. For a while the older man is restless. Then, within moments, he is asleep, letting out little utterances, sighs, strange twitches.

The bed is so tiny, Charles feels like a squashed pretzel. Preparing himself for an uncomfortable night, he puts the pillow over his head and tries to sleep.

\*

He wakes at three, bitterly cold, wondering about Katherine.

He hears coughing from somewhere through the wall. Late, very late — perhaps about four, he is sure he can smell cigarette smoke. He hears a strange, wheezing cry that does not involve tears, but jagged breathing, the sound of someone pushed beyond their physical and emotional limits. He goes to the window, at the same time realising that he is alone in the

room. Orage, in a shabby dressing gown, is shivering and smoking on the lawn outside, almost swallowed by mist. He appears to be in a strange, almost hysterical state. He wonders if he might be sleep-walking. He dismisses the thought of going out there – for what? — to allow the man to feel humiliated? — deciding it would be better to leave him be.

Later, he'll see if he can get a room in that small hotel he'd seen when walking with Katherine.

\*

Charles gets up with Orage at five and is on the first train to Paris. The new moon is in the dark sky, still hours before sunrise. It is raining, thin slivers of ice.

He is groggy from lack of sleep, his muscles half-crippled by the bed. All the same, having arrived at a plan, things seem clearer and more hopeful. He hurtles along the tracks towards Paris in the pitch black, but by the gaslight over the signs at the stations, the names are already becoming familiar: Bois-le-Rois, Valux-le-Penil, Melun... Gradually as sunrise begins, a mild, pinkish light, the far outer metropolitan reaches of the city emerge from the watery pall of darkness and heavy mist.

Everyone knew that, if not treated properly — and in many cases even if it was — tuberculosis was deadly. But, judging by Katherine's appearance and her insistence that her recent health has been stable, there seems no reason to be overly pessimistic. He'd seen patients, far sicker than she appeared to be, make full recoveries.

It is obvious to him what his course of action must be.

## **16. The Porcelain Spoon**

*Paris. December 18 1922. 8.32 am.*

When Charles emerges from the metro station, covering himself from the rain with a copy of *Le Figaro*, he discovers that Passy, the 16<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*, is an impressively well-to-do district, with stately Haussmann-style buildings and wide avenues. It feels distinctly modern, compared with most of the rest of Paris.



Over a quick coffee in a swanky café near the station, his battered map proves easy to follow. He finds the clinic for Dr Ivan Manoukhin in an elegant building at 3 Rue Lyautey just off the Rue Raynouard in the heart of the district. No one has arrived. He waits impatiently, circling the clean and elegant streets which are beginning to bustle with life, the air fragrant with the scent of freshly baked pastries from the chic boulangeries, armfuls of roses and peonies spilling out from flower shops in pavement buckets.

\*

Charles is informed that Dr Manoukhin is not available. Besides he does not speak much English — or French. His French partner will see him instead.

Dr Louis Donat sits at his desk, opposite. His face is refined, gaunt. “So — you wish to ask about Madame Murry. But you are not her husband.”

“I am a friend of hers. A good friend. I am also a doctor. I would like to do everything I can to help her.”

There is an awkward pause. Dr Donat puts his glasses on the table and rubs his nose. He makes minor adjustments to his already tidy desk. “She didn’t complete the treatment...” he says. “I had no reason to suppose she would not respond as well as many of my other patients...”

“What is the scientific basis for your cure, as you describe it?”

“Well, of course it is complex...” Dr Donat smiles thinly. “The irradiation of the spleen with Roentgen rays stimulates production of certain soluble ferments called leucocytolysin reinforcing the white blood cells to boost the immune response...”

“And Dr Manoukhin trialled this in Russia before you opened your clinic here?”

“In Moscow, yes.” Dr Donat nods proudly. “With monkeys and guinea pigs infected with human TB. They were cured. It was found to carry absolutely no risks, and only minimal side effects. He used this technique on over eight thousand patients in Russia, and only sixty-eight — a good deal less than one percent — died. He has treated and cured his own wife, Tatiana. She is completely cured.”

“But you do not consider Madame Murry to be cured?”

Dr Donat seems affronted. "I cannot say," he says. "She left abruptly. I told her that in view of her relative youth and her essentially strong constitution, she was a good candidate for recovery. But if she chooses not to complete the treatment..." He gives an elegant, exaggerated shrug.

"Did you judge there to be any abnormality in her heart function?"

"She complained of chest pains. There is nothing wrong with her heart."

"I would like to see Madame Murry's medical report if you don't mind."

"What is your purpose, exactly?"

"I'm a surgeon. If there is anything that can be done for Madame Murry with a more traditional approach, I am in a position to judge what that approach should be."

With a frown, Dr Donat opens a drawer in his desk, and pages through assorted files for a few minutes. Glancing across his shoulder, Charles notices a framed dissertation prize awarded to Dr Manoukhin from the Petersburg Academy of Military Medicine. Dr Donat hands over a green manila file to Charles, who begins to skim read a page of typed-up notes in French:

*Mrs Middleton Murry née Kathleen Beauchamp, Wellington, Nouvelle Zealand 14 Octobre 1888.*

*Height: 5 ft. 4 inches. Weight: 103 lbs.*

*When I first saw her, Oct 15 1920, this charming lady had been suffering from lung complaints for three years and was complaining of bad attacks of coughing, especially morning and evening (in spite of codeine taken 6 times a day for the last two years) of much stiffness and pain in the right hip joint and muscles in and around the spine, palpitations in the heart on the least provocation. (Digitalis mixture taken for six months previously).*

*Previous history. Age 32. Excellent health until 20. Married for the first time at twenty. 2 years after an attack of peritonitis (very likely from gonococcal origin) for four months. Left salpinx was removed then. Since that time she has never been quite well. A short time after began to suffer from rheumatism in various muscles of the body, hip joints and small joints of the feet and has been more or less troubled with it ever since. During the war, exertions and worries. In autumn 1917 actual disease began and since then her health has been greatly afflicted with lungs and heart and*

*rheumatic troubles. No TB in family history*<sup>27</sup>

On another page, a handwritten note:

*Course of treatment: Stimulus of the leucocytolysins with the Roentgen rays, Mark 8. Fifteen séances, after which patient must take a period of repose, preferably in the mountains, followed by ten more séances.*

Charles looks up, horrified to realise the extent of this man’s malpractice. The level of radiation he has inflicted on Katherine’s body has been sufficient to destroy or at least severely – probably irreparably — damage her internal organs and make her extremely ill. It takes only a few minutes to see that this is an entirely experimental treatment of no proven efficacy or physiological basis. On the contrary, it stood to reason that lowering spleen function would decrease immune response, and therefore any probability of taming TB infection... The level of irradiation Manoukhin had prescribed for Katherine was enough to create internal lesions and ulcers in healthy tissue... She must have been in agony. And she had willingly submitted herself and been subjected to this? Whoever had encouraged her to believe in this doctor’s methods – that person was responsible for severely damaging her chances for recovery. She was recovering *in spite* of the treatment, not because of it.

“I’d like a copy of this please,” says Charles, his voice tight with barely suppressed anger.

“I’m afraid that will not be possible. “

“It’s entirely possible. I’m not going anywhere until I’m have a copy and I’m finished telling you what I think of you. What right do you have to promise a young woman that you are able to cure her, no doubt charging her a fortune – promising her hope for a future cure with something that has no medical basis whatsoever? You should be reported to the medical tribunal.”

“Monsieur Jermyn. I ask you to leave at once.”

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<sup>27</sup> This is taken largely verbatim from Dr Bouchage’s medical report on Mansfield at the end of April 1921, *CLKM*, V, Appendix. Dr Bouchage mistakenly noted the date of her age on her first marriage in the original as eighteen; Mansfield was in fact twenty.

“If you won’t make me a copy, I’m taking this. I will have it returned to you.”

Again, Dr Donat shrugs, and tugs nervously at his beard.

“As you like.”

\*

Charles re-reads Katherine’s report in the café near the station.

Married for the first time at 18. Suspected gonococcal origin? She had been married *before* Jack? Perhaps she had been a widow. As for suspected gonorrhoea...That was a dimension of experience he had not expected. The unpalatable fact was that husbands infected their wives all too frequently. He shakes his head. Poor Katherine. What an appalling thing. He can’t help his knee-jerk conjecture: any doctor worth his salt would have prescribed silver proteinate or mercurous chloride injections. If he’d had a penny for all the times he’d written out those prescriptions during the war.

As for the connection to TB, he frowns. He can only imagine she must have been in perfect health before. She had seemed quite perfect to him. But if it had gone untreated... Any infection made a person far more susceptible – to TB, or influenza, or any number of other horrors. The mystery with TB was always why some people seemed to get it but recover quickly, or became carriers and others succumbed.

He sighs. The people around him look bored and pampered, lingering over their *café crèmes* and frothy chocolates. The dogs look as though they have more attention and money lavished on them than most of the citizens of Paris. Uniformed waiters are beginning to set up for lunch, changing tablecloths and polishing silver. Everything is so gleaming, it feels almost antiseptic. He wonders how many of the *grande-bourgeoisie* around here were fodder for doctors like Manoukhin and Donat, doctors who preyed on their neurosis and desperation. He doesn’t know Katherine’s circumstances. but he guesses Donat’s fees must have caused her hardship.

He orders another coffee, and glumly dips in a pastry. He has been forgetting to eat.

His mind flicks through the general options as he understands them.

*Sanatorium. Hygienic and dietetic treatment: Fresh air, bed rest and hyper caloric regimen*

*Codeine syrup to stop the cough*

*Inhalation of oxygen*

*Collapsotherapy: the inflation of air inside pleural space to create a pneumothorax; the lung is retracted and at rest; the partial collapse of the lung cutting off oxygen to the TB bacilli and thereby killing them*

*Possible kinesiotherapy*

Before Katherine had the misfortune to encounter Dr Manoukhin, had any of these treatments and active therapies been suggested to her? She had mentioned that TB had first been diagnosed four years ago.

Could she actually be getting better, as she claimed? There were cases of spontaneous remission, it was true. But the bacilli could be harboured within the body for years – depending on the immune system. The general wisdom was that it was unthinkable for a patient to make a spontaneous recovery if they had not endured a significant period of time in a sanatorium. About five percent of patients healed initially, but after years or even decades, they would develop active tuberculosis either in the lungs or elsewhere. Healed tuberculosis lesions could show up in bodies of people who had died of some other unrelated death or disease. To ignore TB – even when asymptomatic – could be deadly. With the new collapse procedures that he had assisted on, recovery could be far more rapid, and the cure lasting.

He takes out a small spiral-bound notebook and makes a list.

*Wire Edward Archibald in Montreal?*

*Franz in Zurich?*

*Find out the Paris hospitals which have specialized TB treatments/pneumothorax.*

*Perhaps the Saint-Louis / the Hôtel-Dieu?*

*Pasteur Institute?*

*Sanatorium?*

His own guess is that Katherine should be evaluated for what was, in North America at least,

the common pneumothorax procedure. He's surprised her doctor in London had not urged her to consider it in the first place.

The one person whose advice he trusted was his former boss and mentor, Edward Archibald. As a young surgeon, Archibald had become gravely ill with TB himself, gone into a sanatorium in New York state and made a full recovery. Last year he had invited Charles to the Royal Hospital in Montreal to assist with the new surgical treatment he had developed: Extra-pleural thoracoplasty for cases in which artificial pneumothorax was not possible. It had been a spectacular success. But they weren't in Montreal. The question was, how to find someone over here who had even half Archibald's expertise.

Charles stares out the window, watching a shaft of sunlight on the storefront and buildings opposite, his eyes roving over the faces of passers-by, the silhouetted shadow of a tree, the piquant architectural details. It has become a comfort, a reflex, this urge of his to be on the lookout for what would make a good photograph, to frame a tableau.

He thinks about the nineteen-year old he had seen on a stretcher, lying in the mud outside the clearing station at Dannes-Camiers. He had been about to move on — each day war dumped a fresh harvest of horrifically mutilated men whose ceaseless screams, groans and whimpers Charles had trained himself to ignore as he worked methodically, one man to the next. But something about the gentle face of this silent, lifeless young man had touched him, made him stop. The youth's chest had multiple shrapnel wounds; he had massive bleeding. But when Charles shook him to elicit a response, he had gasped, and was able to whisper his name and rank. At that sign of life, Charles had rammed in an emergency chest tube to prevent air escaping from the young man's collapsed lung, and got him straight to Archibald. After blood transfusions and three major surgeries to repair the substantial damage from the bullets, the young man pulled through — a miracle. Archibald told him that without the chest tube preventing the tension pneumothorax from progressing, he would not have survived the hour. But later, privately he had been rebuked. The attention they had given that young man — who after all might still die — should rightfully have been given to less hopeless cases.

The air is sweet with the smell of roasted chestnuts on the Boulevard Haussman and the Galeries Lafayette swarms with Christmas shoppers. It is full of sparkle, tinsel and vast red banners and bows. A pianist plays *'Douce Nuit'* in the main foyer.

It had taken longer than he thought to find the Paris P & O office – it had moved to the Avenue de l'Opera – then to fill out the paperwork required to postpone his trip and make sure he is not expected to board from Marseilles in a few days.

By the time he reaches the Galeries Lafayette he has walked for several hours, preferring to stay in the sunshine rather than take the Metro. He sits in the quadrangle of the Palais Royal with its avenue of elms. His attention is caught for a moment by a woman seated with her perambulator, her face shining with joy as she played with her gurgling baby, and by the man busy with his cages, feeding his exotic birds. He walks through the gardens outside the Louvre, then weaves back from the Left Bank, crossing onto the Isle de la Cite, and standing for a long moment outside 13 Quai aux Fleurs. He lunches at La Brasserie de l'Isle Saint-Louis, her old haunt. The empty chair in front of him seems to hold her presence. He wishes she were with him. That was how it had been when the met.

In the department store, Charles does not want to be distracted from the specific things he is looking for. In the food and comestibles department, he manages to locate some festive packets of Twining's Assam and Ceylon tea. From a display cabinet, he chooses what he hopes would be the perfect pure white bone china cup and saucer. He picks out a porcelain spoon.

Holding his purchases, he makes his way to *Femmes à la Mode*. He really isn't sure what he's looking for. He wants to buy her something exquisite and feminine. He considers scarves and broaches, but nothing seems right. He feels lost in this unfamiliar universe, about to be buried under an avalanche of fabric, hats, shoes and feathers — and then he sees something he feels sure would be perfect. A satin slip with a matching bed-jacket in midnight-blue and dove grey. Was it presumptuous? Probably very. Good. Not bothering to check the price, he pays for it.

As he waits for it to be gift-wrapped, he glances at the clock. Just as he leaves the store, he remembers two last things. The most delicious-looking Swiss chocolates he can find, tied up with a red bow.

\*

When Charles returns to Le Prieuré, he sees that the stairs have been decked with red swags of fabric and bunches of evergreen holly; there is a large fire in the hallway hearth. The fresh smell of floor wax mingles with the lingering aroma of borscht and Turkish coffee.

\*

“How dare you go ferreting through my life! Behind my back...!”

Katherine won't look him in the eye. She has gone white.

“Where is it.”

“What?”

“That report you took from Manoukhin. I want it. Give it to me.”

He retrieves it from where he had carefully tucked it into his notepad in his satchel. She snatches it away and clutches it close. “I expect you read it. Every word of it.”

“Yes.”

“What made you think you had the right to go meddling in my private life, asking for my confidential medical information?” Before he can reply, she cuts him off. Her voice rises, outraged. “The best doctors advised me to go to warmer climates with drier air – I went to the South of France. They told me to go to Switzerland, that the cold and the altitude would be beneficial – I went. I've had so many doctors. I've been experimented on, prodded and poked. One of them even tried to molest me, in my hospital bed. I was injected with iodine and paraffin so that I swelled up like a pug, I looked *dreadful* –”

He frowns. More borderline quackery.

“I'm here because I'm *sick* of doctors! When I was being treated I thought I was dying. My heart was so exhausted, I could barely walk to the taxi and back... I felt like a parasite, like a living corpse. My spirit was nearly dead. I've had times I've been so ill and broken, I



was terrified of what I might do. It's only been voices from my past saying 'Don't do it' that stopped me..."

He guesses she is talking about suicide. The revolver she'd had by her bedside in the Alps.

She begins to pace, as though she needs to move to find her thoughts. She has rearranged the room, her dresses are casually strewn on the back of the bedstead, her necklaces and powder puff on the mantelpiece. She has placed a striking black silk Spanish shawl embroidered with patterns of flowers over the chair. The bed, where he had slept, the soft pillows with a dent in them where she had been lying. The eiderdown, with one side of the bed, where another person might lie, strewn with her books and notebook.

"None of them suggested the most sensible course of action?" he interrupted. "To actually stay put – in a sanatorium – for however long it took to pronounce you cured? Where you could be monitored, have any necessary procedures? -"

"I won't be locked up like an animal in a cage. I'd never be able to stand it. I wouldn't be able to write, cut off from life..."

He looks at her sharply. "Were you evaluated for collapse therapy? Pneumothorax?"

"I don't want to be a guinea pig for those surgeries. They're barbaric."

"I've assisted on those procedures. They save lives."

"I'm not asking you to be my doctor. Do I look like I've got a sign on my head saying 'Cure Me'?"

"Katherine -"

Her voice rises with emotion. "It might seem like a miracle, and perhaps it is. But I have every reason to feel that I'm getting better here. I feel almost well, *really*. If you'd seen me the way I've been, even the day before I came here, when I could barely walk, when I was an absolute *invalid* – these things aren't only physical... And you had no right, no *right!*"

Furious, she throws Manoukhin's report into the fire. In a second, it's consumed by flames.

“Do I believe in medicine and science? Yes, but not alone. I’ve never believed that cure is only about the body. It must be the psyche too..<sup>28</sup>. I came here for a *complete* cure. I don’t know how he does it, but Gurdjieff *is* curing me. From the first day, I’ve felt better here, better than I’ve felt in years. Everyday I’m stronger... I can walk, I can do things with my hands and body again... If I think of myself as an invalid – I will die. To come back to health means *living*, breathing life, being in close contact with what I love -”

“Katie, I know I can help you to get better. Please hear me.”

She looks at him coldly. “I think you should leave, Charles.”

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He makes his way towards the stairs. A few steps down, he remembers he’s still carrying her gifts in a bag. He fishes out his notebook and scrawls a note.

*These are for you. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt you.*

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Leaving them outside her door, collecting his belongings, he heads off to find the hotel by the river.

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<sup>28</sup> Mansfield’s views on the possibilities for finding a cure beyond conventional medicine, *CWKM*, IV, pp. 433, 435 and *CLKM*, V, p. 303-306.

**Critical Commentary**

**Stealing Lives, Borrowing Voices: Inventing a Secret Life for**

**Katherine Mansfield in *Sudden Flight***

## Introduction

In considering the relative merits of writing history and biographical fiction: A lesson from biological science: *'Hybrid Vigour'* – *The tendency of a cross-bred individual to show qualities superior to those of both its parents.*

(Oxford Dictionary)

This critical commentary seeks to explain both *why* I came to write *Sudden Flight*, a novel partly based on the life of Katherine Mansfield, and *how* I wrote it. My work is, in effect, a blend of historical fiction, life-writing and biographical fiction – a hybrid fictional form that explores and represents a real-life subject – and therefore straddles several literary subgenres with distinctly different methodologies, critical traditions and literary standing. In identifying those differences, I examine the way in which I have approached the challenge of doing biographical justice to my subject while at the same time constructing a speculative fictional life for her. I note here that references in the commentary to the novel's content or characters<sup>29</sup> are made only in so far as necessary to illustrate how I identified and overcame particular problems or to demonstrate techniques employed to build narrative voice; flesh out characters and events – both real and imagined.

Best known as one of the preeminent modernist authors of the early twentieth century and for dying young of tuberculosis aged only thirty-four, Mansfield's reputation as a brilliant writer of short stories was further cemented after her idiosyncratic notebooks, letters, and fiction fragments were published posthumously by her husband, John Middleton Murry, who set himself up as the gatekeeper to her works and became the self-appointed manager of her private and public persona.

My work is not intended to be a fictionalised biography. It is an historical fiction<sup>30</sup> in which the physical settings, characters, relationships and events (some real, some invented)

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<sup>29</sup> Throughout the commentary I refer to Katherine Mansfield as 'Mansfield' but as 'Katherine' when discussing her along with other characters in *Sudden Flight*, similarly 'Mahupuku' and 'Maata' as 'Murry' and 'Jack'.

<sup>30</sup> As Chris Baldick puts it, what sets a 'historical novel' apart from other novels is that it is: '[one] in which the action takes place during a specific historical period *well before the time of writing*

are given a backdrop consistent with known facts. The narrative is set mostly in the 1920s, reaching into the ‘future’ of 1952, with the primary story told not from Mansfield’s point of view but from that of an emotionally invested, meticulously observer, a fictitious Canadian doctor, Charles Jermyn. My Mansfield is evoked in the first person using invented diary entries and letters. *Sudden Flight* thus also fits comfortably within Monica Latham’s description of a work of biographical fiction or ‘biofiction’ as a piece of writing that ‘recreates a quasi-real’ life’ and which ‘absorbs reality, digests it, and offers an oxymoronic semi-fictitious product.’<sup>31</sup> It also sits squarely within what she describes as a ‘current popular postmodernist trend [involving] not only [the invention of] authors who strike the reader as being real, like Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte in A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* [1990], but also drawing on [the] real authors’ lives to imagine a world in which they might have lived and pursued their art’<sup>32</sup>. In Latham’s view, ‘biofictioneers’<sup>33</sup> – of which, it seems I am now one – are ‘forgers’ of a ‘life-writing transgeneric literary product offering readers a simulacrum of a real life’.<sup>34</sup> As Joyce Carole Oates noted: ‘Of literary sleights of hand none is more exhilarating for the writer, as none is likely to be riskier, than the appropriation of another — classic — writer’s voice.’<sup>35</sup> Risky as such appropriation may be, that it can be done successfully is attested by novels such as Jerome Charyn’s *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson* (2010); Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours* (1998) about Virginia Woolf; Colm Tóibín’s *The Master* (2004) which recreates a sliver of Henry James’s life; Jay Parini’s *The Last Station* (1990) which tells the story of Tolstoy’s last year from multiple viewpoints; Sheila Kohler’s *Becoming Jane Eyre* (2009) about Charlotte Brontë, also recreating sisters

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(emphasis added in italics) and in which some attempt is made to depict accurately the customs and mentality of the period. The central character – real or imagined – is usually subject to divided loyalties within a larger historic conflict of which readers know the outcome’. Chris Baldick, *Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 114-115.

<sup>31</sup> Monica Latham, ‘Thieving Facts and Reconstructing Katherine Mansfield’s Life in Janice Kulyk Keefer’s *Thieves*’, *European Journal of Life Writing*, 3 (2014), pp.103-120 (p 103).

<sup>32</sup> Latham, p.104.

<sup>33</sup> This was a term of my own invention, but I note it may have already been coined by the Rodopi’s *Neo-Victorian Series* editor Marie-Luise Kohlke who used the term in a call for contributions to *Neo-Victorian Biofiction: Re-Imagining Nineteenth Century Historical Subjects* (2016).

<sup>34</sup> Latham, p. 105.

<sup>35</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, in her review of Jerome Charyn’s *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson* (Norton, 2010), ‘Ardor in Amherst’, *New York Review of Books*, 8 April 2010 <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2010/04/08/ardor-in-amherst/>> [accessed August 8, 2018] (para 1).

Emily and Anne, Priya Parmar's *Vanessa and Her Sister* (2015) about the Stephen sisters who become Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, and Edmund White's *Hotel de Dream* (2007) bringing to life the poet Stephen Crane, with cameos of Henry James and Joseph Conrad. In this commentary I discuss how my own writing was influenced by the methodological choices and philosophical approaches taken by some of these authors.

In discussing the ways in which my novel could fit (or be squeezed) into one more than one literary genre, it is necessary to examine the inter-relationships between historical fiction and biographical fiction, as well as the evolving genre (and sub-genres) of biofiction. I have therefore explored each of these subjects in turn. In examining elements of the wider scholarship dealing with the various 'historiographical, ethical and aesthetic issues'<sup>36</sup> surrounding biofiction and its sub-genres, I felt it important to heed Michael Lackey's warning in his recent study of the distinctive features and style of the genre.<sup>37</sup> He advises against 'interjecting too much theory' into the discussion pointing out that authors he had interviewed viewed doing so as 'mind-numbing and intellectually reductive'.<sup>38</sup> Lackey himself decided to frame his own analysis of the developing state of the biographical novel by asking '[what] any serious thinking person who loves reading literature could ask: 'What is it that this novel knows? What kind of truth can the novel tell?''<sup>39</sup> In this commentary I hope to answer these questions with the same kind of pared-down clarity.

### **The Architecture of the Narrative**

*Sudden Flight* is the story of a Mansfield, who as well as being disillusioned with her marriage and stung by what she called 'the horrible whispering gallery' of London's literary scene and her former writer friends, is also weakened and demoralised by tuberculosis and the

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<sup>36</sup> Jerome de Groot, *Remaking History, The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> Lackey, *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 25.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25. Indeed, Lackey noted that one writer went so far as to confide off the record that 'the current crisis in the humanities is a consequence of theory's alienating, obscure and anti-democratic jargon' which made me consider what questions I should ask myself; questions that would allow me to expand my arguments with intellectual rigour but avoid falling down theoretical rabbit-holes.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

physically damaging experimental treatments she has endured. She has taken refuge, in October 1922, at Le Prieuré, the institute in Fontainebleau-Avon run by a charismatic, some would say shamanistic, healer and spiritual leader, George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff, joining other followers, mostly Russians but also some English, among them Alfred Orage, the editor of *The New Age*, an influential literary magazine for which Mansfield had written, and Lady Lilian Rothermere.<sup>40</sup> Together, they make up a miscellany of intellectuals, doctors, psychoanalysts, dancers, artists and musicians. I have invented a fictitious narrative frame that speculates about what drove Mansfield to deliberately immerse herself in a programme of radical self-development under Gurdjieff's guidance in order to force herself 'to change [her] whole way of life entirely'<sup>41</sup> and undergo 'a complete revolution.'<sup>42</sup> Who might she have confided in there? Who was she about to become if she had not died, and what was actually happening to her in Gurdjieff's community? Who was Gurdjieff really – and what did his teachings mean to Mansfield? When I examined these questions, I discovered plenty of evidential answers but they were sometimes far from conclusive about the world Mansfield had deliberately chosen to embrace, and to trust, as it turned out, with her life.

The character Katherine in my novel has a short but intense and meaningful relationship on the cusp of 1922 and 1923 with a Canadian doctor, Charles Jermyn, the invented protagonist of the story. He is a former lover who re-encounters Mansfield when she is ill, seven years after their brief passionate affair in Paris, after he comes to Fontainebleau out of intellectual curiosity seeking a new direction for his own life. It is primarily through Charles' eyes that the reader gets to know Katherine and her story. Mansfield is known to have had numerous affairs, some with unidentified men, which makes plausible the fleeting romance between my characters Charles and Katherine in Paris in 1915.

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<sup>40</sup> Lady Rothermere was by then already estranged from her husband, Harold Harmsworth, Lord Rothermere, proprietor of the *Daily Mail* and then one of the wealthiest men in England. Her patronage in London's artistic and literary circles was considerable, and at the time of Mansfield's stay, she funded *The Criterion*, the new literary magazine intended to eclipse its competitors, with T. S. Eliot as editor.

<sup>41</sup> *CLKM*, V, p. 304.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

In Chapter One, ‘From Biographical “Communion” to Fiction’ I outline why I chose Mansfield as a subject, and how my approach to writing about her evolved. Although Mansfield is not the primary narrator, she is nevertheless the dominant character in the novel. While the narrative is largely built upon Charles’ point of view in the third person, it is interspersed with sections of the story told in the first person directly from her viewpoint, and the narration moves between past and present tenses. In fusing fact and fiction to tell Mansfield’s story, I aimed to create a tantalising and oblique portrait of her against a large canvas of ideas touching on what were contemporary medical practices, psychological theories, philosophic and political movements and social attitudes in English and European literary circles. To this end, I relied on both primary and secondary sources. The commentary considers the ethical heuristics guiding my departure from these factual sources and explores the issue of subjective bias and how I found justifiable ways to fill in biographical gaps and ambiguities. I also examine the novel’s factual underpinnings, focusing on specific elements within the historical record which offered opportunities for me to fictionalise Mansfield’s last months. I detail what it was in particular about these biographical gaps that allowed me to explore and apply my own imaginative judgement.

In Chapter Two, ‘Bypassing the Literary Gatekeeper’, I explain that aspects of Murry’s curation of Mansfield and his summation of her final months have been challenged by scholars.<sup>43</sup> Mansfield herself, of course, being dead, could not refute them. In my novel, I deliberately strip away Murry’s shaping of Mansfield in his role of posthumous editor and quasi biographer to create a space for an alternative fictional version that not only deliberately circumvents but also unpicks Murry’s stitches. In their explication of Murry’s deliberate expurgations and misrepresentations, Gerri Kimber and Claire Davison wrote: ‘[Murry] must have known that one day his clever patchwork-quilt methodology [...] would be revealed, yet

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<sup>43</sup> Gerri Kimber, *Katherine Mansfield, The View from France* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2008), pp.135-47. Kimber assesses Murry’s editorial censoring of Mansfield’s work and sheds light on how Murry perpetrated ‘falsehoods’ and encouraged the depiction of Mansfield as ‘a deliberately ossified literary figure.’ C. K. Stead has also addressed the issue of Murry’s editorialising ways. See ‘Introduction’, *The Letters and Journals of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Penguin Books, 1977).



seemingly was not deterred'.<sup>44</sup> What most interested me working with this material as a novelist during my own process was the discovery of ambiguous spaces between what Mansfield did and did not reveal in her notebook entries and in her letters, especially in the last two years of her life.<sup>45</sup> *Sudden Flight* presents fictional speculations about these gaps, yet in doing so, my intention has been to offer the *frisson* of a fresh, provocative and insightful interpretation of Mansfield's life, using fiction as a platform to work with and expand from her complex private material in a way a biography could not. Might the reader find, after reading this novel, that they return to Mansfield's own writings with a different curiosity, having been taken on a somewhat fable-like spin into a conjured-up Fontainebleau of 1922, an imaginary, perhaps mischievous *what-if* world that leaves questions lingering in the mind about who Mansfield was exactly, and what she might have wanted for her life, if she'd lived? The alibi of recreating Mansfield gives me permission to both describe her world as it was – and invent something new.

Chapter Three, 'Fictionalising History, Handling History' expands on the way in which I made interpretive retrospective historical judgements and discusses my reasons for engaging with the historical record while exercising the prerogative of imaginatively concocting my alternative version of known events by re-potting the soil of verifiable reality and growing an entirely fictitious hybrid, creating a realistic nexus between the real and imagined characters. Understood metaphorically, this process is much like the process of inosculation which my invented protagonist, Charles, a surgeon, describes to the character 'Katherine', likening the way in which trunks, branches or roots of two trees grow together in nature to the technique of grafting blood vessels and veins.

'Gurdjieff said when he saw that tree he knew he had to buy Le Prieuré...'

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<sup>44</sup> Gerri Kimber and Claire Davison, 'Introduction', *CW4*, pp. 1-3.

<sup>45</sup> This period coincides with Mansfield's awareness of the mutual infatuation between Murry and Princess Elizabeth Bibesco, Prime Minister H. H. Asquith's daughter, which may have crossed the line into adultery. Mansfield wrote of this period that: 'Jack and I are no longer as we were. I love him but he rejects my living love. This is anguish. These are the worst days of my entire life'. *The Katherine Mansfield Notebooks, Complete Edition*, ed. by Margaret Scott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), II, p. 188.

‘Inosculation.’

She looks at him, puzzled.

‘The medical term for skin grafting. Same principle. Same word for when branches or roots of two trees grow together. Sorry, I must be boring you...’

‘No. I’m fascinated by science.’

‘It’s what you try to encourage with graft surgery. Blood vessels from the recipient site have to connect with those of the graft for the tissue to take ...’

She smiles.<sup>46</sup>

I identify the various challenges I faced trying to integrate the character Mansfield into the ‘historical field’<sup>47</sup> and having her interact with invented realistic characters, primarily the protagonist, while weaving into the narrative invented credible events, cultural and social norms and conversations. In my attempt to merge history and biography with fiction, I found particularly instructive the views not only of critics, historians and scholars but also the narrative devices and methodology used by writers whose novels in this genre I admired; I explain how their philosophical attitudes and techniques influenced me one way or another and helped me to shape and justify my own approach.

In Chapter Four, ‘Being Katherine: An Imaginative Leap into Biofiction’, I ask by what paradox biofiction can promise to satisfy particular curiosities about gaps in the record, while also asking the reader to suspend disbelief and trust in its facsimile reality. To many, taking liberties with any biographical facts of a much-examined life, especially that of a famous writer, can be contentious, and I discuss how in unshackling itself from the conventions of biography, some biofictions are regarded as transgressive, and the genre itself a jailbreaking variant of the literary form. In considering by what criteria successful biofiction is judged, I examine some of the justifications put forward in its defence by writers in this genre and discuss how they gave me the confidence to make my own narrative choices.

The commentary concludes with the argument that by writing a fiction about the end of Mansfield’s life, I have also written a novel about memory, deception and return. By

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<sup>46</sup> Kirsten Ellis, *Sudden Flight*; See extract submitted alongside this commentary (2018) p. 160.

<sup>47</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1973, repr. 2014) pp. 275-277.

questioning aspects of the accepted narrative of Mansfield's life, I have created her as a character revisiting certain crucial events of her past life on which she has gained a fresh perspective; so too, the reader may see her differently. By allowing her to develop a close relationship with my invented protagonist, I contrive to allow Mansfield, the master storyteller and wearer of masks, to gradually reveal her unmasked self.

## 1

**From Biographical ‘Communion’ to Fiction:****The Road to Writing *Sudden Flight***

Like Mansfield, I was born and grew up in Wellington. The streets Mansfield sauntered around, past picket-fenced, higgledy-piggledy wooden houses in Karori and Thorndon, the dense, fern-fronded bush hideaways strident with cicadas; the camellia paths and secret grottos of the Botanical Gardens; the historic Bolton Street cemetery where her infant sister was buried; the Thorndon public swimming baths, the tearooms of Kirkcaldie & Staines, Wellington’s stately Edwardian department store, and the gentle bays of the city’s eastern shoreline reached by ferry,<sup>48</sup> all these were my childhood places, as they had been hers.

A small, poignant vignette in her short story *At the Bay* (1922) aptly captures how we may feel about the inevitable transience and disintegration of ourselves, indeed of all things alive, no matter how beautiful and intricate they may be:

Dazzling white the picotees shone; the golden-eyed marigolds glittered; the nasturtiums wreathed the veranda poles in green and gold flame. If only one had time to look at these flowers long enough, time to get over the sense of novelty and strangeness, time to know them! But as soon as one paused to part the petals, to discover the underside of the leaf, along came Life and one was swept away. And lying in her cane chair, Linda felt so light; she felt like a leaf. Along came Life like a wind and she was seized and shaken; she had to go. Oh dear, would it always be so? Was there no escape?<sup>49</sup>

Despite being a New Zealander, Mansfield has an esteemed pioneering place in the great tradition of modern British female storytelling. Virginia Woolf regarded Mansfield’s as ‘the only writing I have ever been jealous of’<sup>50</sup> and Philip Larkin claimed an affinity with her.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Like Mansfield, I spent many hours at Day’s Bay with its clear deep water and fine wide golden sand running up to groves of manuka and pohutakawa trees – the beach that she called Crescent Bay and used as the backdrop to ‘At the Bay’.

<sup>49</sup> Katherine Mansfield, ‘At the Bay’, *The Collected Stories* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), p. 221.

<sup>50</sup> *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, 1920-24*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth Press, 1977), II, p. 43.

John Fowles loved her.<sup>52</sup> Christopher Isherwood, Elizabeth Bowen, Katherine Anne Porter, Angela Carter and André Aciman are just a few of the writers who have all acknowledged the inspiration they have found in Mansfield's work. Ali Smith observed that 'the strongest of [Mansfield's hundred or so stories] challenged and altered much in the nature and form of literary fiction of the modernist period and beyond', and her '[p]hrases, rhythms and tones [...] anticipate writers as different as T. S. Eliot and F. Scott Fitzgerald'.<sup>53</sup> Mansfield also made an indelible impression on the Chinese-American writer Yiyun Li who described how while suffering from acute depression she came across Mansfield's notebooks and read the entry beginning 'Dear Friend, from my life I write to you in your life – [...]'<sup>54</sup> The unsent letter to an unnamed friend broke through Li's despair and gave her the sense of finding a friend in a dead writer, and the solid sense that writing could create kinship and understanding that outlasted time; she took it as the title for her memoir.<sup>55</sup>

In feeling kinship with Mansfield, I was far from alone. Willingly or not, I had joined a cult; a dedicated fraternity of followers of Mansfield, all charmed, beguiled and fascinated by the woman variously described as 'a sweet and wholesome tragic victim, a selfish dark-eyed piece of trouble, a feminist, an anti-feminist, a satirist, a sentimentalist, a miniaturist, an overinflated reputation, a repressed lesbian, a colonial bisexual angel-devil plagiarist original'.<sup>56</sup> She could be savage, pithy and acerbic; she was definitely a rebel.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> C. K. Stead, 'A Note on Larkin on Mansfield', *Katherine Mansfield Studies* (2012), IV, pp. 118-121 (p.118).

<sup>52</sup> In 1998, I asked John Fowles to sign a copy of *Wormholes* at the Poetry Centre in New York. He asked where I was from. On hearing I was from New Zealand, he said. 'Ah, the country that produced one of the greatest writers, Katherine Mansfield. I love her, I've always loved her'.

<sup>53</sup> Ali Smith, 'So many afterlives from one short life', *The Telegraph*, 7 April 2007 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3664280/So-many-afterlives-from-one-short-life.html>>[accessed 7 August 2017].

<sup>54</sup> *KMN*, I, p. 222. The full entry reads: 'Dear Friend, from my life I write to you in your life – and yet it seems that we never meet on any definite ground, that I found you in the borders of Norman Land, that our hands met & and knew each other there. The Future is quite in darkness but I know that I am on the road again, back again... and that [this] time I journey with a fuller knowledge – a child no longer'.

<sup>55</sup> Yuyin Li, *Dear Friend from My Life I Write To You In Your Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017).

<sup>56</sup> Smith, 2007.

<sup>57</sup> Mansfield's brother-in-law, Richard Murry, commented half a century after her death that he was always reminded of her by the punk girls on the King's Road; her provocative fashion-sense, straight from Paris, the high heels, the skirts daringly short, the coloured tights, the Spanish-Japanese haircut, the red lipstick; and how, after she became ill, how she always made light of her illness, deflected

A small army could be made up of all the writers, scholars and lay devotees who have, since her death, made pilgrimages to her various places such as the Isola Bella house in Menton, the Hotel Beau-Rivage and the Villa Pauline in Bandol, and traipsed down Tinakori Road in Wellington and along streets in Hampstead and Holborn to see with their own eyes what she might have seen, to tread where she had been. Nonetheless, the question could be asked of me: What did I intend to add to the already sizable body of novelistic or biofictional imaginings already published about Mansfield?

### **My Road to Biofiction**

I had previously written a biography, *Star of the Morning, The Extraordinary Life of Lady Hester Stanhope* (2008)<sup>58</sup> so the first and most obvious approach for me might have been through biography. However, I knew in tackling Mansfield's life I wanted to find a more personal way of writing about her. At the outset, I debated what kind of hybrid form of biography might allow me to actively explore biographical and historical material but at the same time not be confined by it; to pay homage to Mansfield and to find a way of breaking new ground in telling her story. Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage: In the Shadow of D. H. Lawrence*<sup>59</sup> (1997), resonated with me as an example of what could be successfully achieved; its style an amalgam of autobiography, biography, travel writing,<sup>60</sup> cultural criticism and literary theory. I identified intellectually and creatively with Dyer's vacillations over what kind of book he should write (novel or biography) and the reason he gave for travelling to

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attention away from it, the type of intimate observations oddly absent in any description of her by her own husband. 'Her Bright Image, Impressions of Katherine Mansfield', Recorded recollections by her brother-in-law Richard Murry, sister Jeanne Renshaw Beauchamp and confidante Ida Baker ('L.M.'), produced by Moira Taylor and Alwyn Owen, Radio New Zealand, 1995.

<sup>58</sup> Kirsten Ellis, *Star of the Morning, The Extraordinary Life of Lady Hester Stanhope* (London: HarperCollins, 2008).

<sup>59</sup> Geoff Dyer, *Out of Sheer Rage: In the Shadow of D. H. Lawrence* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1997).

<sup>60</sup> It is not uncommon for authors of historical fiction to include a travelogue component in their work. For example, Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* (1983) recreates the story of *The Iliad* and the fall of Troy from the perspective of the doomed seer herself and includes several essays Wolf wrote while travelling in Greece conducting research on Cassandra. Similarly, *The Hill Station* (1981) published posthumously, combined J. G. Farrell's unfinished novel and his travel journal while researching in India.

various places (to which he otherwise would not have gone) because they had been significant to Lawrence.<sup>61</sup>

Under much the same compulsion, I too travelled and sought ‘communion’ from places and houses in which Mansfield had lived and written in New Zealand, England, France and Switzerland.<sup>62</sup> In Fontainebleau, I lingered on the wooden stairs at Le Prieuré, trying to pinpoint the exact spot where her too-quick steps had triggered her fatal pulmonary haemorrhage. I also considered Rebecca Mead’s *The Road to Middlemarch, My Life With George Eliot* (2014)<sup>63</sup> in which Mead drew analogies with her own life and reflected upon how literature can open the mind to intellectual curiosity and reflection. Other possibilities lay in handling biographical material in a discursive, thematic way, such as the approach pursued by Lara Siegal in *Free Woman, Life, Liberation and Doris Lessing* (2018), described by her publisher Bloomsbury as ‘genre-defying.’<sup>64</sup>

It seemed to me, however, that other writers had already successfully covered some of this territory, for example, Kirsty Gunn’s *My Katherine Mansfield Project* (2015)<sup>65</sup> and Fiona Farrell’s much less explicitly Mansfield-centric *The Broken Book* (2011)<sup>66</sup> both represent an attempt by the author to meet this objective in relation to Mansfield. In a category of its own, Witi Ihimaera’s *Dear Miss Mansfield, A Tribute to Kathleen Mansfield*

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<sup>61</sup> Another autobiographer of himself as a biographer, Richard Holmes, revealed that that he had been driven by a similarly strong impulse to travel far and wide to track down his subjects during his research for *This Long Pursuit: Reflections of a Romantic Biographer* (2016). In evolving what he calls his ‘footsteps’ principle, he said he had come to believe that: ‘[T]he serious biographer must physically pursue his subject through the past...mere archives are not enough... [The biographer] must go to all the places where the subject had ever lived or worked, or travelled or dreamed...He must then try to calibrate the impact of these locations on his subject. Richard Holmes, *This Long Pursuit: Reflections of a Romantic Biographer* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2016).

<sup>62</sup> Wellington, Greytown and the Wairarapa, and the Ureweras in New Zealand; all of Katherine Mansfield’s many temporary residences in London, the Chilterns, Runcton near Chichester, Zennor in Cornwall in England; in France: Paris, Gray, Marseilles, Cassis, Bandol, Sanary-sur-Mer and Fontainebleau, and Sierre and Crans Montana in Switzerland. I also sought out the house Katherine longed to make her own *soi-disant* ‘Heron House’ -‘Broomies’— in Chailey Common, Sussex, which Murry made a down-payment on – later rescinded – and which she never saw.

<sup>63</sup> Rebecca Mead, *The Road to Middlemarch, My Life with George Eliot* (London: Granta, 2014).

<sup>64</sup> Lara Feigel, *Free Woman, Life Liberation and Doris Lessing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

<sup>65</sup> Kirsty Gunn, *My Katherine Mansfield Project* (Honiton: Notting Hill Editions, 2016).

<sup>66</sup> Fiona Farrell, *The Broken Book* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2011).

*Beauchamp* (1989),<sup>67</sup> combines an imagined auto-biography (Ihimaera's Mansfield-obsessed narrator Mahaki is a thinly disguised version of himself in his novella *Maata*) with several short stories in which Ihimaera attempts variations on 'Mansfieldian' themes. Ultimately, I decided not to write a memoir bordering on autobiographical fiction nor to impose myself in the manner of Dyer, Barnes, Holmes, Feigel, Gunn, Farrell or Ihimaera into my biographical subject's narrative. I began to see that the best way forward for me to handle the subject matter I was so drawn to, was to write fiction — fiction based very closely on fact. As I researched, casting around for inspiration, I became convinced that there was another hidden story about Mansfield, a story waiting to be told.

### **The Genesis and Factual Underpinnings of *Sudden Flight***

Michael Ondaatje observed that writing a novel is like creating 'an original country',<sup>68</sup> but when that country includes a character or characters based on real people and events, the fictional territory needs to be based, metaphorically speaking, on very detailed existing maps. As I searched for, but did not always find, such detailed maps, working in the space of the silent — or silenced — Mansfield, the cautionary words of Barbara Mujica came to mind:

[A]uthors of biographical fiction face particular challenges when attempting to bring to life the experiences of others. Inevitably they must come to terms with their own inability to see the world through their protagonist's eyes. Even if they have access to their subject's diaries and letters [...] they are limited by the subject's self-representation which may [leave out] or distort information.<sup>69</sup>

I was able to identify a possible hinterland once I questioned who Mansfield had become in the last phase of her life and how she had come to see her marriage to Murry. I also had a particular interest in reconstructing Mansfield's long and close friendship with the wealthy

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<sup>67</sup> Witi Ihimaera, *Dear Miss Mansfield, A Tribute to Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp* (Auckland: Viking, 1989).

<sup>68</sup> Anthony Minghella, *The English Patient, A Screenplay* (London: Methuen Drama, 1997), p. viii.

<sup>69</sup> Barbara Mujica, 'Going for the Subjective: One Way to Write Biographical Fiction' from *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 31, 1 (2016), repr. in Michael Lackey, *Biographical Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 88.



Maori ‘princess’ Maata Mahupuku, whom she first encountered at Mrs Swainson’s School for Girls in Wellington in 1900 but never saw again after 1908 when Mansfield left for London. Mahupuku spent most of her life in the Wairarapa, north of Wellington, primarily in Greytown, where I have family history and close relatives. Mansfield also had family living in the Wairarapa: she made at least several visits to stay with her uncle and aunt and cousins, the Beauchamp Maunsells, in Masterton, the regional capital. I believe it was highly probable that Mansfield made at the very least one if not more visits to Greytown, Papawai and Kehemane, just outside of Martinborough, the latter at that time known for its remarkable Takitimu marae (commissioned by Mahupuku’s uncle and intended to be the most impressive in the country), and I have created a fictional scenario depicting this. This was all part of what I considered to be ground left untilled, from the point of view of existing biographical and fictional treatment of Mansfield’s life.<sup>70</sup>

In parallel, I began to create a foreground using key ‘maps’ constructed from known facts of Mansfield’s historical record at two specific, pivotal points in her life — during March 1915, and from October 13 1922 to 9 January 1923. To investigate this territory, I absorbed biographies and studies not only of and about Mansfield, but everyone and anything related to her.<sup>71</sup> I read unpublished letters in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, notably correspondence home from Mansfield’s brother Leslie Heron Beauchamp before he was killed in 1915 in Belgium (several months after Mahupuku’s brother John Grace’s death at Gallipoli); and the exchange of letters (after Mansfield’s death) between Murry and her first husband George Bowden.

A strong sense of a story gathering came after I came across evidence corroborating the existence of a manuscript and a stash of letters Mansfield had sent Mahupuku which the

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<sup>70</sup> Mansfield would have been curious about Mahupuku’s prominent Maori family in Greytown. She met Mahupuku before the latter inherited much land and wealth after the death of her famous uncle and would likely have visited the Maori community of Papawai and the country’s most magnificent marae at Takitimu where he had hosted thousands and welcomed Prime Minister Seddon.

<sup>71</sup> I closely examined, as a priority, Mansfield’s published notebook entries and letters, recollections by her contemporaries, and any letters I could find to and about her, combing through letters, memoirs and accounts by Murry, D.H. and Frieda Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Koteliansky, Dorothy Brett, Ottoline Morrell, A.R. Orage, Beatrice Hastings, Ida Baker, Elizabeth Russell, Francis Carco, Conrad Aiken, T. S. Eliot, William Gerhardi, Violet and Sydney Schiff, and H. M. Tomlinson among others.

Mahupuku family attested had been buried with Maata in 1952<sup>72</sup>. My interest was further piqued by discovering in the archives correspondence on this subject between Murry and the Wellington based journalist Patrick Lawlor who had tried to elicit from Mahupuku, while she was still alive, details of both the manuscript and the letters with a view to purchasing them.<sup>73</sup> Mahupuku had been at home in both the Maori and *Pakeha* (European) worlds, possessor of chiefly status in one and an heiress in the other. A waft of Sapphic scandal attached itself to the relationship<sup>74</sup> although Murry remained non-committal about both this aspect and the importance of Mahupuku in Mansfield's life. Aside from a diary entry written by Mahupuku at Mansfield's request, which contains mention of letters and telegrams between them<sup>75</sup>, no other extant communication appears to have survived. While Murry acknowledged Mansfield had been writing a novel titled *Maata* of which there might be several versions, he downplayed any correspondence the two women had after Mansfield met him in 1911.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Conversation with Mahupuku's great-grandson, Rikki McGregor on 22 October 2016. McGregor confirmed the existence of a Katherine Mansfield manuscript, and of letters Mahupuku had kept. He attested to having heard the story passed down within the family that his grandfather Richard ('Dickie') placed them in his mother's coffin at the time of her funeral, much to the astonishment of his sisters who had searched everywhere for it, well aware that it could be valuable. According to McGregor, Dickie had taken the manuscript from his mother's possession some years prior in order to ensure that it would not be of potential embarrassment to the family, and in this respect he speculated that he probably believed he was acting in the interests of both his estranged parents. His grandfather would undoubtedly have read the manuscript, McGregor believed. As to any extant letters between Mansfield and Mahupuku, McGregor said he had no knowledge as to their existence, beyond the certainty, based again on family hearsay, that the correspondence and thus the friendship had existed well beyond 1911 as Murry stated.

<sup>73</sup> Patrick A. Lawlor, *The Mystery of Maata: A Katherine Mansfield novel* (Wellington: Beltane Book Bureau, 1946, repr. 1976).

<sup>74</sup> In 'Mrs Bowdenhood' *London Review of Books*, 26 November (1987), C. K. Stead noted that this may have to do with what is considered fashionable. 'Just as it was once fashionable to present Mansfield as some kind of otherworldly, pure, mystical person, it's now fashionable to present her as 'bisexual'; and though the new view might be marginally nearer the truth than the old one, both are wrong'. I agree with Stead. Ironically Mansfield's sexual experimentations with women would be considered tame in a contemporary context. It was however, only on agreeing to guilt on grounds of 'sexual deviancy' that Mansfield could obtain her divorce from George Bowden in 1918.

<sup>75</sup> 'Maata's Journal', 7 April - May 1907, Copy of original typed copy made by Ruth E. Mantz, held in the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin. The Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand, MS-Papers-9349-228. Amongst Mansfield's extant papers was a short journal Mahupuku had kept at Mansfield's request when the two were close friends in New Zealand. According to Mantz, Mansfield preserved the original, however it was later destroyed by Murry.

<sup>76</sup> Lawlor, p. 24.

I hunted down material about Mahupuku in archives,<sup>77</sup> scrutinised photographs and contemporary newspapers, listened to oral records and conducted interviews, notably with one of Mahupuku's descendants, Rikki McGregor, as well as with individuals in the Wairarapa able to share with me memories and insights that had been passed down the family about Mahupuku and her European and Maori relatives.<sup>78</sup> I visited locations where Mahupuku lived, and where she was buried.<sup>79</sup> I visited Papawai, the Maori settlement on the outskirts of Greytown that had been presided over by Mahupuku's uncle, chief Tamahau Mahupuku, who had joined the Kotahitanga movement designed to politically empower Maori and helped set up a shadow Maori Parliament. After Mahupuku's father's death, she was her uncle's ward and then became heiress to the wealthy Mahupuku estate. I examined Mahupuku's skein of family relationships, among them her European mother, Emily Sexton; her half-brother John Grace, who was killed age nineteen at Gallipoli; her uncle Tamahau Mahupuku, and her 'Aunt' Niniwa Heremaia, who like Mahupuku herself, was a *rangitira* (sometimes described as a kind of Maori nobility) and an important leader at Papawai. In the course of her close friendship with Mahupuku, Mansfield almost certainly met all these people.

I contend that Mansfield's understanding of the Maori world through Mahupuku was a resource upon which she would have wanted to draw creatively and that it would have been a motivating factor for her to have reached out and continued the friendship with her. I found it plausible that if Mansfield had tried to write about a Maori, or part-Maori, character in her fiction, Mahupuku would be the obvious person to whom she would turn for specific suggestions as to how things might be thought about from her perspective, said in the colloquial way, or to check she had got phrasings and concepts right. There is nothing far-fetched about the idea that Mansfield might have at one time sent a portion of a manuscript to

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<sup>77</sup> The ATL and the Masterton Archives which hold material relating respectively to Mansfield and Mahupuku. The ATL Mansfield collection is voluminous; of particular interest is the ATL 2012 acquisition of the Murry/Mansfield archive. In Masterton, in particular, the Correspondence, (98-90/260) and Legal records of Mahupuku/Asher from the Wollerman, Cooke and McClure collection (96-55/561).

<sup>78</sup> Gareth Winter, Archivist at the Masterton Archives, and Diane Rewi.

<sup>79</sup> Mahupuku is buried alongside her grandfather, father and uncle in the Kehemane *urupa* (Maori cemetery) outside Martinborough.

Mahupuku with this in mind if she had wished to explore Maori characters, concepts and beliefs. Unquestionably Mansfield and Mahupuku shared a unique affectionate bond, and its lingering impact on both of them was something I wanted to explore in fiction.

Equally thoroughly, I absorbed Murry's published commentaries on Mansfield, his autobiography, and his side of their intimate correspondence. My sleuthing had one aim: to assess the facts, gather up a profusion of pointillist detail and piece together a detailed composite of the private, interior emotional landscape in order to create my fictional portrait of Mansfield. As I assembled verified and verifiable facts, I licensed myself to consider inconsistencies, distortions and the aforementioned gaps found within these sources in the record alongside the known timeline of facts and to interpret them in ways that both enhanced my narrative and provided a fictional jumping-off point. As indicated, I deliberately posed questions about – and in one obvious way upended — some aspects of the historical record. There is also another 'map' here – the events, thoughts and feelings which Mansfield either obliquely hinted at or choose not to record. Mansfield regularly had bonfires of letters and writings she found embarrassing or incriminating, and on occasion, went to lengths to obtain, then dispose of, correspondence she put in that category. I came to see what went unrecorded or destroyed as a kind of secret river in Mansfield's life, running deep and I wanted to tap into it for my fiction.

### **Mansfield in Fiction and Fact**

I was aware that Mansfield already had many fictional 'afterlives'.<sup>80</sup> She is depicted as a central character in Stead's *Mansfield: A Novel* (2004), set between 1915 and 1918, and

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<sup>80</sup> Laura Marcus, *Katherine Mansfield's Afterlives*, ed. by Gerri Kimber (Bath: Katherine Mansfield Publications, 2014), pp. 10-28. Elsewhere, Mansfield is memorably invoked as a spectral presence by Ali Smith in her short story 'The Ex-Wife' (2015), a nod perhaps, to the various after-death 'sightings' of Mansfield recorded by Murry, Woolf, and Mansfield's friend Ida Baker (aka 'L. M.'), each of whom wrote separately about being 'visited' by Mansfield's spirit. Helen Dunmore made Mansfield a character in *Zennor in Darkness* (1993) which depicts the experiment in living together of Mansfield, Murry, D. H. Lawrence and Frieda Lawrence in Cornwall in 1916. In Dunmore's short story, 'At the Institute with KM' (2007), she created a narrator, a nameless dying young tubercular soldier who lies beside an also dying nameless Englishwoman on a straw pallet in the cowshed during Mansfield's last days in Fontainebleau. An Englishwoman, whom he discovers, comes from the other side of the world. Meanwhile, plays written about Mansfield, include Vincent O'Sullivan's *Jones and Jones* (1989), Amy

narrated in turn from the perspectives of Mansfield, her brother Leslie, Murry, her friend Frederick Goodyear, Frieda Lawrence and Dora Carrington. Mansfield is also a main character framed as the object of literary obsession in Janice Kulyk Keefer's *Thieves* (2004), told in alternating narratives by a father and son, Roger and Monty Mills, connected by a Byatt *Possession*-style plot structure involving a hunt for buried letters and other secrets, alongside episodes in Mansfield's life written in the third person. Both these novels share characters who have a romantic hankering after Mansfield, namely Stead's Goodyear who dies before he can express his love in a meaningful way, and Keefer's narrator Roger who addresses the dead writer in a one-way conversation in which he passionately confesses his feelings for her.<sup>81</sup> In creating my character Charles, I have not held back through any *faux delicatessen* about suggesting Mansfield might have chosen to keep a past affair hidden. In seeking to bring her to life, I have, to use a Mansfieldian phrase, 'gone the whole hog' and created an actual lover. In addition, plenty of speculation exists to whether Mansfield may have been bisexual, a subject on which I make a fictional interpretation in my depiction of her relationship with Mahupuku. In both respects, I allowed myself the kind of freedom of invention that, with my biographer's hat on, I would find unthinkable. Fiction, however, has different rules, and my challenge in writing *Sudden Flight* was all about discovering them.

I found it useful to study the way Mansfield was portrayed by those who knew her, sometimes presented in disguise, as in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1916), in which she is identifiable as Gudrun<sup>82</sup> with Lawrence choosing to emphasise the most temperamental and negative aspects of her character, as he saw them.<sup>83</sup> She is also evoked in his other stories, notably as the rule-breaking 'modern woman' Alvina Houghton in *The Lost Girl* (1920)<sup>84</sup> and in the bitter allegoric tale, 'Mother and Daughter' (1929)<sup>85</sup> a thinly disguised, hostile depiction of a Mansfield-like character, Rachel Bodoïn, falling into the clutches of a seductive

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Rosenthal's *On the Rocks* (2008) and Lorae Parry's *Bloomsbury Women & The Wild Colonial Girl* (2010).

<sup>81</sup> Latham, p. 110.

<sup>82</sup> Jeffery Meyers, *D. H. Lawrence: A Biography* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1990), p. 93.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>84</sup> *The Lost Girl* (London: Secker, 1920).

<sup>85</sup> Published in T. S. Eliot's *New Criterion* 8 (April 1929), pp 394-419.

mystical quack, Monsieur Arnault, the old Armenian businessman he calls the ‘Turkish Delight’ whose unexpected invitation of marriage she decides to accept. There are satiric portraits of Mansfield (designed to injure) by other contemporaries such as T. S. Eliot’s cruel sketch in his short story ‘Eeldrop and Appleplex’ (1917), with its grossly unflattering future vision of her as ‘Edith’; plump, full-bosomed’ with dyed hair, a menopausal *divorcée* ‘rolling toward a diabetic end in a seaside watering place’ on the French Riviera, her ‘curiosity and passion for experience’ like a ‘hard, gem-like flame’ burnt out. Then there is Mansfield’s erstwhile French lover Francis Carco’s rendition of her into the calculating, opportunistic Antipodean Winnie in *Les Innocents* (1917). I wanted to evoke the way in which Mansfield was a woman perceived to be transgressive by the standards of her day, and how she inspired strong feelings; provoked feelings of antipathy, envy, love and admiration, in equal measure. In my novel, confiding her true feelings about misogynistic gossip about her and critical attacks even by persons she considered friends, Katherine seeks to exorcise the distress such condemnations of her character caused her, and to work through her own feelings of being misunderstood and falsely depicted by others, a necessary step for her to come to terms with who she is and how she sees herself, an important aspect of her character development in the story.

Some eye-witness accounts helped me to envisage Mansfield more roundly. Her friend William Orton wrote a thinly fictionalised autobiography detailing his relationship with the innocent, beautiful ‘Catherine’ in *The Last Romantic* (1937) and something of this Mansfield is glimpsed by Charles when he first meets her in 1915. The American journalist Conrad Aiken described sitting between Mansfield and Woolf at ‘a dreadful Athenaeum lunch’ at which the two women, who may have been meeting for the first time, measured each other up ‘with a locked gaze of feral enmity while they exchanged honeyed phrases of compliment and question’.<sup>86</sup> Afterwards Aiken memorialised Mansfield as Reine Wilson, ‘in

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<sup>86</sup> Conrad Aiken, *Ushant: An Essay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971; first published 1955), p. 292.

every respect the most remarkable woman I had ever met'. His eyewitness description of her is striking:

I do not know how to explain this – for it was not that they had said, at lunch, anything especially remarkable; it was, rather, what she *was*, and *how* she said things. Her burning intensity of spirit, the sheer, naked honesty with which she felt things and the wonderful and terrible way in which she could appear so vividly and joyfully, and yet so precariously alive – all this together with her charming small oddity of appearance, the doll-like seriousness of face and doll-like eyes, combined to make a picture which was not merely enchanting. It was for me, terribly disturbing. I was going to fall in love with her – and I was going to fall hard and deep.<sup>87</sup>

The narrator/Aiken remarked that Wilson/Mansfield wrote 'the most exquisite prose I had ever read – extraordinarily alive, extraordinarily poetic and exquisitely feminine' and he asks how it could be possible to have 'so ethereally delicate a consciousness, a consciousness, so easily wounded, and *live?*'<sup>88</sup> Aiken clearly disliked Murry – regarded him in fact as 'detestable'— and he was deeply perplexed by Mansfield's marriage. 'He doesn't seem to be in love with anyone else – and neither does she. They are perfectly friendly – even affectionate. But they live apart.'<sup>89</sup> From Aiken's descriptions, I found inspiration – in part — for my character Charles who also falls hard and deep for Katherine.

Biographically speaking, Mansfield's short life has come, and continues to come, under intense scrutiny. There are at least eighteen biographies about Mansfield, among them Claire Tomalin's *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life* (1987) with the most recent being Redmer Yska's *A Strange Beautiful Excitement: Katherine Mansfield's Wellington 1888-1903* (2017). Other biographers, including Ruth E. Mantz, Antony Alpers, Jeffrey Meyers and Kathleen Jones,<sup>90</sup> have each in their turn offered distinctly different perspectives about Mansfield. The

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<sup>87</sup> Aiken, 'Your Obituary, Well Written', *The Collected Short Stories of Conrad Aiken* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1960), pp. 403-4.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 403-4.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 403-4

<sup>90</sup> Antony Alpers's *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (1953, re-edited, 1980) Jeffrey Meyers's *Katherine Mansfield, A Biography* (1978) and Claire Tomalin's *Katherine Mansfield, A Secret Life* (1987) and Kathleen Jones's *Katherine Mansfield, The Story-Teller* (2010).

past decade has seen an ‘explosion of Mansfield studies’<sup>91</sup> notably with the publication of a fully annotated 4-volume scholarly series *The Edinburgh Edition of The Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield*<sup>92</sup>, primary source texts for Mansfield scholars, and the publication by Edinburgh University Press of a dedicated peer-reviewed journal, *Katherine Mansfield Studies*.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Alice Kelly, ‘The Explosion of Mansfield Studies,’ *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 40, 4, December 2011, pp. 388-396.

<sup>92</sup> *The Edinburgh Edition of The Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, vols 1-4, 2012-2016).

<sup>93</sup> In addition, there have been numerous, regular international conferences and colloquia focused on expanding the critical discipline organized by the dedicated scholarly enthusiasts who run the Katherine Mansfield Society. At the ‘Katherine Mansfield: New Directions’ conference at Birkbeck University in June 2018 I gave a talk: ‘Opportunities for biofiction in the last months of Katherine Mansfield’s life’.



## 2

**Bypassing the Literary Gatekeeper**

As to what and how I intended to add to an already large body of work relating to Mansfield, I drew on my experience researching my biography of Stanhope — the unconventional maverick who made her name as the greatest woman traveller of her time, going from 10 Downing Street as de facto first lady and confidante of her uncle, Prime Minister William Pitt, to a lifetime of drama and intrigue in Syria. Stanhope, born the same year as Jane Austen, gained fame as the first Western woman to reach Palmyra and achieved a status among the Bedouin matched only a hundred years later by Lawrence of Arabia. Stanhope had been the subject of many earlier biographies, but for me none satisfactorily explained questions I had about what had motivated this exceptionally capable woman to live her life as she had. I had discovered that an entire mythology had been constructed about Stanhope, much of it based on omissions and perhaps deliberate misinformation and it was soon evident to me that this was largely due to over-reliance by previous biographers on the infallibility of one source: the memoirs published by her doctor Charles Meryon. Following her death, Meryon had seized upon his chance to capitalise on her fame and notoriety – to write a best-seller representing himself as an encyclopaedically reliable eye-witness. It was a salutary lesson to me how testimonies by self-interested parties can be greatly deceptive. In Stanhope's case, Meryon accentuated her eccentricity, surmising this was the version of her likely to be most palatable to his intended Victorian audience. Stanhope's behaviour, especially her desire to insinuate herself as a woman of action in the strictly male world of politics, was by its very uniqueness, 'eccentric' — if not preposterous — and it became standard to ridicule her rather than admire her chutzpah. This preamble is important because it outlines the approach I took when assessing Mansfield's biographical hinterland prior to embarking on writing her life as fiction.

It seemed to me a loose parallel could be drawn between Dr Meryon and Mansfield's husband Murry. Not only were Mansfield and Stanhope both posthumously subjected to biographical embalming by men who could justifiably claim greatest access and insight to them but also that, in that embalming process, those witnesses clearly had strong self-serving motives. The resulting portrayals of Stanhope and Mansfield undoubtedly had a lasting impact on their reputations. As Stanhope's biographer, I recognised the necessity of regarding all Meryon-influenced secondary sources embedded in earlier biographies as being potentially questionable and commenced my investigation by re-opening the case as it were: widening the net of potential leads, examining all relevant primary sources and cross-referencing the evidence against all other existing corroborative material, which of course, is – or ought to be – part of the biographical method.

My methodology required me to thoroughly familiarise myself with Murry's hagiography of Mansfield in order to form my own view of how he both presented and shaped her life, her works and their relationship. As stated, my fiction is not a novelisation of Mansfield's biography, rather it is a fictional interpretation primarily of the sparsely-documented last three months of her life about which Murry's summation has generally been held to be accurate, even while, as indicated, academics have acknowledged that elsewhere this is not the case. In fairness, it needs to be said that had Murry not chosen to preserve, edit and publish Mansfield's letters and notebooks and were we only to have her published stories, we would not have the fuller picture of her astonishing creativity and talent, so in that sense, we are in Murry's debt. It is hardly an original contention on my part that Murry's artful shaping of Mansfield's image and his depiction of their marriage perpetrated a central suppression and manipulation of the truth — almost all Mansfield's biographers have turned a sceptical, even jaundiced eye on Murry's curatorial methods.<sup>94</sup> No sooner was Mansfield in

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<sup>94</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, *Katherine Mansfield, A Biography* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978), p 262. See also Kathleen Jones, 'The Mansfield Legacy', *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism*, ed. by Janet Wilson, Gerri Kimber and Susan Reid (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 165-177.

the ground<sup>95</sup> than Murry's editorial myth-making about her life and work swung into production, and continued, more or less constantly, until his death in 1957. Murry, who was Mansfield's literary executor, made a lucrative career out of presenting his curated version of her to the world, and he gave lectures about his wife on several literary tours to America, presenting himself in effect as her 'voice.' However, it is my contention in the absence of other substantially reliable corroborating accounts with regard to Mansfield's final hours, Murry's account has been accorded what could be legally referred to as *dubia in meliorem partem interpretari debent*, in other words, it was given the benefit of the doubt.

Hermione Lee observed that biographies are often compared to 'quests or journeys,' involving 'detective work' and 'excavations'; 'a fishing net', a 'burglary' or an 'embalming.' Another metaphor is an 'autopsy, the forensic examination of the body when the cause is unusual, suspicious, or ambiguous.'<sup>96</sup> Using this disturbing autopsy metaphor, and starting with the dead body, Mansfield's death itself troubled me. Not the mere fact of it: her sudden death from complications of tuberculosis is more understandable when you know, as was explained to me by medical experts that the experimental radiation treatment she underwent with Dr Manoukhin in 1922 irreversibly damaged her spleen and therefore her immune system, almost certainly a crucial factor leading to her death.<sup>97</sup> Thus it was not Mansfield's death itself but the *circumstances* in which it occurred that struck me as significant and fed

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<sup>95</sup> Shortly after Mansfield died, Murry commissioned a gravestone – 'Katherine Mansfield, Wife of John Middleton Murry' which failed to mention that she had been a 'Writer'. Since he failed to pay the fee for the plot, Mansfield was afterwards turfed into a pauper's mass grave to be reinstated only after her father was alerted and sent remedial funds. It was an omission Murry was careful not to make with his own gravestone, leaving instructions to his fourth wife Mary that he be referred to as 'Author and Farmer'.

<sup>96</sup> Hermione Lee, *Biography, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, New York, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Doctors Pierre Weinmann (Chief of Nuclear Medicine Department, Georges Pompidou, European Hospital, Paris) and Laurence Courdavault (specialist in TB and infectious diseases, Chief of Microbiology Department, Centre Hospitalier, Victor Dupouy, Argenteuil, Paris) in May 2016. Weinmann confirmed that the experimental treatment she had recently received at the hands of Dr Manoukhin in Paris likely destroyed her spleen. If she hadn't had this treatment might she have in fact managed to live longer, even to have survived? Perhaps. People did. Collapsotherapy and other treatments were becoming common for T.B. in North America, a situation well known to my protagonist, Charles. Claire Tomalin made a good case for D. H. Lawrence being the source of Mansfield's TB although it could just as likely have been Amedeo Modigliani, whom Mansfield met in Paris in 1915 as the lover of her then-friend Beatrice Hastings, who died of TB in 1920. Courdavault thought it was possible that Murry was a carrier, but unlikely, even though his second wife Violet died of TB. Murry and Frieda Lawrence each had spouses who died from TB yet neither developed the disease, meanwhile – incidentally — they had a brief affair of their own.

into my fiction. Murry's account of what occurred on January 9, 1923 at Le Prieuré – appears never to have been contradicted. One fact is stark: after months of separation from Murry, Mansfield died within six hours of his arrival from London.

In the previous two years, Murry had had affairs that deeply hurt Mansfield and the question of whether she knew about her close friend Brett's affair and pregnancy by Murry has not, as far as I know, been answered.<sup>98</sup> While Mansfield and Murry were estranged in 1922, and after she went to Paris, they became close. When Brett became pregnant by him, Murry insisted she have an abortion, but before she could have it, she miscarried.<sup>99</sup> If, as seems probable, this event occurred prior to Mansfield's death, I made the following speculation: while it may have been within Mansfield's character to forgive the affair, my guess was had this been so if she had learned of Murry's attempt to conceal the pregnancy from her, and of his insistence on an abortion, it would likely have had a profound impact, given her own futile attempts to become pregnant by him for years. In my novel I imagine Katherine having a pivotal reaction to discovering this information. No one knows for certain what Mansfield and Murry discussed when he arrived, and we only have his account of how she felt about him that day and what she said.<sup>100</sup> Had he perhaps resolved, when he saw Mansfield in Fontainebleau, to confess? Or had Mansfield, full of Gurdjieffian truth-telling, calmly urged that she had come to prize honesty above all things and forced him to? Had

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<sup>98</sup> Jones, *Katherine Mansfield, The Story-Teller* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 382-384.

<sup>99</sup> Brett wrote to a friend: 'I am afraid I have struggled through a terrible time of depression... The worry, the fear exhausts me... I feel, as I suppose every woman feels, that the burden is all left to me. Murry can turn from one woman to another while I have to face the beastliness of an illegal operation—or the long strain of carrying a child and perhaps death — not that I mind the last — it might be the best way out if I am not strong enough to stand alone'. Virginia Nicolson, *Among The Bohemians: Experiments in Living, 1900-1939* (London: Viking, 2002), p. 58.

<sup>100</sup> Jones recounts that when Murry's second wife Violet le Maistre died, also of TB, she had on her last day of life been sent a letter by Murry which had made her, to quote an eye-witness, 'cry and cry and cry'. Within hours that night, Violet was dead. The question apparently never answered was, what had been in that letter? Murry took it away with him when he arrived to see the body of his dead wife the next day, and destroyed it. Had Murry — as Jones implied — chosen to 'come clean' with Violet about his affair with Betty, his housekeeper, and soon-to-be third wife? That Murry arrived on the last day of his wife's life – in two instances, once with Katherine and again with Violet – made me wonder if he was like a priest about to receive a confession but instead becomes the confessor. Jones, p. 194.

there been a conversation of enough emotional magnitude to trigger a haemorrhage?<sup>101</sup> No such possibilities are mentioned in the account of the day of Mansfield's death that Murry wrote in his 'Afterword' to a book of Mansfield's collected letters,<sup>102</sup> in which he makes himself the hero coming just in time to tie up all the couple's loose ends, in an 'All's Well That Ends Well':

As truly as I looked at her, while I listened, she seemed a being transfigured by love, absolutely secure in love. She had no desire to defend the Institute; as indeed I had none to criticize it. She spoke quietly of her feeling that she had perhaps gained all that it had to give her, and that she might be leaving very soon. When she did, she would like to live with me in extreme simplicity in a small cottage in England, and she would like me to cultivate the land.<sup>103</sup>

Mansfield had a prime need to feel that, if she were to die – as she wanted to believe she would not — she could face herself truthfully, 'to be "simple" enough as one would be simple before God'<sup>104</sup> as she put it. The Gurdjieffian method required the casting out of 'false aspects' of the personality so that a new self could emerge. Murry's summation was that he arrived at Le Prieuré just at the moment when she had arrived at that new self and was ready to re-embrace him. My fictional interpretation is the opposite.

The question is then, where might fiction help to consider more deeply and critically what happened? We know that Mansfield died of a pulmonary haemorrhage after running up the stairs but when it comes to what prompted her to run up the stairs or what her mood was – there is only Murry's version. Although there were witness accounts from those who observed Murry and Mansfield's last encounter, they were not party to their conversation.

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<sup>101</sup> Ida Baker ('L. M.') recounted to Mantz that on the last occasion of Mansfield's visit to her doctor in London, Victor Sorapure, he had taken her to one side and cautioned her to take great care of her friend, noting he specified avoiding any sudden shock which could precipitate a haemorrhage, information that presumably had also been relayed to Murry and therefore to Brett. Jones, p. 451; also 'Ida Baker in conversation with Ruth E. Mantz, *Adam International Review*, 370-5, 1972.

<sup>102</sup> *Katherine Mansfield's Letters to John Middleton Murry 1913-1922*, ed. by John Middleton Murry (London: Constable & Co., 1951), p. 700.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 700.

<sup>104</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'Introductory Note' to 'The Doves' Nest', *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), p. 315. See Mansfield's original notebook entry, *CWKM*, IV, p. 443.

Was she really joyful and hopeful as depicted by Murry, thrilled to be reunited with her beloved spouse, and wanting to show him how much better she was? So happy she forgot she was ill, as he said?<sup>105</sup> Or was she in quite a different state of mind? I questioned whether all was as Murry would have us think and began to see that day at Le Prieuré as potentially, an emotional crime scene.

Murry's autobiography, *Between Two Worlds* (1936) ends without confronting how badly the marriage had deteriorated or the circumstances of Mansfield's death. Instead, Murry wrote a lengthy justification for the criticism he surely knew would be levelled at him; that he had abandoned her in her times of need, and that he had failed her:

Whatever shelter I tried to build for us both came tumbling down. I felt that she was expecting some surpassing miracle to happen. Our marriage was to have been the miracle; it was not. [...] It was not deliberate in me that my life with Katherine had become one of complete pretence: there was no possibility of it being otherwise. [...] Truth, lies, these were meaningless conventions.<sup>106</sup>

For me, Murry's last sentence is horrifying and revealing; an admission that we may choose to believe him – or *not*. This — alongside gaps in the historical record — offered opportunities for fiction as my imagination circled around what I could take to be the truth about Mansfield's life, as opposed to what I began to recognise as potential Murry contrivances. I came to believe that not only might the real story have been very different from that which Murry would have us believe, but that Mansfield, after going through great upheaval and radical self-reflection, was on the brink of major change, both personally and creatively. I wanted my fictional Mansfield to reflect this distinctly different, entirely edgy and conflicted and for me, hypothetically plausible, version.

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<sup>105</sup> *The Letters of John Middleton Murry to Katherine Mansfield*, ed. by C. A. Hankin (Bury St Edmunds: Constable & Co., 1983), p. 370.

<sup>106</sup> Murry, *Between Two Worlds* (New York: Messner, 1936), pp. 489, 495.

### Murry as Chief Censor: A Man with a Vested Interest

During the First World War, Murry rose through the ranks at the War Office, becoming Chief Censor in 1918, a task for which he received an O.B.E. (or ‘old boiled egg’ as Mansfield blithely dubbed the award). He thereby acquired skills that informed his later airbrushing, redacting and curating of Mansfield’s image and legacy after her death. Ultimately Murry made a living out of being Mr Katherine Mansfield.<sup>107</sup> In the view of one commentator:

Murry’s creation of the cult of Katherine Mansfield is unique in modern literature. In a repetitive torrent of forty books, articles, introductions, poems and letters to the press, published between 1923 and 1959 [Murry died in 1957], he expressed his anguished self-consciousness, deliberately constructed his myth of Katherine and established a posthumous reputation far greater than she had enjoyed during her lifetime.<sup>108</sup>

It fell to Murry sift through the voluminous collection of his wife’s notebooks, manuscripts, unbound papers, writerly scraps and letters after her death. Indeed, in her will, written in August 1922, Mansfield had instructed him to do so, cautioning him that she wished ‘to leave as few traces of [her] camping ground as possible’<sup>109</sup> but he published a great deal of it, which makes the question of what he may have deliberately destroyed or suppressed, and what he may have altered, all the more intriguing.<sup>110</sup> As Philip Waldron notes, ‘there is no evidence

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<sup>107</sup> Dislike of what was considered Murry’s overweening curation of Mansfield among London’s literati became so rife, as Sydney Janet Kaplan recounts in *Circulating John Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield and D. H. Lawrence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012) that Murry was once called ‘the best hated man of letters’. Kaplan noted on p. 1: ‘Didn’t Virginia Woolf name him ‘the one vile man I have ever known?’ and pointed out that Murry was ‘supposed to be the infamous editor Burlap in Aldous Huxley’s *Point Counter Point*?’ She also recalled D. H. Lawrence referring to him as ‘an obscene bug sucking my life away’ and summed up that ‘there was something about Murry that alienated people’.

<sup>108</sup> Meyers, *Katherine Mansfield, A Biography*, p. 253.

<sup>109</sup> Mansfield’s will, ATL, John Middleton Murry Collection, MS-Papers 7224-06.

<sup>110</sup> There is no space here to outline the growing body of scholarship on Murry’s editorial process but it would appear that he excised and omitted information that he did not want made public. Speculations abound as to Murry’s ‘distortion [...] of Mansfield [...] into a temperamentally ethereal figure’. Kimber, *Katherine Mansfield, The View from France*, p. 178. Murry of course was also motivated to protect Mansfield, and surely guessed she would not want to have a biographer combing over her sexual disasters, forgettable or too self-revealing scrawls, misadventures in contraception or embarrassing illnesses. Nonetheless, it is well documented that Murry interfered with and editorially doctored Mansfield’s original documents, removing words and entire passages, a state of affairs that persisted even in subsequent publications of so-called ‘unexpurgated’ editions during his lifetime. At the time of writing, Todd Martin is undertaking research looking into variations between original Mansfield manuscripts and published versions of the short stories, but to my knowledge there has not yet been a systematic academic investigation as to the extent Murry that actively interfered with – i.e. re-wrote,

whatsoever that Mansfield ever had publication [of her manuscript material] in mind',<sup>111</sup> however, it can equally be speculated that she *always* had publication in mind,<sup>112</sup> and that Murry was aware of this and undertook to fulfil this to the best of his abilities. Regardless, as he published and editorialised, Murry systematically presented his own interpretations of her state of mind, body and soul as historical fact. Stead wrote that he 'encouraged a sentimental, and sometimes a falsely mystical, interest in her talent. He could not keep himself out of the picture either, seeing the development of her art always in relation to the development of her feeling for him'.<sup>113</sup>

Vincent O'Sullivan notes that Murry 'embalmed' both Mansfield herself and her love for him 'in a perfection [both were] far too interesting ever to have possessed'.<sup>114</sup> Murry's literary embalming at times veered perilously close to identity theft. It is revealing that Mansfield had observed this tendency in Murry's approach to other writers, and had berated him for his depiction of the poet Edward Thomas, identifying (presciently) that same treatment he would later apply to her:

I think [your] Edward Thomas is seen out of proportion. It's not in his poems; he's not *all* that. Your emotions are too apparent. I feel one ought to replace Thomas with another and

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re-phrased, re-arranged and censored – the notebooks and letters regarded as his wife's primary material, on which so much biographical analysis has been based and to the extent his interference may have shaped scholarship. Meanwhile, Kimber finds that only with the publication of the 'unexpurgated' *CLKM* in 1984 (followed by subsequent volumes up to 2008) are we able to read what Mansfield 'actually wrote as opposed to what Murry wanted us to believe she had written'. Kimber, p. 138. Subsequently the publication of fully annotated 4-volume scholarly series *The Edinburgh Edition of The Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2012-2016), have become the primary source texts for Mansfield scholars.

<sup>111</sup> Kimber, *The View From France*, p. 140.

<sup>112</sup> In September 1920, Mansfield wrote to Murry, telling him that she had begun what she termed her 'journal book' and that she hoped to be able to offer it to Methuen by the end of the year. A year earlier she writes, imagining that 'one day these letters will be published...' *LJKM*, pp. 153, 179. Murry was well aware of Mansfield's fascination for the diaries and letters of writers she admired, especially Marie Bashkirtseff and Chekhov, and her early stated intention to publish such a diary herself, and the exchanges between George Sand and Flaubert, and Goethe and Eckermann. He and Mansfield had almost certainly explicitly discussed the possibility of her wish to publish. See Jones, p. 79.

<sup>113</sup> Stead, 'Introduction,' *LJKM*, p. 11.

<sup>114</sup> Vincent O'Sullivan, 'Introduction' *Katherine Mansfield, Selected Letters*, ed. by Vincent O'Sullivan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. ix.



say it is all about *him*. There was the beginning of all that in Thomas but you've filled it out yourself – to suit what you wanted him to be. It's not wholly sincere for that reason.<sup>115</sup>

However, as Meyers noted, after Mansfield's death Murry 'took possession of her and transformed her into the docile woman he had always wanted.'<sup>116</sup> He even imagined her giving him her seal of approval. In Murry's introduction to Mantz's bibliography of Mansfield's works, he envisaged her 'rising, like a Gothic heroine, from the flowers of her coffin'<sup>117</sup> as she finally opened her eyes, 'and looked at the garden and the house, and smiled. Then, as though weary, she sank back to sleep again. It was peace; it was good, and what she had seen was also good.'<sup>118</sup>

Indeed, Murry went so far as to cast Katherine as 'a perfect thing'.<sup>119</sup> In his introduction to Mantz's biography, he also wrote of his wife distantly, objectifying her value: 'Since Mansfield's death, the interest in her personality has steadily increased. The renown of her work, or the fame of her personality, is becoming universal. It quickly spread through America; it has established itself in France; and now at least it has flowed back to her own country...'<sup>120</sup> Offering himself as mentor and gatekeeper, Murry kept his censoring hand on the rudder of Mantz's biography of Mansfield (1933), which was timed to capitalise on the public appetite for Mansfield after the publication of her notebooks and letters, which he edited, in 1927 and 1928.<sup>121</sup> It is notable that Mantz's biography concerns only Mansfield's

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<sup>115</sup> In the same letter Mansfield adopts a distinctly frank and critical tone, deftly picking through the flaws in Murry's criticism, upbraiding him for his pomposity, pointing out in the manner of someone being cruel to be kind that he must watch his own 'sham personality' getting in the way of his perceptions. *CLKM*, IV, p. 140.

<sup>116</sup> Meyers, *Katherine Mansfield, A Biography*, p. 253.

<sup>117</sup> Murry wrote of his 'mystical experience' in February 1923 of an encounter with 'the presence of Katherine Mansfield' which had 'filled the room and me' and convinced him that 'all was well with her.' John Middleton Murry, 'Introductory Note' to Ruth E. Mantz's *A Critical Bibliography of Katherine Mansfield*, (London: Constable & Co., 1931), p. xv.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, p. xv.

<sup>119</sup> In a poem published in the *Adelphi* in January 1924 to mark the first anniversary of Katherine's death, Murry wrote: 'Was she not a child, A child of other worlds, a perfect thing, Vouchsafed to justify this world's imagining'.

<sup>120</sup> Ruth E. Mantz, *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Constable & Co., 1933) p. 3.

<sup>121</sup> Murry also published *The Aloe* (1929) and his critical essay about Mansfield in *Novels and Novelists* (1930). Kimber refers to Mantz's bitterness at entering into a collaboration with him regarding her biography, which under his guidance and at his insistence, can more accurately be termed a hagiography. See Kimber, *Katherine Mansfield: The Early Years* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 1; also Kimber, 'Addicted to Mansfield: A Glimpse at the Ruth Elvish Mantz Collection

earlier life and ends at the very beginning of the Murry-Mansfield relationship in 1911: a reader might justifiably assume that what followed was a blissfully happy literary marriage marred only by her tragic early death. The Mantz-Murry biography is many ways a quaint, fairy-tale portrait of a beautiful, doomed, literary heroine from the South Seas, a concoction spun to beguile and charm, giving readers no sense, as William Herbert New wrote, that she was ‘a caustic satirist of personal and public foible and a constant experimenter with the formal techniques of irony’<sup>122</sup> or any hint of a tongue, so sharp according to her friend Dorothy Brett, it can ‘cut the heart of you out like a knife.’<sup>123</sup> Nor did the Mantz-Murry’s biography capture what Stead described as her ‘chameleon quality’ always ‘adopting a mask, changing roles, assuming the identity of the person she speaks to or the thing she contemplates’,<sup>124</sup> or provide any realistic hints as to Mansfield’s true nature, which could be ‘witty yet secretive, at times cynical and calculating and variously charming, affectionate or remote.’<sup>125</sup> When making his own selection of Mansfield’s letters, Stead noted that ‘her emotion is often less genuine when she is being “sensitive” than when she is being (for example) satirical, or bullying, or simply plain and factual’.<sup>126</sup>

It has been observed that when the ‘critical debris’ of Murry’s ‘false legend’ of the ‘sentimental and idealized’ Mansfield is cleared away, the woman that emerges is ‘darker and more earthy’; ‘her character was less exquisite than tough; and she was more rebellious and daring, more cruel and more capable than the figure in the legend’.<sup>127</sup> It is then, *this* Mansfield I am seeking to resurrect in my fiction, but crucially, I particularly wanted to explore the question of who Mansfield had become in the months before she died, and to ask what kind of life she might have chosen for herself had she lived. As O’Sullivan wrote, ‘Friendship too,

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in Texas’, *Katherine Mansfield and Russia*, ed. by Galya Diment, Gerri Kimber and Todd Martin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 194-8.

<sup>122</sup> William Herbert New, *Reading Mansfield and Metaphors of Form* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999), p 14.

<sup>123</sup> Jones, p. 383.

<sup>124</sup> Stead, ‘Introduction’, *LJKM*, p. 17.

<sup>125</sup> Meyers, ‘Introduction’, *Katherine Mansfield, A Darker View*, New York: First Cooper Square Press), p xxi.

<sup>126</sup> Stead, ‘Introduction’, *LJKM*, p. 16.

<sup>127</sup> Meyers, ‘Introduction’, *A Darker View*, p. xxi.

and her love for Murry, were under scrutiny in this final year'.<sup>128</sup> A few days before she entered Le Prieuré, Mansfield reminded Murry of the 'the blanks, the silences, the anguish of continual misunderstanding'<sup>129</sup> that she felt she must confront as the central truth of their troubled marriage. 'Were we positive, eager, alive? No, we were not. We were a nothingness shot through with gleams of what might be'.<sup>130</sup> Reading between the lines of Mansfield's notebook entries and her letters to Murry and Brett, she carried a combination of complex, sometimes highly contradictory feelings towards the pair of them; sensing the undercurrents of their relationship. Writing to her friend Koteliansky earlier that August, she seems to have decided to set her own course, painful though it might be. 'Now that I am no longer in a false position with Murry, now that I am, in the true sense of the word "free", I look at him differently', a remark O'Sullivan acknowledges 'is the first direct admission of a serious rift between herself and Murry'.<sup>131</sup> Even as she writes fond, loving letters to both of them, there are intimations of betrayal, and perhaps guilty consciences within what had become, albeit not openly divulged to Mansfield, a peculiar triangular relationship. 'Why do you "warn" me', she wrote to Brett from Paris, while she was undergoing treatment. 'What mustn't I be "too sure" of?'<sup>132</sup> We don't have Brett's answering letter, and we can also wonder at the exact meaning behind Murry's cryptic remark about Mansfield's time at Le Prieuré, persuading himself (and the reader) that she 'made of it an instrument for that process of self-annihilation which is necessary to the spiritual rebirth, whereby we enter the Kingdom of Love. I am certain that she achieved her purpose, and that the Institute lent itself to it. More I dare not, and must not, say'.<sup>133</sup>

Essentially, my presentation of Mansfield stems from the desire to release her from Murry's presentation of her. His portrayal greatly upset many who knew and loved her, including her family. Mansfield's great-niece, Janine Renshaw Beauchamp told me that their

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<sup>128</sup> *CLKM*, V, p. ix.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, p. x.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, p. x.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, p. 255n.

<sup>132</sup> *CLKM*, V, p. 291.

<sup>133</sup> *Katherine Mansfield's Letters to John Middleton Murry*, ed. by John Middleton Murry (New York: Knopf, 1929, 1951), p. 701.

family believed Murry had done Mansfield a great disservice. It was not that Mansfield's family – and by this she meant her sisters — were 'prudes'. Instead, they resented what they felt was Murry's 'whitewashing' of her. 'Murry took out, watered down and destroyed anything that seriously reflected badly on him. His version of her has none of her naughtiness, her fun, her great love of pranks and rude jokes, her plain speaking, wilfulness and transgressive-ness'.<sup>134</sup> Some of Mansfield's friends angrily contended that he not only profoundly misrepresented her, but that they even suspected him on some occasions as inserting his own words as her own.<sup>135</sup>

### **The Case for a Different Interpretation**

As I became aware of interpretations that Murry, whether by omission or arrangement,<sup>136</sup> had nudged us towards, I began to imagine what would be left if his interpretations were to be subtracted from the record. That said, I do not downplay the importance of Murry in Mansfield's life which is manifest throughout her published letters and notebooks. I sought only to ringfence his depictions, explanations and encapsulations of her and regard them with the required degree of scepticism, setting me free as a novelist to speculate about what alternative perspective to his views there might be.

In my novel, Charles has reason to believe that on the day of Murry's arrival Katherine told her husband that she wanted to end their marriage but as she died the same evening, no one else knows. Murry, who is unaware of Charles's existence, chooses to conceal his wife's frame of mind on the day of her death. In other words, I suggest Murry

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<sup>134</sup> Conversation with Janine Renshaw Beauchamp, Mansfield's closest living relative, the day of a grave ceremony at Fontainebleau-Avon in honour of Mansfield on June 9, 2017.

<sup>135</sup> Lytton Strachey said he couldn't recognise her in them — to quote his words — 'why that foul-mouthed, virulent, brazen-faced broomstick of a creature should have got herself up as a pad of rose scented cotton wool is beyond me.' Quoted in Clare Hanson (ed.), *The Critical Writings of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987), p. 2. Elsewhere, D. H. Lawrence wrote to Brett: 'I hear Katherine's letters sell largely, yet Murry whines about poverty and I hear he inserts the most poignant passages himself. Ottoline declares that in her letters to her, large pieces are inserted, most movingly'. *The Cambridge Edition of the Letters and Works of D. H. Lawrence*, VII, ed. by Keith Sagar and James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 55.

<sup>136</sup> Yasmine Ryan, 'A Life Distorted', *Listener Archive* (18 October 2008) <<https://www.noted.co.nz/archive/listener-nz-2008/a-life-distorted/>> [accessed 27 October 2016]; Kimber, 2008, citing Philip Waldron, pp. 178-179.

created a fiction of his last day with his wife and perpetrated it for the rest of his life. In my fiction, my response to this is, why should Murry's seal on the truth stand?

There was another factor to Mansfield's hard-won happiness at Fontainebleau, overlooked by Murry in his account, which I fictionalise. Mansfield's friend Orage, at Gurdjieff's institute, described a conversation he had with her, not long before she died. One day, he related, she had seemed 'radiant' and 'her face shone as if she had been on Sinai'.<sup>137</sup> She told him that she felt she had broken through to arrive at a critical turning point, and that crucially she had found an entirely new 'different attitude, a creative attitude' to life and was eager to begin work.<sup>138</sup>

Mansfield had suffered in the getting of wisdom and not just as a result of her illness. She had made, at times, in her past, catastrophic choices in her choice of lovers and the price was just as intense. A number of biographers over several decades<sup>139</sup> have revealed the physical consequences of Mansfield's early reckless, experimental sexual life (stillbirth, venereal disease, abortion). The emotional scars left from family ostracism, and the deep-seated shame and humiliation and how this may have played into her own self-perception were aspects of her life I wanted to tackle. I was less interested in the fact others perceived the kind of reputational damage that D.H. Lawrence referred to as a lasting 'stigma'<sup>140</sup> than in what Mansfield felt about herself. Surely, she might well have asked, there must have been a point to the suffering life had thrown at her? Orage wrote that she told him: 'Could we change our attitude — we should not only see life differently but life itself would come to be different'<sup>141</sup>. I contend that the implications of this realisation, which she had at Le Prieuré, when she reflected on her own life, shifted her into a new, quite volatile state of mind. It has

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<sup>137</sup> A.R. Orage, 'Talks with Katherine Mansfield at Fontainebleau', *The Century* magazine, November 1924, pp. 36-40 <[http://www.gurdjieff-bibliography.com/Current/KM\\_07\\_2006\\_02\\_ORAGE\\_Talks\\_with\\_KM.pdf](http://www.gurdjieff-bibliography.com/Current/KM_07_2006_02_ORAGE_Talks_with_KM.pdf) p. 3> [accessed 27 April 2018], p. 3.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>139</sup> Refer to footnote 90, p. 206.

<sup>140</sup> A notion Lawrence explores in his depictions of her in *The Lost Girl* and in 'Mother and Daughter'. This is expanded upon by Jeffrey Meyers, 'Katherine Mansfield, Gurdjieff and Lawrence's Mother and Daughter', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 22, 4, (December 1976), pp. 444-53. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/440585>> [accessed 3 April 2018].

<sup>141</sup> Orage, p. 4.

been observed that Mansfield chose ‘in her life, as metaphorically, in her art, to be an émigré’; that ‘[s]he was perpetually on the outside, looking on, often unhappy and possibly more often angry; yet she could transform her dislocations into her art.’<sup>142</sup> Mansfield was clearly ripe for self-reinvention, and perhaps in her way, this transition was, or might have been, as I explore in my novel, just as major for her as Picasso turning to Cubism, a point of giving an affirmative ‘Yes’ to a new way of seeing, and a new way of life. Picasso had responded to his transition by sloughing off a spouse. Whether Mansfield, had she not been an invalid, might have found the deceptions and self-deceptions inherent in her marriage (evident to any outside observer) too great to tolerate as she entered a more mature phase of life is a matter of speculation, one I have taken advantage of in contriving a bold ‘what if’ fiction to re-tell her story, all the while adhering closely to the historical record.

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<sup>142</sup> New, p.xi.

## 3

**Fictionalising and Handling History**

When asked: ‘Which is the most truthful, history or literature?’ Margaret Atwood replied:

That’s kind of a difficult question to answer because fiction says on the front ‘This is fiction’ so it’s not purporting to be literal truth... I would not want to read a history book in which Napoleon won the Battle of Waterloo because it would not be true, but I might read a speculative fiction fantasy book in which Napoleon won the Battle of Waterloo. And I would know that this was not supposed to be ‘true’ truth. There are books in which Hitler won World War II, by the way — fiction books. There are books in which Charles Lindbergh became the President of the United States. That didn’t happen, but the fiction is saying, ‘Look what could have happened and then what it would have been like’. Fiction is more like that. All fiction is ‘What if’. And history is, or ought to be ‘That’s what’.<sup>143</sup>

My use of Charles as the fictional protagonist allowed me to circumvent the question of whether my portrait of Mansfield can be considered an accurate one, for the reader primarily encounters the character of Katherine and aspects of her life as re-imagined from his point of view. Thus, any claim of ‘untruth’ in relation to the historical record is avoided because almost everything is filtered through Charles’s perspective and can therefore be viewed as being subject to his misinterpretation. Readers may never be entirely sure whether Charles quite ‘gets’ the ‘truth’ about the real Katherine, but they do get *his* version of her and how she marks him and are also able through his questioning of Katherine to understand how he perceives how she views her own life history.

In a recent discussion about historical fiction,<sup>144</sup> Hilary Mantel and Pat Barker both made the point that that writers can justify making inventions if they are executed with finesse and authority based on deep knowledge of relevant biographical and historical details. What writers are not free to do, however, is subvert the known historical facts. Mantel had earlier

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<sup>143</sup> Margaret Atwood interviewed at the Hay Festival, 2018.

<sup>144</sup> Hilary Mantel and Pat Barker in panel discussion, chaired by James Naughtie, ‘Rewriting the Past’, Southbank Centre 6 July 2018.

criticized the curious decision of the writers of the TV series *The Tudors* to amalgamate Henry VIII's two sisters into one character,<sup>145</sup> commenting that: 'Most historical fiction is, I like to think, in dialogue with the past. *The Tudors* was not holding a conversation – just stamping, whistling and making faces'. The consequences of diverging from historical fact are dangerous: 'One falsification trips another', she warned. 'Consequences collide'. In re-writing history to conveniently round-out a storyline, they declare, she said, 'war on the laws of space and time'. This can result, she pointed out, in a scenario that does away at a stroke with the existence of Lady Jane Grey who cannot then be born, nor can Mary, Queen of Scots. 'Suddenly Mary Stuart is no more real than a character in *Game of Thrones*'. Thus, the reason you must 'stick by the truth,' Mantel urges, 'is that it is better, stranger, stronger than anything you can make up. If the shape is awkward, then you must make your fictional technique so flexible that it can bend around the difficulty... You can select, elide, highlight, omit. Just don't cheat'.<sup>146</sup>

Am I 'cheating' by telling a story in which once-living and invented characters encounter one another in a fictional narrative that does not otherwise challenge 'the laws of space and time?' In my defence, in *Sudden Flight*, whatever the unverifiable internal thoughts, interactions and actions I give my character Katherine, in my view I have not diverted from the known facts. But what could hypothetically be conjectured to have happened – what could fictionally happen — in between these facts is another matter, as Murry knew full well. Thus, Murry framed their final day together as a reconciliation, which Mansfield, being dead, could not dispute, and thereafter imposed his own private seal on his depictions of her character, her emotions, the state of their marriage and what she wanted for the future. In my novel, I allow the reader to play with the idea that it is instead this which is the real fiction.

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<sup>145</sup> Hilary Mantel, BBC Reith Lectures, 2017.

<sup>146</sup> Mantel, BBC Reith Lectures, 2017.



### Intersecting Taxonomies

While both historical and biographical fiction writers are assumed to have a stake in writing the truth about a past world rendering that past time with some accuracy and skill, the difference between the two genres depends largely on the focus and central interest in their works. That is not to say that crossing the borders between fact and fiction does not have implications for both genres. The emphasis on the historical-figure – as subject in biofiction – its determining characteristic – carries an underlying promise to readers of intimacy with that same subject. Simply put, in general terms, ‘someone’ is more centre stage in biofiction, while historical fiction deals more with the ‘landscape’ behind the portrait.

To complicate matters theoretically, within the typology of biofictions, *Sudden Flight* is not only a fictionalised recreation of a famous writer’s life, it fulfils, in parallel, the criteria of a revisionist fictional biography, a subgenre which Ansgar Nünning defines as novels which ‘question and revise the official biographical record’<sup>147</sup>; they ‘rewrite, rather than just represent, the life of real historical individuals’ and therefore depart from the genre of the realist or traditional fictional biography although both integrate factual with fictional material. The revisionist fictional biography often upturns the conventions of biographical fiction by ‘violating one or even all of the constraints on the insertions of reality references that realist fiction adheres to.’<sup>148</sup> Brian McHale explains this constraint by noting that the ‘freedom to improvise actions and properties of historic figures is limited to the ‘dark areas’ of history, that is, to those aspects about which the ‘official’ record has nothing to report’, and where the novelist creates ‘a convenient dark area’ in order to find the freedom ‘to improvise’.<sup>149</sup> He notes the ontological sense of scandal the reader experiences ‘when a real-world figure is inserted in a fictional situation, where he interacts with purely fictional characters [...or when] two real-real world figures interact in a fictional context’ because

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<sup>147</sup> Ansgar Nünning, ‘Fictional Metabiographies and Metaautobiographies: Towards a Definition, Typology and Analysis of Self-Reflexive Hybrid Metagenres’ from *Self-Reflexivity in Literature*, ed. by Werner Huber, Martin Middeke and Hubert Zapf (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neuman, 2005), pp.195-210; repr. in Lackey, *Biographical Fiction* (2017), pp. 363-379 (pp. 366, 368-369).

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 368.

<sup>149</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 87.

‘boundaries between worlds have been violated’<sup>150</sup> The most profound constraint, emphasised McHale, is that in order to meet the norms of ‘classic’ historical fiction, the ‘logic and physics of the fictional world must be compatible with those of reality if historical realemes<sup>151</sup> are to be transferred from one realm or another’. Such realemes – real persons, events, specific objects and archival material – can only be introduced on condition that the properties and actions attributed to them do not actually contradict the ‘official’ historical record. But as McHale points out ‘[t]his, of course, is a question-begging formulation: it leaves open questions of which version of history is to be regarded as the “official” one’.<sup>152</sup>

Meanwhile, my novel can also be seen through its contrivance of imagined journal entries and letters mingling with a careful, sustained collation and research into the biographical underpinnings of Mansfield’s life to contain in this respect elements of biografiction, which is variously defined by commentators as ‘fiction thematising any forms of biography from any period’<sup>153</sup> and ‘contemporary fiction concerned with the way biographical narrative combines fact and fiction’.<sup>154</sup> It may be useful to point out the way in which biografiction is distinguished from biofiction, although these forms can, and do, interbreed.<sup>155</sup> The term, biografiction, proposed and more precisely identified by Max Saunders, can potentially include biographical fiction ‘such as a novel based on another life’s than the author’s’, ‘fake biography: fiction which assumes biographical form’ and also ‘fiction in some way about biography and biographers’,<sup>156</sup> while Saunders points out that biografiction can also be understood as a strand of historiographic metafiction.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> McHale, p. 85.

<sup>151</sup> Coined by Itamar Even-Zohar, ‘realemes’ are neologisms; historical realms – persons, events, specific events etc. See McHale, p. 87.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>153</sup> Max Saunders, *Self-Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 7.

<sup>154</sup> Merle Tönnies, ‘Radicalising Postmodern Biofictions: British Fictional Autobiography of the Twenty-First Century’, in *Fiction and Autobiography: Modes and Models of Interaction*, Salzburg Studies in English Literature and Culture, ed. by Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Wolfgang Görstschacher (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2006), 3, pp. 305-14.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>156</sup> Saunders, p. 216. Saunders notes that ‘fictional works with biographers as central characters have emerged as an increasingly significant category of postmodernism’.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 493.

The speculative nature implicit in my novel's premise and the invention of the main protagonist (by which I deliberately set up a fictional illusion of a relationship that did not exist in order to highlight the cracks in one that did, namely, Mansfield's marriage to Murry) skirts the very edge of historiographic metafiction<sup>158</sup>— a term Linda Hutcheon applied to distinguish traditional historical fiction from fictional works which the creator signals in some way to readers that it is not created as a work of empirically accurate non-fiction but is an imaginative recreation of plausible historical representations.<sup>159</sup>

Postmodern fiction often thematises this process of turning events into facts through the filtering and interpreting of archival documents [...] in historiographic metafiction, the very process of turning the traces of the past (our only access to those events today) into historical representation.<sup>160</sup>

Readers, Hutcheon, intimates, are intended *not* to believe in the complete veracity of what has been put before them in the form of informed but invented dialogue but to understand that it is entirely fictional. A tacit collusion thus exists between the writer and the reader whereby the writer implies 'you know I am making this up' and the reader inwardly responds 'yes, I know' and perhaps adds 'but 'I don't care' or even 'of course, this is a novel'.<sup>161</sup> However, while this element is implicitly woven into the structure of my novel, it does not otherwise meet the defining self-reflexivity characteristic of metafiction.<sup>162</sup> Instead, I have created a work which can be viewed as, to use Edmund White's phrase, 'a fantasia on real themes

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<sup>158</sup> See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>159</sup> Among the novels Hutcheon cites as fitting her concept of historiographic metafiction which could technically also be filed under historical fiction include: Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1987). To that list I would add the excellent example of the metafictional process at work in Barker's 1990's trilogy set during the First World War and its aftermath: *Regeneration* (1991), *The Eye in the Door* (1993) and *The Ghost Road* (1995).

<sup>160</sup> Hutcheon, p. 57-8.

<sup>161</sup> Representation of history in a work of metafiction does not, however, have to be real history as perhaps implied in Hutcheon's statement above. For example, Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) retells the story of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) from the perspective of the madwoman in the attic Mrs Rochester and provides different perspectives on the other fictional characters in that novel (and on Brontë herself to some extent). Similarly, Tom Stoppard's absurdist, existentialist tragicomedy *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) reimagines the events in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from the point of view of the two courtiers.

<sup>162</sup> Nünning quoted in Lackey, *Biographical Fiction* (2017) p. 369.

provided by history'.<sup>163</sup> My story sets up a scenario whereby a chance encounter with a stranger seven years before her death proves pivotal for the dying Mansfield – it is not intended to be *believed*; it is a tale through which to set up an impressionistic recreation of the idiosyncrasies and semi-farcical wonders of Le Prieuré, and in creating a portrait of Mansfield as she discovers what really matters and imagines another life for herself, pay fictional homage.

It does not make sense, Martin Middeke suggests, '[g]iven the multifarious ways in which genre conventions are blurred in contemporary biofictions [to even attempt] to subsume all novels under one rubric, be it historiographic metafiction' 'or 'fictional biography',<sup>164</sup> and Ann Heilmann points out that 'biofiction' has 'the advantage of simplicity, pointing as it does to the dynamic interplay between biographical and novelistic genres while highlighting the latter'.<sup>165</sup> Many prominent contemporary historical and biographical novelists unequivocally state that they wish their works to be considered simply, fictions. On the other hand, the absence of such a rubric can lead to a kind of taxonomic explosion. Yet taxonomical clashes can, however, be liberating for a writer leading to all kinds of ambiguous speculations, interpretations, subversions and elaborations. Judging by the debate and critical acclaim for two recent American works of historical imagination, Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer prize-winning *The Underground Railroad* (2016)<sup>166</sup> and George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) which won the Booker Prize, the potential cultural and intellectual appeal and impact of such genre-bending novels is strong. What this meant for me

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<sup>163</sup> Edmund White, 'Postface', *Hotel de Dream* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 223.

<sup>164</sup> Martin Middeke and Werner Huber, eds., *Biofictions, The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 1999), p. 46.

<sup>165</sup> Ann Heilmann, *Neo-/Victorian Biographilia and James Miranda Barry: A Study in Transgender and Transgenre* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 18.

<sup>166</sup> Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 2016). In Whitehead's novel, about the network of black and white activists who helped slaves escape to freedom in the decades before the Civil War, the channels themselves, the string of safe houses, become an actual subway system, creating a work that according to Michiko Kakutani 'accommodates both brute realism and fable-like allegory'. Review: "Underground Railroad" lays bare horrors of slavery and its toxic legacy, *The New York Times*, 2 August 2016 <[https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/03/books/review-the-underground-railroad-colson-whitehead.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FWhitehead%2C%20Colson&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=7&pgtype=collection](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/03/books/review-the-underground-railroad-colson-whitehead.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FWhitehead%2C%20Colson&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=7&pgtype=collection)> [accessed 6 January 2019].

was that from a critical perspective, if not an ethical one, there were no barriers to experimentation.<sup>167</sup>

As I added fictionalised elements into the known timeline of Mansfield's history, filtering and weaving in archival material and allowing all kinds of actual events and recorded conversations to infuse my contrived fictional 'reality', I wanted to offer unexpected, perhaps startling insights into possible truths about Mansfield's life and character by means of a fictitious character able to subjectively witness her emotional state and draw out her feelings and reminiscences. My intention was also to provoke readers to consider my rendition of a 'what could have been' story in the light of what they might already know, or may subsequently learn, through reading biographies and Mansfield's own work. Indeed, I hope that Mansfield scholars are able to identify and appreciate where and why in the narrative I have stayed true to the known facts even as I have interwoven them with fictional events and interpretations.

### **Mixing Invented and Real Characters in a Fictional Landscape**

One of the major choices open to writers of historical fiction is the option of inserting a fictional character into a real event or writing about people whose lives do not actually touch the course of history at all – people who, from the point of view of the historical record, can be viewed as having lived 'off-grid' like my character of Charles. Whitehead recounted how, in order to write *The Underground Railroad*, he immersed himself in research, absorbing oral history archives, primarily first-person accounts collected by the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s. Whitehead's novel began with his motivation to write about the subject of slavery, bringing to light unknown and untold stories, but he also thought hard about how other themes could also influence his creation of his invented leading characters, especially the teenage girl Cora, because he 'wanted to write more generally about parents and children'<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> That said, to deliberately pass off fiction for fact or to perpetrate a literary hoax, would require a different legal discussion.

<sup>168</sup> Emma Brockes, 'To deal with this subject with the gravity it deserved was scary', *The Guardian*, 7 July 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jul/07/colson-whitehead-underground-railroad>>

and how what happens to his characters would allow him to tell the larger story in an entirely personal way. The novelist Saunders, on the other hand, was tackling the most revered of all US presidents, whose life has been raked over by innumerable scholars and reimagined by a raft of writers. How was he to bring a new light to his portrayal of Lincoln? Saunders' ingenious solution was to create narrative voices from the multitude of spirits, many invented, inhabiting the Oak Hill cemetery in Georgetown in which Lincoln's eleven-year old son Willie lay buried. In a startling departure from the usual tradition for writers of both historical and biographical fiction, which is to attempt to seamlessly feed their research into their fiction, Saunders peppers his novel with scholarly passages from primary and secondary sources, quoting verbatim and giving full attribution – what's more, while most are real, some are invented, so there is a tease as to the nature of what may be believed. The novel's publisher described the novel as 'an exhilarating new form'<sup>169</sup>; it reads like 'a play for voices, with no narrator or stage directions, mixing nineteenth century dialogue with descriptive passages cribbed from Abraham Lincoln's real life-life biographers'.<sup>170</sup>

Writers of historical fiction and biofiction fiction are bound by different rules, arguably. It is one thing to insert into a work of historical fiction an imaginary extra gentleman into the court of Henry VIII whom the writer has made up for instance — or describe in detail the lavender harvest in the Luberon in the nineteenth century. Such works are wide open canvasses onto which a writer can embroider detailed characters and historical fact with a storyline suggested by its context. But by contrast, a writer of biofiction begins with a verified subject in mind, around which an imaginary narrative can be woven as foreground rather than backdrop. This trend has even crept into what might appear, at first glance, to be the traditional biography form, controversially seen in Edmund Morris's *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (1999) a biography with fictional elements.<sup>171</sup> Antonia Fraser

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[accessed 14 January 2019].

<sup>169</sup> George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

<sup>170</sup> Joe Fassler, 'George Saunders on Chekhov's Different Visions of Happiness', *The Atlantic*, 15 February 2017 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/02/george-saunders-on-chekhovs-different-visions-of-happiness/516798/>> [accessed 10 January 2019].

<sup>171</sup> Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1991).

remarked that ‘the insertion of the self into the story is something I have come to disapprove of intensely in modern biographers, for example that authorised biographer of an American president, much younger than his subject, who chose to insert himself (fictitiously) into the narrative’. She recounted how, when giving a lecture to the Historical Association she sternly stated to her audience that, while researching her biography on Marie Antoinette, she ‘would not dream of inserting [herself] into the palace of Versailles, let alone the Petit Trianon’. But it had struck her later that, if she were honest with herself, she should admit that it had been exactly ‘this instinct, evidently deeply rooted in human nature’, that first tantalized her interest in history and set her on her own path writing as historical works.<sup>172</sup>

What I want for my readers is the promise of getting up close to Mansfield in a way the historical record does not, by itself, allow. Having said that, by using an invented character as my primary narrating lens, I significantly mediate my portrait of Mansfield rather than attempt to ventriloquise her, a technique used by other biographical novelists for their subjects, for example, *Emperor Claudius* (Robert Graves), *Hadrian* (Marguerite Yourcenar), *Marilyn Monroe* (Joyce Carol Oates) or *Madame Mao* (Anchee Min).

The creation of interactions between verifiable figures and imagined characters within a historic setting — as Rose Tremain did by inserting the fictional British lutenist Peter Claire into the Danish Court of King Christian with *Music and Silence* (1999), and as Tracy Chevalier did with her creation of the servant girl Griet who comes into Vermeer’s household in *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999) — invite the reader to contemplate a fictional dimension to a historic figure that, once created, can become for the reader an imagined reality without having an effect on the historical record, and to an extent I am following in this tradition. Whether that imagined reality is deemed fanciful<sup>173</sup> or ethically transgressive is an issue that

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<sup>172</sup> Antonia Fraser, *My History, A Memoir of Growing Up* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2015), pp. 41-42.

<sup>173</sup> Despite the rise of historical fiction and its almost universal acceptance as a literary form, the genre has had to shake off its own history of critical opprobrium. In the first of her Reith lectures, Hilary Mantel described the ‘cultural cringe’ of being a historical novelist when she wrote her first historical novel, *A Place of Greater Safety* in the 1970s. Within the genre, Chris Baldick has identified a scale of merit that has factored in the popularity of, if not the contemporary regard for, the literary merit of historical fiction: ‘While the historical novel attempts a serious study of the relationship between

goes to the heart of the principal objections to both historical and biographical fiction, an issue on which I elaborate below. We can consider, as novelist Saunders puts it, that such ‘[f]iction can allow us a really brief residence in the land of true ambiguity, where we really don’t know what the hell to think. We can’t stay there very long. It’s not in our nature. [...] But that brief exposure to the land of ambiguity is really, really good for us. To be genuinely confused about something even for a few seconds is good because it opens us up to the idea that that which we know right now is not complete’.<sup>174</sup>

From the point of view of historical integrity however, a distinction can be drawn between taking fictional licence, in which all inventions – characters, events, conversations, motivations – no matter how improbable, are convincingly of their own time, and historical fiction which may appear at first to offer the promise of authentic detail but in fact presents us with modern heroes and heroines in period dress who behave in anachronistic ways, a criticism levelled at Jessie Burton’s *The Miniaturist* (2014), whose novel was inspired by an elaborate doll’s house (circa 1710) on view in Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum, about whose wealthy owner, Petronella Oortman little was documented and everything had to be invented.

My invented character Dr Charles Jermyn – a survivor of the First World War, a surgeon profoundly affected by his experiences and driven by a need to search for meaning in life like many intellectuals of his generation – is arguably comparable to such other invented protagonists of historical fiction such as Sebastian Faulks’ entirely fictional Dr Robert Hendricks in *Where My Heart Used to Beat* (2015) alongside that of Barker’s fictionalised recreation of Dr William Rivers in her *Regeneration Trilogy*<sup>175</sup> which also mixes invented characters with historical individuals, including Rivers himself, a pioneer in treating post-traumatic stress disorder, and the poets and patients, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.

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personal fortunes and social conflicts, the popular form known as the historical or costume romance tends to employ the period setting only as a decorative background to the leading characters’. It is this last category, the prolific and lucrative sub-genre, that attracted pejorative attention to the genre, regarded as ‘the full-dress petticoat-and-farthingale kind... associated with Mary, Queen of Scots’. Margaret Atwood, ‘In Search of Alias Grace’, *Writing with Intent* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), p. 163.

<sup>174</sup> Fassler, ‘George Saunders’.

<sup>175</sup> Pat Barker, *Regeneration* (London: Viking, 1991), *The Eye in the Door* (London: Viking, 1993) and *The Ghost Road* (London: Viking, 1995).



The self-questioning that leads Charles to study with Jung and then to come to Le Prieuré is told in the third-person, and exploits shifts in time. Both genres allow for this kind of free-roaming, close up third-person or first-person interior thought in the presentation of a character who is able to show the reader the world through their eyes, whether invented or based on fact, as notably evidenced by Byatt's creation of Randolph Henry Ash in *Possession*.<sup>176</sup> Her character Christabel LaMotte poses an additional challenge in that Byatt has to produce plausible Victorian literature that never existed rather than match herself to an existing voice as I do with Mansfield. Indeed, one of the criteria for testing whether I have succeeded in what I set out to do is whether I can enter into an existing voice — that is, Mansfield's — and inhabit it fictionally rather than invent a character and make it say things which are not on the historical record. When in my novel I tell Katherine's side of the story, I both invent and borrow 'her' voice, using descriptions and tropes I absorbed from her letters, alighting on details and turns of phrases to build a layered, recognisable version of her. Whether I was recreating or creating, I had to make a conscious pact with the ethics of working with history and to consider the critical framework in which it would be judged.

### **The Question of Historicity in *Sudden Flight***

In considering historical authenticity in relation to my narrative, my first task was to evaluate all relevant documentation in order to ascertain accurately what happened to whom and where in order to fictionally extend it. As historian and critic Richard Slotkin observed, historical fiction, if responsibly written, can stimulate interest in the study of history. Qualifying that statement by adding that while readers want to read about characters set in the past and be entertained, challenged and stimulated, they do not want to be knowingly misinformed.<sup>177</sup> My second task came into focus after I had challenged Murry's contribution to the record and after I had licensed myself to go behind apparent facts and possible outcomes much as an historian might and introduce connections made by applying deductions about psychology

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<sup>176</sup> A. S. Byatt, *Possession* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990).

<sup>177</sup> Richard Slotkin, 'Fiction for the Purposes of History', *Rethinking History*, 9, 2/3, June-September 2005, pp. 231-226.

and human nature. As to facts themselves, Cunningham commented that while we do need to know them, ‘we need as well to be reminded that the facts don’t always add up to what could necessarily be called an explanation.’ In my methodology, I generally follow a deductive line of questioning. Could I be certain things happened the way they have been portrayed? What might have been the potential reasons why not? What can I truthfully assert on the basis of factual evidence?

Another way to look at the particularities of historical fiction with respect to the notion of being able to arrive at some putative fictional ‘truth’ is to state, as Hayden White has done, that ‘historical discourse [wagers] everything on the true while fictional discourse is interested in the real – which it approaches by way of an effort to fill out the domain of the possible or imaginable’.<sup>178</sup> In White’s words:

The rest of the real, after we have said what we can assert to be true about it, would not be everything and anything we could imagine about it. The real would consist of everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it possibly could be.<sup>179</sup>

In my judgement, White’s criteria for asserting ‘actuality’ in fiction is crucial, along with its implication that a writer of historical and biographical fiction must have acquired a bedrock of knowledge of their subject and history before they can begin to apply what can be regarded as a kind of licensed speculation to it.

James Wood made the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that one of the reasons for the great success of Mantel’s novels is that she ‘seems to have written a very good modern novel, then changed all her fictional names to English historical figures of the fifteen-twenties and thirties’.<sup>180</sup> Yet Mantel, as Wood is well aware, is demonstrably not just writing about early twenty-first century people in lace collars and hose. Instead, under her gaze, in her attempt to

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<sup>178</sup> Hayden White, ‘Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality’, *Rethinking History*, 9, 2/3, June/September, 2005, pp. 147-157.

<sup>179</sup> White, ‘Historical Fiction’, p. 148.

<sup>180</sup> James Wood, ‘Invitation To a Beheading: The Thomas Cromwell novels of Hilary Mantel,’ *The New Yorker*, 7 May 2012 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/05/07/invitation-to-a-beheading>> [accessed August 3, 2017].

peel back the centuries, something alchemic is happening between fiction and history, in which the past itself seems to become reanimated as the object of her imagination. In an equally playful riposte to Wood's provocative comment, Richard Lee argued in an article 'What is Literary Historical Fiction?' published by the Historical Novel Society<sup>181</sup> that: 'The defining characteristic of historical fiction is merely that it is set in the past. The second is – well, it rather depends what you mean by greatness... In other words, it's not the past-ness that matters here, it's the greatness'.<sup>182</sup> In Mantel's case, the 'greatness' is her acknowledged brilliance in bringing to life her character Thomas Cromwell and in evoking both his internal and external world so vividly, with such comprehensive factual precision as to make the reader feel they have stepped back in time and can trust what they are being told. Indeed, Jane Smiley in giving Mantel high praise, said '[she] seems to know Thomas Cromwell on the cellular level'.<sup>183</sup> In Smiley's view:

[S]uch a thing is possible only in a novel, because the job of a novelist is to do her (or his) best to see the world through her character's point of view – to imagine simultaneously what she and her subject are thinking and feeling as human beings, no matter how far apart they are, and also what is different about them – what has changed over the years and therefore indicates the passage of time and the change in the way people perceive things.<sup>184</sup>

Today's reader is likely to assume that a critically well-received work of historical fiction is constructed from rigorous and accurate research and that they might likely encounter within it large political and sociological themes with detailed psychological insights into its protagonists from which they might learn a significant amount about a past time and place. The best historical fiction then, is not just mere entertainment. An historical novel, as Elizabeth Bowen noted about J. G. Farrell's *Troubles* (1970), should not merely be a 'period

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<sup>181</sup> Richard Lee, 'Walter Scott Prize – What is Literary Historical Fiction?' *The Historical Novel Society*, 1997-2018 <<https://historicalnovelsociety.org/walter-scott-prize-what-is-literary-historical-fiction/>> [accessed August 28, 2017].

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Jane Smiley, 'History v historical fiction', *The Guardian*, 15 October 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/15/jane-smiley-niall-ferguson-history-versus-historical-fiction>> [accessed August 28, 2017].

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

piece,’ however well-constructed, but able to pull off that magical trick of being ‘yesterday reflected in today’s consciousness’.<sup>185</sup> In other words, the present and its tastes and judgements and perceptions are of course implicit in the undertaking, but the test of historical fiction’s historicity is the way in which it uses the inevitable lens of the present to allow us to look at the past, the place where we can never otherwise go. Thomas Mallon raises the proposition that two occasions best call for the historical novelist: ‘when the facts have been lost to time and when a time has been lost to the facts’.<sup>186</sup> In my view, historical fiction can make the past feel more relevant and closer to our lived experience. We seek to go back to the past – which is, in the oft-cited words of L. P. Hartley ‘a foreign country, they do things differently there’<sup>187</sup> – to see what it has to teach us and to better understand what our human experience is, to reach out our hands and hearts to who we might have been in another time and what choices we might have been faced with. As Farrell<sup>188</sup> said, on winning the Booker Prize with *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), it was necessary to write novels about the past, not just because ‘novels arise from the shortcomings of history’ but because, ‘[h]istory leaves so much out... everything to do with the senses, for instance. And it leaves out the most important thing of all: the detail of what being alive is like’.<sup>189</sup> Following on from this logic, by taking fictional liberties, I could and did aim to capture and sensualize the historical material, to make a persuasive case for my imagined version of Mansfield’s conflicted inner life, by evoking the seemingly ‘real’.

Historians are bound by rules and constraints in their craft, as are biographers, and as alluded to earlier, so too, in very different ways, are novelists of realist historical and

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<sup>185</sup> Elizabeth Bowen quoted in Neil McEwan, *Perspective in British Historical Fiction Today* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 130.

<sup>186</sup> Thomas Mallon, *In Fact: Essays on Writers and Writing* (New York: Doubleday, 2012), repr. in Lackey, *Biographical Fiction* (2017), pp. 60-63 (p. 60).

<sup>187</sup> L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Penguin 1997), p. 5.

<sup>188</sup> J. G. Farrell’s novels *Troubles* (1970), *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) and *The Singapore Grip* (1978) came to be regarded as his trilogy of historical novels.

<sup>189</sup> Farrell was similarly commended in relation to his later novel *The Singapore Grip* (1978) for going in search of ‘what is elemental about the era it describes’. See Sam Jordison, ‘Looking back at the lost Booker: J. G. Farrell’, *The Guardian*, 5 April 2010

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/apr/15/booker-prize-fiction>> [accessed September 2, 2017]. Other more recent examples of writers achieving this ‘hard-to-pull-off’ feel in historical fiction are David Mitchell’s *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010) and Francis Spufford’s *Golden Hill* (2016).

biographical fiction. Even so, Comer Vann Woodward, a Pulitzer Prize winning historian described the relationship between them as one of ‘historical siblings’ as opposed to their more traditional kinship with scientists, notably social scientists.<sup>190</sup> Woodward cautioned that ‘[t]here are firm rules of course, about what [the historian’s] discipline permits and forbids [them] to do with [their] imagination. [They] cannot, for example, as the novelist can, invent characters, invent motives for [their] characters’.<sup>191</sup> Adding gloss to this view, Jerome de Groot notes there is a consensus that ‘historical fictions are texts that suggest an experience of a ‘past’ that cannot and does not exist, insofar as it is fictional and the past is irretrievable.’<sup>192</sup> This view aligns with that of critic Tony Tanner who reminds us that ‘there is no one veritable ‘truth’ about history and experience, only a series of versions: it always comes to us stencilled’.<sup>193</sup>

In a wider context, critic Fredric Jameson cautions that the historical novel cannot ‘set out to represent the past; it can only “represent” our ideas and stereotypes about that past [rendering it at once] “pop history”’.<sup>194</sup> Providing a salutary lesson – with a view to critical judgement of my own work – was Jameson’s dismissal of E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1975), a book crowded with real historical figures; Teddy Roosevelt, Emma Goldman, Harry K. Thaw, Stanford White, J. Pierpont Morgan and Henry Ford as well as the once living Houdini who interacts with a fictive family. In Jameson’s view, *Ragtime* ‘combine[d] fantasy signifiers from a variety of ideologemes in a kind of hologram’.<sup>195</sup> Jameson reduced to a mere ‘elegiac backdrop’ the novel’s setting and the way in which its themes and depiction of history, specifically political history, had been filtered by Doctorow into the narrative. Others, such as John Keener have described ‘the Freud and Jung’ of Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (like the Jack Kennedy and Malcolm X in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*) as ‘cameos’ whose

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<sup>190</sup> C. Vann Woodward, Ralph Ellison, Robert Penn Warren and William Styron. ‘The Uses of History in Fiction’, from *The Southern Literary Journal*, 1968; repr. in Lackey, *Biographical Fiction* (2017), p.132.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>192</sup> de Groot, p. 3.

<sup>193</sup> Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (New York, Harper & Row, 1971).

<sup>194</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 79.

<sup>195</sup> Jameson, p. 22.

main value is to create, in McHale's words, 'a certain tension between the internal and external fields [of reference].'<sup>196</sup> Such cameos, Keener notes may be 'necessarily no more or less historically accurate than any other kind of biographical narrative' and 'can function as an element of mimesis, speculation or pure subversion.'<sup>197</sup> Keener's remark is in keeping with what Saunders has noted of the postmodernist trend in life-writing and in 'auto/biographical fiction' towards [writers being more] 'ludic and performative in their explorations of the aesthetic life.'<sup>198</sup> Nonetheless, when the reader is being asked to reconsider history or to grapple with what is and isn't true in the presentation of historical figures, considerations of these issues signal a useful caution for would-be novelists.

Jameson's observation prompted me to analyse the extent to which I had ended up shaping and arranging my characters around their historicity and the themes I had sought to develop over the course of writing *Sudden Flight*, compared to my initial intention to focus primarily on fleshing out the characters of 'Katherine' and her friend 'Maata'. Had I in fact begun my novel with the idea of writing about these two women in a way that was, in essence, making them mere 'cameos'? Was I, like Doctorow (in Jameson's view) facing 'a crisis of historicity'<sup>199</sup> in my depiction of leading characters based on living people, including Gurdjieff and Jung, the latter a presence in my novel, albeit only referred to, since my invented character Charles has come to Le Prieuré after studying with him in Zurich? Would it be 'be impossible for [my readers] to receive their representation [in my novel] without the prior interception of already acquired knowledge' a state of affairs that Jameson suggested could set up a misleading familiarity 'rather than with any solid historiographic formation on the reader's part'.<sup>200</sup>

It had not occurred to me to consider this: I was, like most writers, simply groping my way towards my own way of telling the story, following hunches, adding characters,

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<sup>196</sup> McHale, p. 89.

<sup>197</sup> John Keener, *Biography and the Postmodern Historical Novel* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), repr. in Lackey, *Biographical Fiction*, 2017, pp. 344-45 (345).

<sup>198</sup> Saunders, p. 492.

<sup>199</sup> Jameson, pp. 18-19.

<sup>200</sup> Jameson, p. 24.

widening my frames of reference. However, I came to identify this predicament as one of the key challenges for any historical novelist – while noting the existence of a parallel challenge for biographical novelists not to allow the weight of biographical material to suffocate their fiction. I persevered, feeling that in my portraits of these surrounding historical figures, my aim was to bring something intimate and personal to their depiction, just as I was doing with the character of Katherine, allowing the reader to feel they had a sense of the flesh-and-blood personality behind the (famous) name. I do not dispute that this might be regarded as a knowing, wilful contrivance. Equally it was clear to me that when confronted with a fiction about or based on a well-known person, readers will always come with their pre-conceived notions and expectations about that person (or personages) and that therefore a process takes place in which readers test and expand their knowledge, weighing up what they know or suppose may be true, against that which they find may surprise them as fictional truth in a novel. In my case, as I have outlined, I present a Mansfield who may, in the opinion of some of her readers and critics, not conform to their own private view of her, while others may find themselves wishing that my fictional version of circumstances were not fictional at all, and that Mansfield might indeed have found some happiness and hope – away from her clearly conflicted, complicated relationship with Murry – before she died.

Given that Jung's theories and psychoanalysis have a place in my novel, I found it interesting to compare and contrast the objection by the great Hungarian literary theorist Georg Lukács to the biographical form of the historical novel on the grounds that '[i]mportant writers of today take exception – and rightly so – to an excess of the psychological'<sup>201</sup> against the assertion by White (quoting Michel de Certeau) that historical fiction can be regarded from a psychoanalytic point of view as history's 'repressed other' in other words, it is what history refuses to be.<sup>202</sup> But in writing my novel and developing my characters, it was *precisely* the psychological I was most interested in. Nevertheless, I needed to consider whether the prescriptive cautions and constraining framework imposed on both

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<sup>201</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Boston: Beacon Press: 1962), p. 321.

<sup>202</sup> White, 'Historical Fiction', p. 147.

the historical and the biographical novel by the Marxist critic Georg Lukács<sup>203</sup> (whose entire canon was male) could still be relevant to a contemporary writer like myself? I was, after all, choosing to write about a famously secretive and quintessentially female writer, an exquisite chronicler of the ‘miniaturist “subjectivist” writing of impressionism’<sup>204</sup> who specialised in rendering pointillist-style, the internal, emotional, psychological and sensory registers that at first glance bore no relationship to the giant (and apparently primarily male) levers of history<sup>205</sup> and the Lukácian preference for ‘the world-historical individual’.<sup>206</sup> In my novel, all ‘history’ happens off stage. The narrative progresses against the background of the First World War, the Spanish Flu Pandemic, the Russian Revolution, the birth of Fascism; the existence of small movements actively seeking complete societal and spiritual change such as Gurdjieff and his Fourth Way and Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophists; advancements of scientific discoveries about tuberculosis and medical procedures being pioneered to combat it, the rise of psychoanalysis and interest in it, women’s suffrage, and the stigma and suffering

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<sup>203</sup> Lukács, who valued historical fiction for its ability to exemplify ‘the great crises of historical life’—and favoured Scott, Dickens, Tolstoy, Victor Hugo and Balzac for their depictions of rebellions and revolutions and epochal ideological clashes – was regarded for many decades as the preeminent arbiter of the form of both historical and biographical fiction. In his seminal work *The Historical Novel* (1937) Lukács notes the ‘insoluble problem of how to connect in a direct way a detailed presentation of a character’s private life with a convincing portrayal of the genesis of great, indeed timelessly magnified ideas’ and to ‘sensuously embod[y] the colliding social forces’ in popular life. (Quoted in Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, pp. 317, 310). Lukács’s views continued to dominate critical literary analysis of both genres right up until the late 1970s, even though when it came to English literature, he confined his study to seminal canonical novels and did not allude to a single historical novel by a woman.

<sup>204</sup> Janet Wilson, ‘The Burden of the Feminine, Frank Sargeson’s Encounter with Katherine Mansfield’, *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Influence*, ed. by Sarah Ailwood and Melinda Harvey (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 207.

<sup>205</sup> Although one could say Lukács was a product of his time one could equally ask how he was justified overlooking Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen, and George Eliot, all of whom wrote novels set at least a generation in their past. Perry Anderson continues this tradition in his assertion that the historical novel had become, by the interwar period, ‘déclassé and that it had ‘fallen out of the ranks of serious fiction’. Anderson, ‘From Progress to Catastrophe’, *London Review of Books*, 33, 15, 28 July 2011, pp. 24-28 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n15/perry-anderson/from-progress-to-catastrophe>> [accessed 5 January 2019]. In a rebuttal to this view, Professor Diana Wallace asserted that, to the contrary in fact, ‘[i]nstead it became, in Britain at least, a predominantly female form’, citing such writers as Naomi Mitchison, Rose Macauley, Georgette Heyer, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Rosemary Sutcliff, Hilda Vaughan, Kate O’Brien, D. K. Broster, H. F.M. Prescott, Mary Renault and Jean Rhys who ‘reinvented the genre in radical ways’. Wallace further observed that ‘[w]hen Anderson refers to the “huge mound of trash” of the postwar years, he is replicating the dismissive attitude towards these women writers which led to the historical novel being critically ignored.’ Letters, *London Review of Books*, 33, 16, 25 August 2011.

<sup>206</sup> Quoting Hegel, the ‘world-historical individual’ is emblematic of ‘the great human beings in history whose own particular purposes contain the substantial, which is the will of the world spirit.’ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 103.



associated with venereal disease which until the invention of antibiotics could not be effectively treated. Readers are made aware of these things, but they are filtered through the consciousness of the characters, conveyed almost incidentally or tangentially, as part of conversational exchange or reflection, all conveyed at a tangent to history. For example, there was no need to emphasise in the narrative how devastating the impact the war has been on the characters: the deaths of Katherine's brother, Maata's brother and the fictional son of the invented Lefevres, the couple running the hotel where Charles stays during some of his time in Fontainebleau. Similarly, in the novel, the big questions and issues of the era during and after the war are left to be grappled with from the point of view of the protagonist, a surgeon demoralised and traumatized by war, along with his feelings for the character Katherine.

### **Considering the subjective framework for fiction**

While it is trite to say truth is often stranger than fiction, just because something is true does not necessarily make it a good story. As Parini has pointed out, 'the term fiction [...] has its origins in the Latin *fictio*, which means "shaping" [...which] suggests a process of selection and arrangement' because otherwise 'reality — that on-going hail of sensation that pelts us from cradle to grave — is formless and, in its unmediated condition, without meaning'.<sup>207</sup> Indeed, Parini suggests that the poststructuralist shift towards subjectivity is an integral, arguably vital, part of the novelist's toolkit. One must, in his view, assume today that 'the writer of any text — a critical essay, novel, biography, historical study — speaks from a particular point of view and that this viewpoint colours and to some extent shapes the content of the work'.<sup>208</sup>

I found particularly instructive an anecdote Parini related concerning the young woman Masha he invented in *The Last Station* who had a relationship with Tolstoy's young 'amanuensis' Valentin Bulgakov with details of that relationship revealed to the reader through an exchange of fictional letters. Parini noted how gratified he was when '[a]n

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<sup>207</sup> Jay Parini quoted in Lackey, *Biographical Fiction*, pp. 301-2.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

extremely well-known Tolstoy scholar wrote to [him] to say ‘I thought your use of those letters between Bulgakov and Masha [was] particularly effective. I have indeed always admired those letters’.<sup>209</sup> Accordingly, feeling free to follow suit in writing *Sudden Flight*, I created a story revealed via imaginary letters how Maata’s first marriage has been adversely affected by the discovery of a draft manuscript that Katherine had sent her, a story that ends up with both the manuscript and the letters being buried with Maata in her coffin. The story is not entirely fanciful. In an interview in 1959 conducted by W. J. Phillipps forwarded to Lawlor, Mahupuku’s daughter Nani Te Tau said that Mahupuku had expressed her wish that the manuscript (which Lawlor had repeatedly offered to buy) be buried with her. As to the possible existence of Mansfield-Mahupuku letters, Te Tau assumed they had existed, but their whereabouts were unknown.<sup>210</sup>

My fictitious letters relay that the manuscript included a transparent portrait of Maata’s inner thoughts and musings on past infatuations infuriated and outraged Maata’s soon to be ex-husband, George MacGregor.<sup>211</sup> After inventing this story, I spoke to Mahupuku’s great grandson, McGregor,<sup>212</sup> and he confirmed that interest in the whereabouts of Mansfield’s manuscript created consternation and disharmony within the family and that his grandfather, Mahupuku’s son Richard – Dickie — decided to take action to avoid it attracting public attention. According to McGregor, his grandfather referred to it as ‘that bloody manuscript’. Dickie ‘saw his mother being stressed out’ by the overtures and offers she was receiving over the manuscript, from Lawlor and Mantz and others, and ‘he also didn’t want his step-sisters Nani and Pat to get their hands on it, because they would have sold it. They thought it would be their meal ticket.’ McGregor believes that by putting the manuscript in Mahupuku’s coffin on the morning of her death, his grandfather believed he had done the right thing: ‘It’s out of our hair now’, McGregor remembered him saying. Although

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>210</sup> ‘Katherine Mansfield: aspects of Old Wellington days’, Ref. 77-067-8/26 (1930-1977), Nani Te Tau quoted in ‘File described by Lawlor’: Interview by W. J. Phillipps of Naani Asher-Grober (1959), ATL.

<sup>211</sup> Maata’s Journal.

<sup>212</sup> McGregor, 2016.

Mahupuku had been upset to discover the manuscript had disappeared, she did not suspect it had been Dickie, ‘her blue-eyed boy’, who had taken it. McGregor recollected of the manuscript, which he described as ‘the remnants of a book, with pieces missing’, that his grandfather had ‘read it, and was excited by it, but disapproved of some of what was in it.’<sup>213</sup>

Did I unwittingly get close to the truth about Mansfield and Mahupuku and the ‘missing’ Mansfield manuscript? Might I have come closer if I had written a biography and engaged in factually-butressed and footnoted speculations? These questions arose in the course of writing my novel and I then understood what could have led at least two writers of fiction, Kate Grenville and Jerome Charyn, to follow up their novels with a parallel non-fictional investigation of their subjects.<sup>214</sup>

Changes in the evolving genre of the historical novel, as Livi Michael points out,<sup>215</sup> have ‘reflected shifts in social ideology, and historiography itself’ and ‘in the latter half of the twentieth century, historical revisionism has focused on what has been excluded from the historical record’. As a result, there has been an increasing interest in social history, in life as it was lived by different classes and races of people. At the same time, postmodern historians such as White or Keith Jenkins have questioned the assumptions behind historiography. How can this one body of knowledge claim the authority to decide what history is, how it must be studied, and whether it can be ‘owned’ as cultural heritage? The question, if not the answer, of who owns what narrative interpretation of events in a relationship or a marriage arises in the story of *Sudden Flight* and larger issues concerning hegemonic contentiousness of historical interpretations are also refracted and reflected on a personal or domestic level in it. One of my concerns in challenging received history about Mansfield, particularly Murry’s portrayal of her, was not to do her the disservice of misrepresenting her in relation to any of the facts of her life. A warning is implicit in the words of Julia Alvarez, author of *In the Time*

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<sup>213</sup> McGregor, 2016.

<sup>214</sup> Grenville followed up *The Secret River* with *Searching for the Secret River* (2006) and Charyn followed *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson* with *A Loaded Gun: Emily Dickinson for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2016).

<sup>215</sup> Livi Michael, ‘Not what it used to be’, *Historia*, Magazine of the Historical Writers Association, 4 August 2016 <<http://www.historiamag.com/not-what-it-used-to-be/>> [accessed May 13, 2018].

of *The Butterflies* (1994): ‘The truth is complex, multi-faceted, and one person’s truth might actually negate another’s truth.’<sup>216</sup> This notion has particular resonance in the Mansfield-Murry nexus, but it can equally be argued that any author of a novel involving real people is involved in the act of making fiction — as opposed to fact — and this is an unavoidable outcome in itself. However, in *Sudden Flight*, it can be seen that I am willing to apply Alvarez’s logic, to consciously and systematically negate Murry’s truth in order to make room for what I take to be Mansfield’s truth.

### Historical fiction and its Critics

In 2001, Hermione Lee asked important rhetorical questions about Ian McEwan’s novel *Atonement* (2001) – cited by Jerome de Groot ‘as one of the most important recent examples of the historical novel’s engagement with “moral practice” and the questionable ethics of writing about the past’.<sup>217</sup>

If fiction is a controlling play, a way of ordering the universe in which the writer is away in her – or his – thoughts, then is it a form of escapism, lacking all moral force? Is it just another form of false witness, and so always ‘unforgivable?’ And are some forms of fiction – modernist, middle-class, limited to personal relations – more unforgivable than others. A political critique edges in.<sup>218</sup>

In counterpoint to Lee, de Groot asserts the principled right of the novelist ‘to control the chaos of the universe’<sup>219</sup>, for, he says, ‘[w]hat McEwan’s novel encapsulates [...] is this central truth of fiction, [that] it is a lie that sits at an awkward and morally problematic angle to history’.<sup>220</sup> ‘All novels lie’ added de Groot, and ‘historical novels do not make a claim to completeness’.<sup>221</sup> Therefore, from another perspective, de Groot noted that ‘historical novels clearly invite the reader to reflect upon the ways history is told to them. [They] participate in

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<sup>216</sup> Alvarez quoted in Lackey, *Biographical Fiction* (2017), p. 191.

<sup>217</sup> de Groot, p. 32.

<sup>218</sup> Hermione Lee, ‘If your memories serve you well...’ *The Observer*, September 23, 2001 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sep/23/fiction.bookerprize2001>> [accessed 3 June 2017].

<sup>219</sup> de Groot, p. 36-37.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

a semi-serious game of authenticity and research, deploying tropes of realism and mimesis, while weaving fictional narrative'.<sup>222</sup> Would historical fiction naysayers find this convincing? Unlikely.

A test case for the kind of controversy that can attend a novel attracting the ire of historians is Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) which tells the story of her great-great-great-grandfather Solomon Wiseman – who becomes the fictional William Thornhill — a convicted London thief who went to New South Wales with his wife and children in 1806. Her novel describes the interactions between the colonising European settlers and the aboriginal people who already inhabited the land. *The Secret River* won and was shortlisted for major awards but embroiled Grenville in controversy when she was challenged by a number of historians for having crossed the line into creating what Mark McKenna called 'fictive history' in confronting a crucial element in the Australian identity, the competing narratives of European and Aboriginal histories. While 'the Aboriginal stories of violent encounters with settlers [...] are transmitted orally and are unwritten',<sup>223</sup> the primary object of the European historical accounts was 'not to understand or to interpret'<sup>224</sup> but to legitimise and to set the stage for 'the emergence of order from chaos' – yet within this space were left 'scars on the land and the psyche of the people, both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians.'<sup>225</sup> According to McKenna, the greatest danger lay in the perception that Grenville's narrative – which found its way into the secondary school syllabus in the Australian state of Victoria – might too easily be regarded by readers as a substitute for the historical facts, especially in the context of contentious or disputed interpretations of colonial and indigenous histories. What disturbed him was 'the way that certain novelists are now courted in the media as historical authorities, and willingly play 'the historian'.... There is an implied sense that historians have let the nation down, that they have descended into snarling bands, and it is fiction that must now

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>223</sup> Sarah Pinto, 'History, Fiction and The Secret River', *Lighting Dark Places: Essays on Kate Grenville*, ed. by Sue Kossew (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), p. 8.

<sup>224</sup> Grant Rodwell, *Whose History?* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2013) p. 59.

<sup>225</sup> Sue Kossew, 'Voicing the 'Great Australian Silence': Kate Grenville's Narrative of Settlement in The Secret River', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 42, 2, (2007), pp. 7-18.

save the day.<sup>226</sup> He wrote '[t]hat fiction is capable of unearthing powerful insights and truths into our history is a given, but ultimately history, unlike fiction, is the only place where claims to historical truth can be tested and verified.'<sup>227</sup> Adding to the criticism of the novel, John Hirst 'rejecte[d] any fiction writer's claim to write more penetrating history than historians'<sup>228</sup> while Inga Clendinnen went so far as to describe the novel as 'anti-history'<sup>229</sup> and derided the 'opportunistic transpositions' of Grenville's methodology.<sup>230</sup>

It's a dramatic imagination unleashed on some wilfully selected historical material, used as grist to the novelist's mill. I've nothing against novelists doing that. I just don't want them to say they are taking things into some zone beyond history.<sup>231</sup>

Key here is the presumption of fiction being presented as fact. Grenville emphatically stated that she had never presented her novel as history. 'I never pretended it was anything else but fiction', she said. 'I was doing what virtually every novelist does, which is to take a real bit of life and transform it'.<sup>232</sup> In the affray that followed, Grenville disputed that she had ever claimed to be writing a new kind of history as had been reported by print and radio journalists<sup>233</sup> and defended her creation. 'She had, she said simply tried 'to acknowledge the complex relationship, backwards and forwards across an invisible line, between the world of fiction and the world of the real.' It might be a brave new frontier, but one that writers enter at their peril if they do not provide carefully delineated, recognisable signposts.

In response, Grenville wrote *Searching for the Secret River* (2007), a non-fiction counterpoint to the novel, detailing the meticulous research she undertook and her writing

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<sup>226</sup> Mark McKenna, 'Writing the Past', *Australian Financial Review*, 16 December 2005, pp. 1-2, 8.

<sup>227</sup> Mark McKenna, 'Comfort History', *The Australian*, 18-19 March 2006, p. 15.

<sup>228</sup> Jane Sullivan, 'Making a fiction of history...' *The Age*, 21 October 2006  
<<https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/books/making-a-fiction-of-history-20061021-ge3dpn.html>> [accessed 10 September 2017].

<sup>229</sup> 'Kossew, 2010, p. 189.

<sup>230</sup> Clendinnen quoted in Jane Sullivan. Clendinnen further elaborates in 'The History Question: Who Owns the Past?', *Quarterly Essay*, 23, (2006), p. 16.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> Susan Wyndham, Interview with Kate Grenville, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 March 2015  
<<https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/kate-grenvilles-new-life-as-a-single-woman-20150304-13vbim.html>> [accessed 20 June 2018].

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*

process as she borrowed from contemporaneous accounts, made intuitive leaps, invented all manner of twists and turns and a dramatic ending that did not occur in real life. She wrote the memoir as a corollary to the fiction, seeking to infuse authenticity through use of the historical record and justifying her inventions with the explanation that fiction often trumped truth when it came to shaping satisfying characters and the demands of a good story. The memoir remains an unusual enterprise — a writer choosing in effect to tell her story again, but differently, turning her novel inside-out, revealing the under-stitching of research and discussing the actual facts and the current cultural and critical landscape that underpinned her fiction. Perhaps it was in part, written as a vindication – an *apologia*. Is there an argument for this kind of diptych fiction/non-fiction approach by any author with enough stamina to undertake the task? The question could be asked of the reader, when faced with, for example, the twin works of non-fiction and fiction produced by Grenville and Charyn, which of their two approaches they prefer – and why.

## Being Katherine: An Imaginative Leap into Biofiction

In this commentary, I analyse the precise literary nature and status of what I have written in my novel *Sudden Flight*. As mentioned above, as well as falling easily into the broad category of historical fiction, I consider my novel can also be regarded as an example of the biofiction genre. The term biofiction, thought to have been first coined by Alain Buisine<sup>234</sup> in 1991, has been broadly defined by various commentators as ‘a strategic co-existence, collusion and “hybrid fusion” between biography and the novel’,<sup>235</sup> ‘a narrative based on the life of a historical person, weaving biographical fact into what must otherwise be considered a novel’<sup>236</sup> and ‘a work of fiction that names its protagonist after an actual historical figure’.<sup>237</sup> Max Saunders defines it as ‘a form which does not show you the biographer going over the sources to try to reconstruct the subject; instead it makes up conversations, interior monologues, and dramatized vignettes all silently based upon these sources’.<sup>238</sup> (The question that clearly must be asked, with regard to the latter definition, is whether it is the biographer wearing the novelist’s hat, or vice versa.)

For some commentators, writers of biofiction want the impossible: to be able to claim that the biographer’s stamp of authenticity can be firmly planted on their work, once it has been produced, even as they propose to exercise, in producing it, the freedom that fiction can give them. Biofiction has been called a ‘stealth’ trend, ‘ethically troubling’ perhaps but

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<sup>234</sup> Alain Buisine, ‘Biofictions’, *Revue des sciences humaines*, 4, 224, 1991, pp.7-13. Saunders rounds out the definition referencing Martin Middeke use of the term ‘to identify a strand of postmodern writing which falls within Linda Hutcheon’s category of historiographic metafiction but which is specifically concerned with literary biography and Romantic writers’. But Saunders also asserts use of the term ‘biografiction’ includes not only these works but fiction thematising any forms of biography from any period’. Saunders, p. 7.

<sup>235</sup> Latham, p. 104.

<sup>236</sup> *Experiments in Life-Writing, Intersections of Auto/Biography and Fiction*, ed. by Lucia Boldrini and Julia Novak (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 9.

<sup>237</sup> Lackey, ‘The Uncanny Power and Artistry of Biofiction’, *Bloomsbury Literary Studies*, 31 March 2016 <[www.bloomsburyliterarystudies.typepad.com](http://www.bloomsburyliterarystudies.typepad.com)> [accessed 20 June 2018].

<sup>238</sup> Max Saunders, ‘Byatt, ‘Fiction and Biofiction’, *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity*, 6 (1), 10 January 2016 <<http://doi.org/10.18352/hcm.543>> [accessed 13 January 2019].



often ‘superbly imaginative’.<sup>239</sup> The central transgressive element in biofiction is that these leaps of imagination are made into – or overlaid on – an existing person’s life, therefore carrying with it all of the ethical complexity that implies. Certainly, biofiction has some tricks up its sleeve, some sleights of hand, that biography, by tradition, does not. Reaching for the unknowable, that is, the space in the once-alive character’s head; allowing for a narrative to slip back and forth in time; inventing scenes and conversations, whether based on fact or fed by imagination, these are all ways in which biofiction is able to offer the powerful emotional lure of taking the reader on an imaginative leap into their subject’s inner life, and by a peculiar paradox, promise to satisfy particular curiosities about gaps in the record while asking for a suspension of disbelief as to how the facts may have been left behind.

In an observation that goes to the heart of what biofiction can achieve, Lackey further noted: ‘Like the best historians, the most gifted biographical novelists are experts who give readers certain types of ‘truths’. He went on to ask: ‘But what kind of experts are they? And what kind of “truths” do they give the reader?’ How are those ‘truths’ different from the ones found in history books?’ Lackey invited a dialogue on the topic, asking first ‘[H]ow can the “truths” of biofiction supplement the historical record or redirect the scholarly conversation?’, secondly, ‘what makes a specific historical figure particularly suitable as the protagonist of a biographical novel?’ and thirdly, ‘how might authors’ historical and cultural orientations impact on their portraits of a biographical subject?’<sup>240</sup> These questions preoccupied me in constructing my novel, as a New Zealand woman venturing to imagine in what specific emotional and sensory ways Mansfield, while she was at Fontainebleau, recalled her New Zealand childhood, her family and her Maori friend, Mahupuku. Growing up in New Zealand with Maori schoolfriends myself, having physically inhabited many of the same landscapes, and having left the country at the same age clearly influenced what I choose to articulate about her experience, and the ways in which I mapped my own subjective

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<sup>239</sup> Guy Gavriel Kay, ‘Are novelists entitled to use real-life characters?’, *The Guardian*, 20 August 2009 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/aug/20/novelists-real-life-characters>> [accessed 7 August 2018].

<sup>240</sup> Lackey, ‘Saving Lives, The Futures of Biofiction Studies’, *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 32-2 (2017), pp. 343-346 (p. 343).

experience against hers. Yet far more than mere proximity of experience is required for successful biofiction.

### **The Development of Biofiction as a Genre**

With the flowering of the genre and the trend today being towards greater overlap between literary genres it is almost astonishing to consider that up until around the 1980's some novelists felt their works were slighted from a literary merit perspective simply because they chose to write in this genre. Lackey, who initiated a project to discover the genesis and development of the biographical novel, questioned what prejudices had attended what has now become a popular genre, and considered why contemporary authors have felt more liberty 'naming a character Virginia Woolf or Ludwig Wittgenstein in recent years.'<sup>241</sup> The genre — or at least what passed before it became to be described as biographical or biofiction — had been comprehensively denigrated by Lukács who claimed that the biographical novel 'could never rise to the level of a legitimate historical novel' because the focus on 'the biography of the hero' led authors to overlook or misrepresent significant historical events. Lackey attributed shifts in postmodernism as being a liberating factor for writers wanting to 'fuse biography and the novel' qualifying that comment by saying this was less about a shift away from writers giving up on inventing stories and more about their seeking new ways of interpreting their fascination with biographical subjects. The consensus among the writers he canvassed<sup>242</sup> was that:

[I]t is no longer possible to treat historical and/or biographical representations as any more truthful than narratives of fiction because historians and biographers use the same rhetorical strategies, devices and techniques as creative writers in constructing their narratives. Within this postmodern framework, fact is fiction and consequently, history and biography, which were once considered to be separate and distinct from fiction, can no longer lay claim to being non-fictional.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Lackey, *Truthful Fictions*, p. 27.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

For many decades, scholarship on the genre was patchy.<sup>244</sup> Carl Bode's essay 'The Buxom Biographies' (1955)<sup>245</sup> and Paul Murry Kendall's *The Art of Biography* (1965)<sup>246</sup> both discussed the biographical novel using confusing definitions that on very slight unpicking prove specious and unreliable, with Kendall decrying the 'novel-as-biography' as an unworthwhile concoction because it was 'almost wholly imaginary'.<sup>247</sup> Lackey asked: 'If novels-as-biography displace the biography, thus rendering them *not* biographies, then on what grounds can Kendall call them biographies (novels-as-biography) and then *critique* them as biography. The whole point is that they are *not* biographies (added italics)'.<sup>248</sup> Therefore, it can be contended that this historic widely-held distaste towards biographical fiction led to a misleading tendency to evaluate biofiction in relation to biography rather than fiction, which meant that it was not given proper critical consideration. Later, the terms 'fictional biographies' and 'biographical fictions', as examined by Ina Schabert in *In Quest of the Other Person: Fiction as Biography* (1990),<sup>249</sup> came more colloquially into use, these days often under the umbrella term of 'life-writing'. In any case, especially from the 1980s onwards, there was a 'veritable explosion of such novels'.<sup>250</sup>

The relatively recent genre has flourished to become, in Lackey's view 'a dominant literary form' experiencing 'contemporary valorisation and popularity'<sup>251</sup> and one that is giving rise to 'the most promising and exciting areas of biographical study' according to another commentator, Nigel Hamilton.<sup>252</sup> Lackey suggests the trend of interest towards biofiction is caused by 'a shift in our contemporary theories of consciousness, which may

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<sup>244</sup> Lackey cited a cluster of biographical novels by well-regarded writers prior to the 1970s (including Thomas Mann's *Joseph* novels (the first of which was published in 1933) and Robert Graves' *Claudius* novels (the first of which was published in 1934), but as he pointed out, the genre continued to elude both accurate definition and critical legitimacy for decades.

<sup>245</sup> Carl Bode, 'The Buxom Biographies', *College English* (1955), repr. in Lackey, *Biographical Fiction* (2017) pp. 267-274, (pp. 265-69).

<sup>246</sup> Paul Murry Kendall, *The Art of Biography* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1965).

<sup>247</sup> Lackey, *Biographical Fiction*, p. 1.

<sup>248</sup> Lackey, 'Locating and Defining the Bio in Biofiction', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 31-1 (2016), pp. 3-10.

<sup>249</sup> Ina Schabert, *In Quest of the Other Person: Fiction as Biography* (Tübingen: Francke, 1990), p. 44.

<sup>250</sup> Michael Lackey, *The American Biographical Novel* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), Back cover.

<sup>251</sup> Lackey, 'Saving Lives'.

<sup>252</sup> Nigel Hamilton, 'Reflections on Biography: What Next', *The Biography Society*, 20 June 2016 <<https://biography.society.org/2016/06/20/what-next/>> [accessed 7 May 2017].

have a significant impact on the way we understand and do history'. To put it succinctly, he believes this is because:

[t]raditional historical novelists have a positivist approach to history, so they picture the external factors that objectively shape and determine consciousness and thereby make historical collisions possible. Biographical novelists believe that there is a surreal dimension to consciousness, so they shift the focus from the objective external world to the subjective internal world in order to picture the forces that have given birth to major historical collisions.<sup>253</sup>

The rapid evolution of biofiction as a form of life writing is also seeing, as Novak observes: 'scholars regularly [re-conceptualising] their object of study...to incorporate the new insights their discipline has yielded'.<sup>254</sup> In addition, as biofiction has gradually gained ground becoming established as a literary genre in its own right, it has developed apace its own ethical framework for inventing stories and creating protagonists named after actual biographical figures.<sup>255</sup> It has now been emancipated, albeit somewhat loosely, from both historical fiction and life writing and 'continues to chart a narrative space uniquely its own'.<sup>256</sup> That biofiction as a *bona fide* offshoot of historical fiction is gaining recognition is evidenced by the award of the *Prix Goncourt* in 2014 to Lydie Salvayre for *Pas Pleurer* imagining the life of her own mother during the Spanish Civil War and by the short listing for the 2017 Sir Walter Scott Prize of Jo Baker's *A Country Road: A Tree* which not only recreates Samuel Beckett's time in Roussillon, France, during the German occupation but attempts to imitate Beckett's idiosyncratic style of writing and choice of words.<sup>257</sup>

Not every attempt to invoke and flesh out real characters in a fictional context pretends to adhere closely to known biographical facts. Alain Buisine, in his essay 'Biofictions' decries the way in which 'these metastases of the biographic progressively contaminate each domain of the human sciences' and warns against 'bastard re-workings that

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<sup>253</sup> Lackey, 'The Rise of the Biographical Novel and the Fall of the Historical Novel', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 31-1 (2016), pp. 33-58.

<sup>254</sup> Novak, 'Introduction', *Experiments in Life-Writing*, p.1.

<sup>255</sup> Lackey, 'Locating and Defining the Bio in Biofiction', pp. 3-10.

<sup>256</sup> Lackey, *Truthful Fictions*, p. 3.

<sup>257</sup> Jo Baker, *A Country Road: A Tree* (London: Doubleday, 2016).

have no great revelations, despite some exceptions and transgressions'.<sup>258</sup> Where we seem to be heading, says Buisine, is a situation where 'the biographic is ever more engaged in fiction' and there is 'this strange reversal where biographical fiction will precede the work itself'<sup>259</sup>. It might be churlish to ask who had heard of Alexander Selkirk before Daniel Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) but the same question can be posed of the real Doctor Zhivago's Lara, Olga Ivinskaya or about Count Almásy before Michael Ondaatje wrote *The English Patient*. The question could equally be asked whether there might be more interest in reading an historical novel about Eleanor Roosevelt and journalist Lorena 'Hick' Hickok<sup>260</sup> than an actual biography of the relationship<sup>261</sup>— judging by the critical reaction to both books, there appeared to be ample appetite for both. It is interesting to note that what Christopher Nicholson's *Winter* (2014), about Thomas Hardy's last unrequited love affair, Naomi Woods's *Mrs Hemingway* (2014) which is narrated through the perspective of each of Hemingway's wives, Kate Moses's *Wintering*, Jill Dawson's *The Great Lover*, and Susan Sellers *Virginia and Vanessa* (as well as other novels about famous writers) have in common is the assumption that readers will be drawn to the story because they already have an existing knowledge of the biographies of these figures, and are now prepared to, or indeed may want to, go on a fictional adventure to 'meet them' – or more precisely put, an imagined version of them — in a novel.

All this is a matter for celebration not alarm, according to Hamilton, author of *Biography: A Brief History* (2007). Hamilton predicts that biofiction will become 'one of the most promising and exciting areas of biographical study [...] the no-man's land between biographical fact and fiction – a land that is continually increasing in mass'.<sup>262</sup> He notes that: 'Over the past dozen years, the number of real-life, named figures in fiction has doubled, at

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<sup>258</sup> Lackey, *Biographical Fiction*, p. 161.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>260</sup> Amy Bloom, *White Houses* (New York: Random House, 2018).

<sup>261</sup> Susan Quinn, *Eleanor and Hick, The Love Affair That Shaped a First Lady* (New York: Penguin Press, 2016).

<sup>262</sup> Hamilton, 2016.

the very least – and is now increasing exponentially’.<sup>263</sup> Hamilton’s unorthodox penchant for describing biographical fiction as ‘life-depiction’ and his approach – dismissed by Hilary Spurling as ‘journalistic, populist and reductive’<sup>264</sup> – will undoubtedly find its share of detractors and the question of what biofiction will mean for future scholars of biography remains an on-going debate. As Boldrini and Novak predict,<sup>265</sup> the trend for biographical subjects to be tackled in increasingly audacious and experimental ways forecasts new possibilities for biography and fiction and the nexus between them, which correspondingly, widens even more the debate about the liberties writers of fiction may take with fact.

### **The Genre of ‘Body-Snatching’: Stealing or ‘Legitimate’ Theft?**

The idea that we look to biographical subjects for diversion and entertainment is undeniable, and famous writers have a particular allure.<sup>266</sup> But one of the key charges against what has been termed the genre of body-snatching is that it can steal or distort the captive subject’s identity. For example, in his unpicking of Norman Mailer’s experimental novel biography about Marilyn Monroe, and in particular his speculative portrayal of her death as the outcome of a murder plot, William Epstein describes the perils of biographical ‘(mis)recognition’<sup>267</sup> as ‘re-enacted in and through the trope of abduction.’<sup>268</sup> Epstein contends that Mailer’s ‘oppositional narrative’ was intended to ‘rescue and reanimate [Monroe]’ but instead he

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Hilary Spurling, ‘Oh come on, it’s time you got a life’, *The Observer*, 20 May 2007 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/may/20/biography.features>> [accessed 13 March 2017].

<sup>265</sup> Novak, ‘Introduction’, *Experiments in Life-Writing*, p. 1.

<sup>266</sup> As in fiction so too with film, theatre and radio plays. The appetite for ‘consuming’ fictionalised versions of the lives of famous, the notable and the notorious, while always strong, has never been greater. The evolution can be traced from the earliest days of cinema namely *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906) to the recent Netflix adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (2017). A rough estimate of films (in the English language alone) specifically depicting the lives of famous writers numbers almost sixty, evolving from *The Loves of Robert Burns* (1930), *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934), *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937) and *Young Pushkin* (1937) though to, more recently, *The Invisible Woman* (2013) about Charles Dickens’s mistress Nelly Ternan and *Saving Mr Banks* (2013) about P. L. Travers, *The Edge of Love* (2014) about Dylan Thomas, *A Quiet Passion* (2016) about Emily Dickinson, *Rebel in the Rye* (2017) about J. D. Salinger, and *Goodbye Christopher Robin* (2017) about A. A. Milne. Quite possibly the most commercially as well as critically successful of these writer biopics was *Out of Africa* (1985) about Isak Dinesen aka Karen Blixen. Many, if not most, of these films take considerable ‘artistic liberties’ with the facts.

<sup>267</sup> William H. Epstein, ‘(Post) Modern Lives: Abducting the Biographical Subject’, *Contesting the Subject, Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practise of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, ed. by William Epstein, (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1991), p. 226.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., pp. 228-229.

‘abducts [her], detains and defiles her’. In further outlining the shifting ethical terrain on which a writer of biographical fiction operates, Epstein asserts that biofiction writers would do well to recognise their rightful place as that of ‘biographical and cultural guerrillas’, and in so doing, claim their opportunity with boldness and tactical strategy without any pretence to be what they are not.<sup>269</sup>

Charyn too has described the stir created by his biofiction relating to Emily Dickinson, highlighting that making a character out of a famous writer and creating a fictional voice for him or her greatly increases the risk of literary opprobrium. As he found:

[H]alf the people I expected would react violently indeed hated it and half the people just as violently loved it... [m]any people said “How dare you take our previous Emily Dickinson in such a way?”[Some could not] even read the book, they felt it was such a violation... they felt threatened by someone writing a novel in her voice.<sup>270</sup>

Charyn defended himself by asking: ‘What does any writer do but steal anyone’s else’s voice?’ and claimed that ‘every art is a kind of theft, a kind of appropriation’.<sup>271</sup> The question, when it comes to biofiction, is not to dispute that a robbery is being committed, but to ask whether stealing the voice and story of any real-life person – whether dead or still-living – can be regarded as a legitimate theft.

In reflecting on the critical reception to biofiction and how other writers have grappled with it, I had some initial hesitation about the liberties I was taking by creating a fictional interaction between Mansfield and my invented protagonist. I inwardly debated writing her character as someone ‘based on’ Mansfield, in order to be able to explore her life with as much – or as little — impunity as I might like. But the idea of a ‘loosely based on’ facsimile version of Mansfield held no appeal and having so closely researched the

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<sup>269</sup> Epstein, p. 230.

<sup>270</sup> Richard Phelan and Sophie Vallas, Finding the music: An interview with Jerome Charyn on *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson*, recorded 28 September 2010 at LERMA (Laboratoire d’Etudes et de Recherche sur le Monde Anglophone at the Université de Provence  
<<https://journals.openedition.org/erea/1737>>\_ 8 February 2011 [accessed 6 July 2018].

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

documentation of her life and all those close to her, I knew I wanted to write about Mansfield herself. Therefore, as a priority, I needed to make her invented character be as close to the ‘real’ Mansfield and as faithful to authentic historical incidents as I could contrive, while all fictitious events, scenes and conversations had to fall within the realm of likelihood for me to believe in the accuracy of my own fiction. Indeed, much of the fascination for me in writing the novel lay in making these detailed connections from the subtle ambiguity of her own words, in intuiting meaning from the blanks and spaces in between her lines, as well as interweaving details and facts that would be instantly recognisable to a Mansfield scholar but not necessarily the general reader, and to shape them in such a way as to create a strong emotional tension and story. But there always had to come the moment when I unshackled myself from biography, from reported speech and from my own hesitations about taking liberties.

*Sudden Flight* certainly stands guilty of the most common charge levelled at biographical fiction as expressed by A. S. Byatt who has decried ‘the appropriation of others’ lives and privacy’.<sup>272</sup> Yet this is equally a criticism that could be made against biographers, and biography itself, where a different kind of appropriation is undoubtedly made of the subject’s lives, very often posthumously or without their permission. Freud wrote in a similar vein that ‘biographical truth is not to be had. Anyone turning biographer commits himself to lies, to concealment, to hypocrisy, to flattery, and even to hiding his own lack of understanding’.<sup>273</sup> Joanna Scott questioned the fine line drawn when biographies create singular characters from their subjects. ‘Who is more real, the Milly Theale of *Wings of the*

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<sup>272</sup> Alison Flood, ‘Byatt attacks novelists who use real-life characters,’ *The Guardian* 13 August 2009 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/13/byatt-novelists-real-life-characters>> [accessed 5 October 2017].

<sup>273</sup> Edward Rothstein, ‘The Scar of Sigmund Freud’, *New York Times Book Review*, 9 October 1980 <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1980/10/09/the-scar-of-sigmund-freud/>> [accessed 2 September 2017]. Commented Rothstein: ‘The truth of a life, [Freud] seemed to imply, would always slip away under the biographer’s gaze, for where is such truth embodied and how is it confirmed? It can hardly be captured by cataloguing the meals eaten, the homes inhabited, the beliefs and constructions of the intellect, or the reports from colleagues, friends, passers-by. Moreover, the biographer is bound up in the truth he finds’.



*Dove* or the Henry James of Leon Edel's biography? If I did not know better I would call Peter Gay's Sigmund Freud and Hermione Lee's Virginia Woolf both fictional characters'.<sup>274</sup>

The central premise of my novel, the idea of a fictional secret relationship able to shed light on and reveal intimacies about the main historical character is of course a well-worn technique. It has been used by Margaret Atwood with Dr Simon Jordan and the real-life Grace Marks in *Alias Grace* (1996), by Esther Freud connecting Thomas Maggs to Charles Rennie Mackintosh in *Mr Mac and Me* (2014) and by Dawson inventing a relationship between Nell Golightly and Rupert Brooke in *The Great Lover* (2009). In the film world, *Agatha* (1979) depicts the missing mystery writer staging her own famous disappearance during which she encounters and becomes close to the American reporter Wally Stanton, a complete fabrication that nonetheless neatly dovetails into the known facts, and is thus, incidentally, in the spirit of what I have invented. Each of these examples offer a kind of hidden door leading to a new, hitherto-unknown way to frame known events, not only suggesting the finding of fiction-within-reality but delivering imagined versions of events in such a way as to starkly alter both the angle and the lens from which the subject may be seen.

One way to view biofiction is that it grew out of a frustration with the limits of biography,<sup>275</sup> offering the chance to get out of the third into the first person, to get up right close to the subject, to go beyond the sources, to create as Alvarez called it 'that kind of truth which is more than facts, but includes the facts [...] the emotional, the *lived* reality of that moment and that drama, and the feeling of the character living it'. Indeed, the key element of successful biofiction according to Moses mandates '[the use of] fiction in order to illuminate

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<sup>274</sup> Joanna Scott, 'On Hoaxes Humbugs, and Fictional Portraiture', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 31, 1 (January 2016), pp. 27-32, repr. in Lackey, *Biographical Fiction*, pp. 101-102.

<sup>275</sup> Meanwhile the 'rules', if they exist, are arguably evolving for biography as elaborated earlier. A biography may be praised for its 'novelistic insight', as indeed was Lyndall Gordon's *Outsider Women* (2017), 'for pushing into the biographical material to substantiate her hunches' and taking her books into the realm of 'speculative literary biographies', but paradoxically novelists, if they tackle historical or biographical subjects, will find themselves placed in a position of having to defend their work in terms of its factual accuracy as noted by Tessa Hadley in 'Outsiders by Lyndell Gordon review – five women who changed the world', *The Guardian*, 25 October 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/oct/25/outsidere-by-lyndall-gordon-review-five-women-writers-who-changed-the-world>> [accessed 2 January 2018].

the character in a new way that facts alone can't'.<sup>276</sup> She points out by way of example how Charyn's novel about Dickinson was a work that was 'wildly imaginative [and] created a 'wild and far-flung thing' a 'fantasy life' for her that 'in its execution was "completely justified" straying from the facts'.<sup>277</sup> Similarly, when Susan Sellers explained why she chose to write a novel about Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell<sup>278</sup> rather than attempt a biography, she alluded to the greater freedom of the novelist: '[F]iction is not biography: it does not have to quote its sources and it can take liberties with the truth. It can stage interpretations that arise from the imaginative endeavour of attempting to get into a character's head'.<sup>279</sup> Some might say that this is a fundamentally 'false' sense of illumination for the sake of entertainment, but an equal and opposite argument can be made that this is an integral element of all literature.

When Cunningham came to make Woolf one of his characters in *The Hours*, he said he had assumed 'the freedom to imagine entering her mind' in such a way that would be impossible for a biographer; a freedom which allowed him as a novelist to 'go all the way into [his] characters, down to their very hearts and souls'.<sup>280</sup> Thus what is required in writing biofiction is an inhabiting of the body and the senses; to write in the guise of the subject, one must 'become' them – it is as though it is stage-acting, as illusory and fleeting as a dream, it is a ruse that must be convincing for the duration of the novel and beyond in the reader's imagination and memory. Alvarez has also observed that 'there isn't anything that so powerfully recreates the interior life of a character, the complex stream of thoughts and feelings in response to what is happening as a good biographical novel'.<sup>281</sup> That said, the conceded greater freedom of the novelist over the biographer is far from open-ended. This raises the matter of whether and what considerations need to be taken into account regarding portraying what is and is not factually correct in fiction. In Charyn's case, trying to create a

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<sup>276</sup> Lackey, *Truthful Fictions*, p. 169.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>278</sup> Susan Sellers, *About Virginia and Vanessa* (Isle of Lewis: Two Ravens Press, 2008), Interview with Sellers <<http://susansellers.co.uk/interviews-and-articles/>> [accessed 5 July 2017].

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>280</sup> Cunningham quoted in Lackey, *Truthful Fictions*, p. 93.

<sup>281</sup> Alvarez quoted in Lackey, *Biographical Fiction*, p. 202.

voice for Dickinson came from ‘reading and constant re-reading of her letters’, ‘not trying to mimic or simulate’ but using them ‘in a way that [would] capture her essence without imitating her.’ Cunningham too describes the pact he made with himself writing *The Hours*: the proviso being that ‘the facts are there for an artist’s use, provided the artist penetrates, by way of imagination, to an imperishable truth at each fact’s core.’<sup>282</sup> Therefore we may conclude that everything in such a venture rests on the quality of that penetrating imagination, in other words on the relative skill of the writer – as to whether readers may decide what is worthy and convincing about a real-life character being woven into fiction and what they may willingly suspend their disbelief for.

When my own biographical scruples were doing battle with the fictional licence I was taking in re-creating a life for Mansfield, I considered what Hermione Lee had said in describing her initial hostility to *The Master* when she resisted the idea that Tóibín, ‘for all his great gifts as novelist’ could allow himself ‘the chutzpah to pretend to be Henry James, to know what he thought, to make up his life?’

Biographers don’t, on the whole (unless they’re Peter Ackroyd) invent their subject’s conversations, or take their clothes off and put them into bed, or fantasise their secret memories and unacted desires. Biographers (if they have any decency) don’t freely paraphrase their subject’s writings, or quote from their letters without footnotes. But novelists are allowed to make free.<sup>283</sup>

But with *The Master*, Lee overcame her biographer’s scruples and the novel — which she had started to read ‘in a state of distrust’— ended up by moving her profoundly. It was, she pronounced, a daring and wonderfully intelligent work, albeit in a genre she was reluctant – as a critic and biographer — to embrace. Yet in making a character of James, she observed that Tóibín had in fact succeeded not only in creating his own invention but had, in scenes ‘invented or extrapolated from fact’ deepened readers’ understanding of James and given

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>283</sup> Lee, ‘The great pretender, Hermione Lee acclaims Colm Tóibín’s *The Master*, a bold attempt at being Henry James’, *The Guardian*, 20 March 2004  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/mar/20/featuresreviews.guardianreview17>> [accessed 7 September 2017].

them a fictional exploration of ‘the complicated, mysterious process of how a novelist – above all, this master-novelist – goes about ‘masking and unmasking himself’. Therein lies the object lesson in biofiction: if a writer has the temerity to make this high-wire act, best execute it boldly and brilliantly, and with profound knowledge of one’s subject.

A quote, widely attributed to T. S. Eliot, that urges writers to be intellectually courageous and provocative, not timorous, famously asserts ‘good writers borrow, great writers steal’.<sup>284</sup> While undoubtedly true of writers such as Shakespeare, this bald claim requires qualification if to be used as any kind of ethical guideline for novelists of biofiction. Viewed in its best light, it is simply a manifesto for boldness, one that resonates for me as a ‘biofictioneer’.<sup>285</sup> It was absolutely the claim made by Madelaine Miller as the inspiration for her novel *The Song of Achilles*, which brings to life the story of the love affair between Achilles and Patroclus, placing the character of Patroclus, hitherto regarded as minor, centre-stage. The idea that the two men were lovers was hardly new – ‘I stole it from Plato!’ explained Miller<sup>286</sup> – but had never been made explicit and the more Miller researched, the more she found evidence to support it; her transfixing tale draws heavily on ancient Greek and Latin texts. Eliot’s assertion that ‘each generation must translate for itself’ the ‘great writers that are not museum pieces but a vital force’<sup>287</sup> is a view which lends itself naturally to this process of reinterpretation and re-examination.

The question, nevertheless, remains as to when and what a novelist can take from previous writers while avoiding any reputational risk and moral stigma that might be associated with using others’ works and their associated ideas and characters. What Eliot meant, I think, implicit in his original quote that the theft is melded ‘into a whole of feeling

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<sup>284</sup> This pithy quote originated from T. S. Eliot’s original quote: ‘Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that which it was torn.’ T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood, Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Knopf, 1921), p. 114.

<sup>285</sup> One can playfully note the term being akin to ‘buccaneer’, which was originally derived from the word *boucanier*, describing the French hunters (and then small-time pirates in the Caribbean) who roasted meat on a *boucan*, or grill, a process which some subjects of biography might feel has a certain aptness.

<sup>286</sup> From Madelaine Miller’s website: <<http://madelinemiller.com/q-a-the-song-of-achilles/>> [accessed 7 January 2019].

<sup>287</sup> Tony Sharpe, *T. S. Eliot, A Literary Life* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1991), p. 72.

which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn'<sup>288</sup> is that 'borrowing' involves copying something original without adding any or much more to it whereas 'stealing' can result in the writer/thief producing potentially a better literary work. 'Good' writers as thieves are able to make over what they 'steal' and incorporate in their works, stamping what is taken with their own particular sensibility and style, and reshaping it to match their own objectives. When writers seek to pay homage to another author by placing him or her as a character or narrator in their own fiction, an additional factor enters the equation, arising from the writers' fascination with the author's work and persona and the strong urge to reflect that fascination. Notwithstanding these dangers, I feel the fable I have created about Mansfield cleaves closely to Eliot's notion of 'stealing' rather than borrowing.

In addition to the ethics of 'stealing' lives, the question that must always be asked with biographical fiction is whether the theft is thorough and interesting enough and to what degree it is accomplished with sufficient skill to be regarded as a successful work in its own right. Speculative fictions that conjoin fact and fiction to imagine hitherto unexplored or alternative paths for real events must offer far more than mere novelty. Ultimately, writers of such fiction require their readers to surrender to the fictitious *what-if*; to allow themselves to be captured for the time they read it, by the contemplation of a counterfactual reality, not in a literal sense, but by – hopefully — the intelligence and, perhaps, the pure quirk of such an enterprise. And yes, such an endeavour doesn't always succeed. It may be accused, as was Ali's novelised version of a plastic surgery-transformed Diana finding a new life in the American suburbs, as being enjoyable perhaps, but possibly in bad taste. Ultimately the litmus test is whether or such a novel adds to our understanding of its subject; whether the writer has the power to give us something unexpected, to challenge or entice us into the story of the life they have created with this inevitable interweaving of fact and fiction.

A salutary warning for me was implicit in Lee's review of Stead's *Mansfield, A Novel*.<sup>289</sup> In her view, Stead was 'trying to do to Katherine Mansfield what Colm Tóibín [had]

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<sup>288</sup> Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, p. 114.

<sup>289</sup> Hermione Lee, 'Capturing the chameleon', *The Guardian*, 29 May 2004

done to Henry James in *The Master*<sup>290</sup> or Michael Cunningham to Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*: to take a short section of a great writer's life, extrapolate its essence from biographical information and primary sources, and turn it into a vivid, immediate fictional narrative which daringly enters into the famous subject's inner life'.<sup>291</sup> While Lee acknowledged Stead's literary and academic credentials and deep knowledge of primary sources (he had edited Mansfield's letters and notebooks) she found his novelised version of recorded events that really did happen and paraphrasings of things that were actually said or written contrived and less compelling than the originals. She was, however, interested by his inventive move of making Mansfield's friend Frederick Goodyear, largely neglected in biographies, more central to the telling of the story.<sup>292</sup> Lee's implication being that it was when Stead unshackled himself from the known biographical facts, and allowed himself to trust his imagination that the material revealed its novelistic spark.

As mentioned earlier, one seriously 'ethically troubling' aspect to biofiction arises where a work of biofiction may distort the image of a character who, being dead, cannot refute the portrayal of his or her life, actions, omissions or general character. Critiques based on fairness by definition need to draw a distinction between the over-imaginative biographer and the free-wheeling novelist, especially in regard to the portrayal of real people. For example, Julian Barnes in his collection of stories *Pulse* (2011) had a fictitious character toss off an anecdote intended to amuse the reader and highlight the snobbishness of the English upper class. The character relays that he has been told that Lady Diana Cooper or Nancy Mitford – he cannot remember which – was on a transatlantic liner and had had consensual sex with one of the stewards one evening.

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<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/may/29/featuresreviews.guardianreview20>> [accessed 2 January 2018].

<sup>290</sup> Lee might have, but did not, referred to David Lodge's novel *Author, Author* (2004) also about Henry James, published the same year or Emma Tennant's *Felony* (2002) which investigated the source of James' *The Aspern Papers* (1888).

<sup>291</sup> Lee, 'Capturing the chameleon'.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

And the next morning he ran into her in the fo'c'sle or whatever and said hello in a friendly way – 'As one would.'

'As one would'

And she replied, 'Intromission is not introduction'.<sup>293</sup>

Neither woman is alive and able to contest any slur that a reader may cast upon her sexual morals. Indeed, the reader may well proceed to view both women henceforth in the same light. It could be argued that Barnes, writing as a novelist, rather than biographer, has a freer hand to invent events and conversations relating to once-living people. Nonetheless one is reminded of Oscar Wilde's acerbic *aperçu* about biographers being the 'body snatchers of literature'.<sup>294</sup> Looked at in this way, the danger is not so much any 'improper' mixing of categories but fairness to those supposedly posthumously traduced.

### **Towards an Ethics of Representation**

It has been put forward by more than one commentator<sup>295</sup> that fictionalising history 'demands an ethics of representation' and that writers of fiction, especially historical and biographical fiction, should adhere to 'some kind of moral practice'.<sup>296</sup> Patrick Hayes notes that Novak drew attention to the way such experimentation creates 'particular challenges for developing any reliable criteria for an absolute distinction between factional and fictional narrative' although according to Hayes, Novak resists Lackey's 'over-schematic categorisation of biography and biofiction as fundamentally different enterprises'.<sup>297</sup> Novak situates Lackey's comments that biofiction is distinguished from biography by its 'creative invention' and that the biographical novelist 'invent[s] stories that never occurred in order to answer perplexing questions' and therefore 'unlike the biographer, uses an actual historical life as a springboard for something other than making the person "known" within her own viewpoint that no matter

<sup>293</sup> Julian Barnes, *Pulse* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), p. 57.

<sup>294</sup> Peter Raby, (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, repr. 2004), p. 15.

<sup>295</sup> For example, Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literature of Memory* (Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 78.

<sup>296</sup> de Groot, p. 31.

<sup>297</sup> Patrick Hayes, 'Experiments in Life-Writing: Intersections of Auto/Biography and Fiction', *European Journal of Life Writing*, VII (June 2018), pp. 27-31 (p. 28).

whether biographical novels should be read as fiction [...] their biographical content clearly interests readers and is recognised as contributing to the subject's afterlife'.<sup>298</sup> When it comes to the ethics of jumping off the springboard into fiction, in my view the onus rests on the biographical novelist to construct a fiction cleverly and intimately based on fact. I concur in this regard, with White's distinction between autofiction and autobiography when he said: 'I believe in truth, I don't buy this bullshit that everything is fiction, I think that's silly. Most people know that the truth is something like a horizon; it's something you head toward. Maybe you never get there, but at least you have a sense of direction'.<sup>299</sup>

Some may well object to the very premise on which my novel is based and thus I needed to ask myself in what ways I could be opening my methodology up to rebuke. When it came to considering how I was going to walk my tightrope between fact and fiction, I looked to writers I admired for guidance. Atwood outlined the set of rules she imposed on herself when she wrote *Alias Grace*, a work which also straddles historical and biographical, based on the life of Grace Marks, a convicted nineteenth century murderess. When she examined documents from the court case she found them unreliable: witnesses often contradicted one another. She decided she could not alter solid facts. Therefore, 'every major element in the book had to be suggested by something in the writing about Grace and her times, however dubious such writing might be, but in the parts left unexplained – the gaps left unfilled – she was free to invent. Since there were a lot of gaps, there [was] a lot of invention'.<sup>300</sup> Atwood's approach closely chimes with that of Mantel and Barker described earlier in this chapter. I decided that whatever my fictional inventions, I could not alter the trajectory of the empirical facts of her history, only raise questions and illuminate the reader's perception of them.

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<sup>298</sup> Novak, 'Introduction', *Experiments in Life-Writing*, p.10.

<sup>299</sup> Alex Clark, 'Drawn from life: why have novelists stopped making things up?', *The Guardian*, 23 June 2018. Quoting from an interview with Edmund White in *Asympote* magazine, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/23/drawn-from-life-why-have-novelists-stopped-making-things-up>> [accessed 20 August 2018].

<sup>300</sup> Atwood, 2005, p. 174.



Mantel had also added to her advice for creating what de Groot refers to as the ‘imagined authenticity’<sup>301</sup> of the past by urging writers to employ the most ‘plausible’ and ‘grounded’ facts. In his turn, de Groot<sup>302</sup> has further developed Mantel’s approach, venturing that ‘[w]hat [she] points out, quite fundamentally, is that the writer of historical fiction continually works with unclean (non-sterile) materials, and they have volatility and an affective impact that must be considered carefully’. But one of the accusations against the authenticity of both historical and biographical fiction rests on writers making inherent speculations based on lack of evidence. As historian Patrick Collinson once conjectured, nearly all historical evidence, above all recorded speech, is not available to us.<sup>303</sup> This is where trying to re-imagine these multiple, sometimes comprehensive yet vital unrecorded gaps in the historical record is part of the oxygen of the novelist’s process. As Mantel says: ‘We all have these moments in our lives, and the historian can’t do anything about them because it’s not recorded. It’s only a novelist that can do full justice to these memories’.<sup>304</sup> This is where history leaves off, and a novelist such as herself rolls her up sleeves.

But are there — or should there be — special constraints that writers of biographical fiction ignore at their peril? Or is this chiefly a matter of commercial and critical taste, where a novelist navigates the high-wire between trying to do something new and bold at the risk of condemnation if their work is judged factually un-credible or their concept too far-fetched or crassly postmodern?<sup>305</sup> That the market determines what sells and what gets publicized and that readers consume fiction as a ‘product’ is too obvious for comment, yet it perhaps worth

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<sup>301</sup> de Groot, p. 30.

<sup>302</sup> ‘Booker winner Hilary Mantel on dealing with history in fiction, *The Guardian*, 17 October 2009 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/oct/17/hilary-mantel-author-booker>> [accessed 10 June 2017].

<sup>303</sup> Patrick Collinson, ‘Not Biographable’, *London Review of Books*, 29 November 2007, p. 33. Classical writers such as Thucydides and Herodotus in the fifth century BC had few scruples about putting expanded or made up speeches into the mouths of those inhabiting their histories; a convention entirely acceptable and unremarkable at the time.

<sup>304</sup> Mantel and Barker, Southbank, 2018

<sup>305</sup> A recent case in point is surely *Imagining Diana* by Diane Clehane a New York Times bestseller which envisages a scenario where Diana survives the Paris crash and goes on to another life. Diane Clehane, *Imagining Diana*, (New York: Metabook, 2017.) Readers who might shun such a book might more happily turn to Monica Ali’s *Untold Story* (2011), an alternative fictional scenario for a Diana who fakes her own disappearance and lives on in a small American town. Likewise, Mantel’s short story ‘The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher’ (2014) envisages a ‘what-if’ imaginary narrative of the killing of the former PM by a sniper.

commenting that apparently anything goes commercially, quite aside from any critical reception to blurred genres.

While a reader may enjoy an author's teasing, manipulative and inventive did-it-actually-happen narrative, critical reception of his or her book may also depend on whether readers are put on notice of contrivances of the truth and distortions of the historical record or of the invention of future events in which a currently living person features. Sometimes, a book stretches legal and ethical issues regardless of any literary merit. The actress Scarlett Johansson, for example, went to court in an attempt to block translation of a best-selling French novel, Gregoire Delacourt's *La Premiere Chose Ou'on Regarde (The First Thing You See)*, in which a mechanic is visited by a woman he believes is Johansson, on the grounds that the novel 'constituted a violation and fraudulent and illegal exploitation of her name, her reputation and her image' but although the judge agreed that the novel was defamatory (only in that it imagines two relationships she never had), Johansson was awarded only minimal damages and effectively lost her case. The question could be asked of my novel: what rights if any does a dead person have over the re-animation of their persona in a fictitious story?<sup>306</sup>

Authors of novels such as my own which exploit and explore gaps in the record face a dilemma as to whether they should alert readers to what is history and what is imaginative fiction and append an author's note or a chronology of 'what really happened'. There could be an assumption that the best kind of novelist, as White put it, 'genuinely believes that the historical and the fictional can be mixed but ought never to be confused, in the way that Oliver Stone does [in *JFK* and his] other movies as a matter of course.<sup>307</sup> One can also assume, as writers like Mantel and Barker choose to, that when it is clear enough that a work is a novel, readers can be trusted to know – and enjoy — the difference between history and

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<sup>306</sup> This is where the legal framework on defamation and moral rights pertaining to the living and the dead comes into play, the latter only applicable in the case of an author or the estate of an author who seeks to assert that their work is being used for a purpose that diminishes them. It is interesting to note two recent 'literary mash-up' works associated with Mansfield, one a graphic novel, Sarah Laing's *Mansfield and Me, A Graphic Memoir* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2016) which alternates charming strips of the artist's present-day dilemmas (complete with adoring husband); the other Matt and Debbie Cowens' *Mansfield and Monsters* (Wellington: Steam Press, 2013), a book recasting Mansfield's stories with a gothic horror twist featuring zombies, sea monsters and aliens.

<sup>307</sup> White, 'Historical Fiction, Fictional History and Historical Reality', pp. 147-57.

biography and fiction and won't be confused. My own view is that authors should adhere to some kind of ethical standard if they deliberately meddle with established facts of history and combine fictional and non-fictional events and characters, which is where the filmic 'based on' or 'inspired by' disclaimers come in.<sup>308</sup> Moses was probably prompted by the same concerns when she appended a four-page 'Author's Note' to *Wintering, A Novel of Sylvia Plath* outlining her familiarity with primary and secondary sources and detailing her research: she scrupulously cited sources for all quotations (in lieu of footnotes in the novel) as well as permissions given for any copyrighted material, and included a detailed factual chronology of Plath's life.<sup>309</sup> Mantel, on the other hand, has turned her back on what she has called her 'cringing' contemporaries in historical fiction who 'try to burnish their credentials by affixing a bibliography'.<sup>310</sup> She has urged them not to apologize for anything: 'You have the authority of the imagination, you have legitimacy. Take it. Do not spend your life in apologetic cringing because you think you are some inferior form of historian. The trades are different but complementary'.<sup>311</sup>

In my view, it is the author's right to ask, as he or she decides how to shape a story, how their characters are going to inhabit the time in which they lived, but clearly this is not a task undertaken lightly and without great diligence, as any serious writer of fiction — historical or biographical — can attest. For my own work, I have refrained from attaching a bibliography but I did write an 'Author's Note' citing sources wherever I used Mansfield's

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<sup>308</sup> Richard Harris's *Fatherland* (1992) envisages events in 1964 in a world in which Germany won the Second World War; Harris's 'Author's Notes' explain that, except for the invented backgrounds of the fictitious characters, the narrative describes historical fact up until 1942, and after that everything is fictional. Others refrain, or if they do mention the issue, dismiss it in one graceful line, like Charles Frazier's last sentence in his 'Acknowledgments' in the final pages of *Cold Mountain* (1997): 'Finally, I would like to offer apologies for the great liberties I have taken with W. P. Inman's life and with the [geographical details] surrounding Cold Mountain (6,030 feet)'.

<sup>309</sup> Kate Moses, *Wintering, A Novel of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), pp. 285-88. In her 'Author's Note' Moses writes about the actual events on which she has based *Wintering*, and alerts the reader to where she has departed from the known historical record, and where she has invented and speculated, for example: 'There is no record of Plath speaking on the phone to her mother on December 21, as she is presented doing here'. Moses provides a comprehensive list of books she has consulted, alongside a detailed description of the research and sources on which she has based her work.

<sup>310</sup> Claire Armistead, 'Is Hilary Mantel's view of historical fiction out of date?' *The Guardian*, 4 April 2017 <[https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/apr/04/hilary-mantel-historical-fiction-cringing?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/apr/04/hilary-mantel-historical-fiction-cringing?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)> [accessed 7 August 2017].

<sup>311</sup> Interview with Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch, Oxford Literary Festival, 1 April 2017.

own words, either in dialogue or in imagined first person, something I noted Cunningham did freely in *The Hours*. I could not resist writing an ‘Afterword’ briefly detailing what happened to the most notable real-life characters I fictionalised in my novel, and in this I was motivated by my own strong curiosity and guessing that readers too, would want to know. For it seems, there is always an immediacy to the question – even in the past – about what happens next.

### **Fact, Fiction and the ‘Inner’ Mansfield**

In addition to the above considerations, as I proceeded to write a novel focused on Mansfield – a self-described wearer of masks,<sup>312</sup> and someone once described by her on-and-off friend D. H. Lawrence as being full of ‘lies & poses’, and ‘a liar, out and out’<sup>313</sup> it was necessary for me to explore her own complicated attitude to truth-telling, how she blurred the boundaries between the facts of the raw, private self she kept largely hidden (until Murry’s posthumous publication of her letters and notebooks) and the act of creating herself as an artist, which in a sense involved her inventing and exploring fictional versions of herself. In my close, forensic study of Mansfield’s letters and notebook entries and those of her correspondents, I noted that while in her notebook entries she sought to be brutally honest with herself, she was, at the same time, frequently evasive and misleading in her relationship both with Murry and others.<sup>314</sup> She had every right, of course, to guard her privacy both in her lifetime and for posterity, but I was interested in the psychological impact her secret-keeping had on her personality and her writing, and how her sense of herself as ‘the odd man out’ impinged on her life choices.<sup>315</sup>

That Mansfield was prone to weaving together fact and fiction in her presentation of herself in her complex, introspective writings (whether letters, fiction or notebook entries) was something I found the need to get to the bottom of as I attempted to determine the

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<sup>312</sup> ‘Don’t lower your mask until you have another mask prepared beneath – as terrible as you like – but a mask’, wrote Mansfield to John Middleton Murry, July 1917. *CLKM*, I, p. 318.

<sup>313</sup> *D. H. Lawrence, Letters*, ed. by Aldous Huxley (London: Heinemann, 1932) p. 565.

<sup>314</sup> ‘As I write, I falsify slightly’, Mansfield revealed. See O’Sullivan’s ‘Introduction’, *CLKM*, IV, pp. vii-xi.

<sup>315</sup> Conversation with Janine Renshaw Beauchamp, Mansfield’s closest living relative, the day of a grave ceremony in honour of Mansfield on June 9, 2017 at Fontainebleau-Avon.

significance for creating fiction of what I found to be ‘true’ about her during my research. As I cross-referenced Mansfield’s depictions of herself and descriptions of events with those written by others, notably by Murry and her friends, I discovered that often each source offered different, often conflicting accounts. Commenting on this, Stead noted that ‘the easy adoption of different masks, different voices, is one of the principal skills on which her success as a fiction writer rests, and it is not surprising to notice the way her recognition of the distinct character of each of her friends determines the persona she adopts in writing to them’.<sup>316</sup> ‘My mind is like a Russian novel’,<sup>317</sup> wrote Mansfield, and Claire Davison points out that Mansfield’s ‘notebooks and stories are all like Russian novels too, in the way they reflect ingrained habits of veiling, embellishing and dramatizing the self.’<sup>318</sup> As Patricia Hampl has pointed out, much of Mansfield’s allure rests on the way in which ‘it becomes increasingly difficult to pry her work (the stories) [apart] from the life (notebooks and letters)’.<sup>319</sup> As Hampl reflected:

Ours, of course, is an age with a strong [...] stomach for raw autobiography. We have also developed a taste for the writer’s story behind the story, for what is called ‘creative process.’ Mansfield’s notebooks and letters provide fascinating, sometimes heart breaking, testimony of both. Her struggle against loneliness, and the ache of abandonment she described during the years of illness, rise beyond personal complaints to become, in her transparent prose, models of spiritual searching.<sup>320</sup>

Like Cunningham with Woolf, Tóibín with James and Charyn with Dickinson, in my novel I use the power of singular, isolated real biographical details to suggest areas of story that go beyond the known documentation to support and validate my imaginative recreation of

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<sup>316</sup> Stead, ‘Introduction’, *LJKM*, p. 16.

<sup>317</sup> *KMN*, 1997, I, p. 103.

<sup>318</sup> Claire Davison, *Translation as Collaboration: Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield and S.S. Kotliansky* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 31.

<sup>319</sup> Patricia Hampl, ‘Whistling in the Dark’, *The New York Times*, 16 March 2003 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/16/books/whistling-in-the-dark.html?mtrref=www.google.co.uk&gwh=77086CEB37E5BAA86DF97DCE2B9E2DE8&gwt=pay>> [accessed 16 June 2017].

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*

Mansfield. These are referred to as biographemes<sup>321</sup>, a term coined by Roland Barthes, and have a poignant potency for any dead writer: he conjured up the word as he imagined some future biographer searching after his death, for details of his life, to find it reduced to ‘a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections’, musing that the ‘distinction and mobility of these biographemes ‘might go beyond any fate and come to touch, like Epicurean atoms, some future body’.<sup>322</sup> Tóibín has described his ‘method of merging the deeply personal with the imagined, matters which come deliberately and also unwillingly and unconsciously [as being] the main method by which novelists work, and by which James himself, the supreme novelist, also worked’,<sup>323</sup> a method of intuiting within the edges of the known I could recognize from my own creative process. I studied the physical objects Mansfield touched and lived with, things she kept squirrelled away and preserved amongst her effects<sup>324</sup> and as much as possible I looked for handwritten, original documents and letters in archives. In writing my novel I drew on facts, details, and events from Mansfield’s real life, and the fictional universe she created as she reflected many of her own experiences and emotions into her invented characters, all of which underwent an assimilation process in my imagination. These biographemes provide a living link between the real and the imagined, to be touched, perhaps by the fingers and certainly by the mind<sup>325</sup>, like the first latent particles from which a whole speculative image develops. I think of it, perhaps whimsically, of the developing process for film in the pre-digital era, something I describe Charles thinking about:

The image of her rose slowly from the paper, like a reverse Ophelia, brought back to life. He was always entranced by this process. First, seeing the image on the printed paper only in its negative form, like an X-ray. Washed in developing fluid, how it hints at its form, spectral and hazy. Then, literally, watching as a face, an object, a landscape appeared, gradually

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<sup>321</sup> Biographemes are referred to as ‘kernels of truth’ by Latham, ‘Thieving Facts and Reconstructing Katherine Mansfield’s Life in Janice Kulyk Keefer’s Thieves’, p. 103.

<sup>322</sup> Roland Barthes, *Sade Fourier Loyola*, trans. by Richard Miller (Baltimore, John Hopkins Press, 1997), p. 9.

<sup>323</sup> Barthes, p. 9.

<sup>324</sup> *The Material Mansfield, Traces of a Writer’s Life*, ed. by Laurel Harris, Mary Morris and Joanna Woods, (Auckland: Random House, 2008).

<sup>325</sup> While researching my biography of Stanhope, I was given the urn of her ashes to hold by a Syrian Melkite priest in Lebanon, a most unexpected and wonderful thing to occur, an embarrassment of riches from a biographeme point of view.

revealing itself, the invisible becoming visible. The trick was always to judge the precise moment to take the print out, to ‘fix’ it in time. Too soon, and the image would withhold itself, without definition. Too late, and it would become blached-out, opaque, formless.<sup>326</sup>

Latham refers to this kind of gradual unveiling process as the ‘transposition phenomena that allows authors to create fiction (therefore ‘untruth’) and yet simultaneously make it appear as ‘truth’.<sup>327</sup> The developed image is not ‘truth’; per se. It may even be staged, with all kinds of imported props. Yet it captures something, a likeness, an interpretation at a given moment, and stands as an object in itself as a way of seeing the subject. In every way this approach allows gaps – ‘negative space’ – to be a spur for the imagination, allowing a freedom to go further in fiction and create scenarios off limits to a biographer.<sup>328</sup> With this in view, I was intrigued by the psychological import of an undated entry in Mansfield’s notebook written in the spring of 1922 in Paris, headed up ‘135’:

Well! – who could have believed it – who could have imagined it! What a marvellous what a miraculous thing to [have] happened! I’m trembling; I feel quite... But I mustn’t get too excited; one must keep one’s sense of proportion. Be calm!

I can’t, I can’t! Not just for the moment. If you could feel my heart! It’s beating very fast, not racing, as they say, but it’s simply quivering – an extraordinary sensation – and if I am quite sincere I feel such a longing to kneel down. Not to pray. I scarcely know what for. To say Forgive me! To say, my darling. But I should cry if I said it. My darling! My darling! Do you know I’ve never known anyone well enough to call them that. It is a beautiful word, isn’t it. And one puts out one’s hand when one says it & just touches the other... No, no. It’s fatal to think such things. One mustn’t let oneself go [...]

If a flash-light photograph had been taken at that moment, or if a fire had broken out & we had been unable to move and only our charred bodies found it would have been the most natural thing in the world for people to suppose we were – together. Even his reading the newspaper & not speaking to me seemed to make it more natural.

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<sup>326</sup> Ellis, *Sudden Flight*, taken from completed novel, unpublished at date of thesis submission.

<sup>327</sup> Latham, p. 106.

<sup>328</sup> Pushing this transposition idea further, as Hayes notes, ‘there is a resonance here with Barthes’s interest in musical metaphors for self-knowledge... which can be traced back to romantic ideas about ‘symphilosophy’ as an alternative to subject-centred notions of truth. Hayes, 2018, p. 30. In addition, it is no accident that in writing about his process of interpreting Dickinson in fiction, Charyn observed that ‘[he] wasn’t trying ‘to steal her music.’ His observation that writing is ‘all about music’ – ‘the music the novelist writes and the music the reader listens to’ is an idea widely expressed by writers, and openly alluded to by Mansfield herself. Phelan and Vallas, 2011.

This tenderness, this longing, this feeling of waiting for something. What is it. Come! Come! And then one goes out and there are new leaves on the trees, the light shakes in the grass and everywhere there is a gentle stirring. I have never been very good at imagining things. Some people have so much imagination. They make up long stories about the future.<sup>329</sup>

It was this entry that prompted me to invent Charles and gave me additional licence to consider that Mansfield had a capacity to long for someone quite other than her husband, someone in whom to confide, if the occasion presented itself.<sup>330</sup> The fact that Mansfield often deliberately obscured her own record of her personal history (which as mentioned earlier, she had every right to do) is hardly surprising. All of Mansfield's biographers have commented on her highly evolved secretive, contrary and conflicted nature.<sup>331</sup> The entry becomes more intriguing when one finds that in a letter to Murry's brother, Mansfield describes herself as staying in room 134 and Murry arriving to stay in room 135.<sup>332</sup> Might the diary entry date from before or after Murry's arrival? Or is Mansfield deliberately fictionalising her own emotional landscape, perhaps imagining a version of herself as a potential character in a story, transposing her hopes for the kind of love she craved and which we know from many of her notebook entries at that time she was not experiencing in reality with her husband? As

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<sup>329</sup> *CW4*, p. 429. Also see commentary footnote 322.

<sup>330</sup> In creating the fictional character of Charles and his relationship with the character of Katherine, I was in part inspired by an admission after Mansfield's death by her admirer Gerhardi, seven years her junior who, in acknowledging the depth and poignancy of his feelings for her as a woman felt he could have loved her had circumstances been different, and perhaps been able to be 'lastingly-happy'. Claire Davison, 'Near Misses: From Gerhardi to Mansfield (and back) via Anton Chekhov', *Katherine Mansfield and Russia*, p. 71. That the ailing Mansfield inspired this depth of feeling, right up until her death, not just in Gerhardi, but in Aiken and others, gave me the justification, should I feel additional need for it, to create an imaginary past lover. I took note of several encounters with men Mansfield mentions in her letters, about whom she mysteriously says no more, one describing being walked home late one night in wartime Paris, and these lines from her time in Fontainebleau: 'There is a man here who is going to take a photograph of me one day. I have changed. I no longer have a fringe – very odd'. *Letters between Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murry*, ed. by Cherry Hankin (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1991), p. 399.

<sup>331</sup> The title of Claire Tomalin's biography is particularly apt: *Katherine Mansfield, A Secret Life* (1987).

<sup>332</sup> This entry would appear to date from Mansfield's stay at the Victoria Palace Hotel in early 1922, where in March, in a letter to Murry's brother Richard she anecdotally reports that she and Murry are staying in 'two rooms'. This notebook entry is referenced in *CW4*, p. 429; the letter in *CLKM*, V, p. 87. Mansfield describes her and Murry's adjacent rooms: 'I am 134 and Murry is 135', in an unfinished letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, quoted in *Katherine Mansfield and the (Post)colonial*, ed. by Janet Wilson, Gerri Kimber and Delia da Sousa Correa (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 170.



Valerie Baisnée observed, ‘we can wonder whether the notebooks are a place where Mansfield freely experiments with writing or whether they belong to a genre with its own implicit “laws” about self-writing’<sup>333</sup>. Mansfield was clearly playing with ideas when she wrote this entry, indulging in some kind of subterfuge summed up by the French theorist and writer Serge Doubrovsky: ‘A dream is not life, a book is not life. But what manner of dream might it be?’<sup>334</sup> I can think of no better or eloquent summation of the possibilities inherent in biofiction, nor for what motivated me in my own exploration of my subject’s life.

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<sup>333</sup> Valerie Baisnée, ‘My Many Selves: A Reassessment of Katherine Mansfield’s Journal’, *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism*, p. 179.

<sup>334</sup> ‘L’autofiction, c’est comme le rêve: un rêve n’est pas la vie, un livre n’est pas la vie’, Interview with Serge Doubrovsky by Nathalie Crom, *Télérama*, 29 August 2014 <<https://www.telerama.fr/livre/serge-doubrovsky-inventeur-de-l-autofiction-un-individu-ce-n-est-pas-que-beau-a-voir,116117.php>> [accessed 8 October 2017].

## Conclusion

Mansfield once said, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, that she was not one of those writers ‘who make up long stories about the future’.<sup>335</sup> In writing this novel, I am one of those people, writing a future for Katherine, but set it in the past.

In her early days after arriving fresh from New Zealand and venturing onto the London literary scene Mansfield admitted to enjoying playing a game when she went to parties by sometimes pretending to be someone quite other than who she was, rather like a Bloomsbury Holly Golightly. ‘Would you not like to try all sorts of lives – one is so very small – but that is the satisfaction of writing – one can impersonate so many people’,<sup>336</sup> she wrote to a friend. In her notebook, when still a schoolgirl, Katherine reflected on ‘that most sly, ambiguous, difficult piece of advice: ‘To thine own self be true’. . . True to oneself! which self? Which of my many — well really, that's what it looks like coming to — hundreds of selves?’<sup>337</sup> In my fiction I have done my utmost to stay true to at least one of those possible selves. My portrait of Mansfield, which concentrates on a specific moment in her life, is by definition limited, and does not seek to be exhaustive. Like all portraits, it exaggerates some features, omits others and it is drawn in the hope of revealing a previously hidden story.

It was difficult to shake off the biographer’s ingrained urge to cleave to known and previously documented facts when I first began to tell Mansfield’s story. I did not want to attempt to ventriloquize Mansfield, her husband or any of her famous literary friends. Nor did I want to confine myself in a tight thicket of historical research. As to the perils that could arise from writing about a dead writer, literary critic Carlene Bauer pointed out that ‘...we write novels about authors to see if we might get closer to these figures, or coax what remains unsaid out of them. But if an author leaves behind a mountain of diaries and letters, there may

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<sup>335</sup> See the last line of excerpted text quoting Mansfield on p. 268 of this commentary.

<sup>336</sup> *CLKM*, I, p. 19.

<sup>337</sup> *CW4*, p. 349.

be nothing left to imagine but a glorified series of stage directions.<sup>338</sup> Mansfield's own Mt. Annapurna of diaries and letters and the existing biographies about her certainly answer to the point made by Bauer. Above all, it was evident to me that in writing fiction about Mansfield it could not be a matter of doggedly gathering up notebook entries here, adding in shards of history there, a sprinkle of reported conversation with a dash of literary hearsay there, and then giving the mixture an inordinate soak in the sacred primary texts. My intention was to create a work that was, as Novak puts it 'the product of biographical scholarship and authorial imagination'.<sup>339</sup>

In this undertaking to unveil my character 'Katherine' I had to somehow put the literary personage of Mansfield aside, heed the cautionary remarks of Lee<sup>340</sup> – and Oates<sup>341</sup> – and take the plunge, fully aware of the risks this high-wire act might involve. My aim was to find another – and an intimate — way of looking at who Mansfield had become at the end of her life, to give readers a last glimpse of her at a time when she recorded very little, and to write in such a way that readers might be able to feel as close to her as if they had met her themselves. Such a reinterpretation – I decided — could only be made possible through the invention of a fictional character, a witness who could be judged by the reader as reliable, unreliable, or a mixture of both. For me to invent a story – an affair – and to pitch it into the left field of the Mansfield-Murry ménage, pushes me into the Epstein's definition of a 'biographical guerrilla'.<sup>342</sup> In staging what some may see as perhaps a provocative and transgressive act, I concede the deliberate naughtiness in my deliberate upending of Murry's narrative. But I do not commit the sin of pretending it is real, in the way Mailer by his own admission did when he criticized himself for 'the most unforgivable act as [he had] ever committed as a writer' when he presented the unproven circumstances of Monroe's death,

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<sup>338</sup> Carlene Bauer, 'Literary Lives', *The New York Times*, 12 June 2015  
<<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/14/books/review/literary-lives.html>> [accessed 7 September 2017].

<sup>339</sup> Julia Novak, 'Feminist to Postfeminist, Contemporary biofictions by and about women artists', *Angelaki, Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 22, 1, March 2017, pp. 223-230.

<sup>340</sup> See footnote 289, p. 260 of this commentary.

<sup>341</sup> See footnote 35, p. 188 of this commentary.

<sup>342</sup> Epstein, p. 230.

widely speculated to have been murder, as circumstantially implied fact.<sup>343</sup> But in steering readers to consider the idea of a re-aligned narrative and the existence of bigger question marks that may have been at stake in Mansfield's life, I am asking them to take another look at her story. As writer-detective, I've used the facts to extrapolate a possible interpretation and come up with a lover from the past who is, in effect, a bomb thrown into the picture, to maybe find a larger truth, and a deeper understanding of who Mansfield was, and what she might have gone on to do, as a woman and an artist, had she lived. 'I'm 33, I feel I'm only just beginning to see now what it is... I want to do. It will take years of work to really bring it off', she wrote, the spring before her death.<sup>344</sup>

It's probably true that everyone on whom Katherine Mansfield has made a strong impact cherishes their own version of her, so to some, even the idea that I might dare to recreate her point of view – or write in her voice – might be an affront. To counter that, my aim was not to try to 'steal' her genius or match her wit, but to take the reader on an adventure and try to explain this particular – sparsely documented – period in which she chose to undergo radical upheaval and change, a time in which Mansfield went from Paris – where she underwent experimental radiation treatments that undoubtedly shortened her life— to Fontainebleau, where she wanted more than anything to go on living.

Although my protagonist is a complete invention, as I scrutinised the historical record and the verifiable facts into which I dovetailed my fiction, I could not say with certainty that something like this might never have happened or could never have happened. An important element for me, in order to write this novel, was that I needed to convince myself that what I invented could in fact have plausibly been possible. One of my primary concerns was to ensure the accuracy of the factual architecture from which I was constructing my fiction, but it was not to take shelter in but rather to use it as a platform from which to take what Woolf

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<sup>343</sup> Norman Mailer, *Marilyn* (New York: Warner, 1973), p. 350.

<sup>344</sup> *CLKM*, V, p. 114.

referred to as the leap that writers of fiction, ‘being ‘anarchists’, have to take, ‘from what we know to the instinctive’.<sup>345</sup>

This is where fiction can provide a narrative where biography does not — or cannot. It seemed to me that there were real gaps in what could be definitively known during this period which offered opportunities to insert some delicate imaginative judgement and invention. Fiction seemed to me to be more than just a useful tool to unlock the puzzle – it allowed me to make judgements and interpretations of the historical facts. I wanted to find a way for readers to encounter her, through a relationship which cannot be remembered as ‘fact’ because it did not exist; it can only be imagined.

In 1929, Mansfield’s friend Brett recollected the strong impression she had of how changed Mansfield was before she left for Fontainebleau:

It was as if all fear had left her. As if the same impulse to hide had turned to an impulse to stand revealed. To be herself to everyone – she seemed to have come to the knowledge that nothing and no one could hurt or destroy her. She was in a high spiritual condition – where love poured out in handfuls was all and everything. Compassion – tenderness.<sup>346</sup>

This recollection, written after Mansfield’s death, and after the dust had settled on Brett’s own disastrous romance with Murry, is accompanied by wistful regret: ‘If only we had known of New Mexico, she would be alive now – but she sought a further freedom – a renewal of her writing life and died in the adventure. She was lovely – lovely beyond words.’<sup>347</sup>

The claim that my novel makes an original contribution to literature by offering a fresh and feasible perspective on what is already known about Mansfield relies on several elements, which, as the narrative proceeds, are co-dependent on each other, like a three-legged stool. First, when I delve into her long-standing relationship and communications with Mahupuku, it becomes apparent to the reader that having enjoyed such a strong and

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<sup>345</sup> Bell, I, p. 181.

<sup>346</sup> Jill Golden 1999, ‘Letters from Dorothy Brett, 1929 to 1935. English Language Notes’, 37, 2, 51-67. Copyright 1999 Regents of the University of Colorado <space.flinders.edu.au> [accessed 2 June 2018], p. 54.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid, p. 54.

cross-cultural connection had not only influenced Mansfield but given her a lifelong appreciation of the Maori world in the context of the profoundly different Maori and European cultures at play in colonial New Zealand during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Secondly, by taking the opportunity to treat her husband Murry as an unreliable witness with a strong vested interest (not just pecuniary) in framing her life and their relationship, I unpick his interference with the historical record which gives me the opportunity to question and re-frame many aspects of Mansfield's life. The third and pivotal element of originality in my novel relates to the last period of Mansfield's life, when by her own acknowledgement she was engaging in re-evaluating her relationships, her view of herself, the world and what she wanted to do as a writer. In order to explore this, I invented a character – a former lover – who encounters her in two historically feasible situations seven years apart — who can speak to her past, present and future because he was witness to her physical prime when they first meet, and he is witness again when she is, although unwell, in her intellectual prime. He is afforded insights into past and present events and relationships in her life and her true unguarded feelings about them – insights that only someone trusted and allowed to become emotionally close to her could have been given. Like her he is a colonial, an outsider, and like her he is seeking a new direction in life, although intellectually more inclined to follow Jung than Gurdjieff. In other words, I am using all each of these related elements as devices in order to see Mansfield anew, and to tell an unexpected fictional love story.

In reviewing Charyn's book William Kowalski wrote of the sensations it provoked: 'I had hoped that there was someone like Dickinson out there. My one regret, after finding her, was that I would never get to make her acquaintance. No doubt millions of others feel the same. It's for us that Jerome Charyn has written this book'.<sup>348</sup> This honest confession echoes my own: I wrote my book wanting to meet the Mansfield I came to imagine, and I hope readers feel the same. I contend that in this kind of novelistic risk-taking — a trait especially

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<sup>348</sup> William Kowalski, Review of *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson* by Jerome Charyn, *The Globe and Mail*, 1 April 2010 <<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/review-the-secret-life-of-emily-dickinson-by-jerome-charyn/article4314290/>> [accessed 3 June 2018].

inherent in biofiction — I am not veering towards the abandoning of fact or falsification of truth but exploring the value of going further into pure invention and inhabiting it as stated fiction. To the question whether such novels should exist – novels such as mine, Charyn’s and Cunningham’s – my answer to this is implicit in the undertaking: each writer of a biofiction of this kind sets out to bring something unique of themselves in magnifying the work and mind of another writer, their own vital and valuable fingerprint, to make themselves a human bridge, between their subject and their time, and that of the reader. I have sought therefore to create an absorbing work of fiction from Mansfield’s life and to provide a new view of her world, inevitably bringing something to it of my own.

In sum then, even supposing that what I have written might be close to the truth and told with as much faith as I can manage, I concede it is merely fiction, a way to see the facts, told in the spirit of Emily Dickinson’s line: ‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant’.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> Emily Dickinson, ‘F1263’ in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. by Ralph W. Franklin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press 2005), p. 494.

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