Not ‘Do You Remember’, But ‘What If’?

Gerri Kimber

Katherine Mansfield snapped shut the plastic cover of her typewriter, leant back in her desk chair and stifled a small yawn. The typescript for her latest novel lay next to the typewriter, ready to be sent to her publishers. She was quite certain it was her finest work to date. With her seventieth birthday just days away, she believed herself to be at the height of her craft. Writing was still her passion – her ‘metier’ – after all these years.

She raised herself up slowly from her chair – rheumatism was now a constant curse – and walked over to the window. It was dark; or as dark as it could ever be in a London street, with lampposts and car headlights creating a softly orange world. The curtains in the bedroom of the little boy who lived opposite were tightly drawn. There was just the faintest glow discernable from the nightlight his mother said he could not sleep without. Last week she had invited the boy and his mother to tea. She expected to be disappointed, to find fault, but they had exceeded her expectations. The husband was a government minister and almost never at home. The woman, she sensed, was lonely.

They had sat in her drawing room, the two women sipping tea, the boy, aged six, drinking juice and eating his slice of rich fruit cake with obvious enjoyment.

‘The cake is very special. It’s from New Zealand’, she had told him, ‘sent by one of my relations’, and had then fetched an atlas and shown him exactly where it was on the map. He had delighted in this information and she observed how the mother sat with burning pride as her beautiful boy asked intelligent, curious questions, which ‘Miss Mansfield’, the famous writer, seemed only too delighted to answer.

She moved away from the window as a draught from the casement brushed across her face and sent an involuntary shiver down her spine. She had recently had the very latest central heating installed, with large radiators in every room. Oh, the joy of always being

warm; it was a luxury she never, ever, took for granted. She had spent so much time earlier in her life being constantly cold, dreading the winter months. Literary acclaim and its financial rewards had made her a wealthy woman, but even now, her memory as sharp as ever, she could take herself back to the winter of 1922, where she had spent several months in Fontainebleau at Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. The experience had altered the course of her life forever, but the freezing conditions of that winter (which layers and layers of clothes and a fur coat had not been able to assuage), had left her with a horror of the cold that bordered on the obsessive.

Smoothing down the silk of her dress with her elegantly thin and beautifully manicured hands, she walked towards the door, her black patent court shoes sinking into the deep pile of the carpet. Fastidious. Always immaculate. She could not bear the thought of 'letting herself go' as women of her age so often did. Why, she spent more on her personal grooming now than she had ever done in her life. Self-indulgent possibly, but it gave her the profoundest pleasure. Her three sisters were the same – always perfectly turned out. They laughed about it on the rare occasions they saw each other and put it down to mother's influence from years ago.

Last month she had treated her sisters (all together in England for a family wedding) to dinner at the Café Royal, a favourite haunt of hers. She enjoyed scrutinising them, not obviously of course, but quietly, feline in her quicksilver observations, missing nothing. She had never forgotten how they had more or less ignored her when she was a struggling author, living an uncertain – and to them, unsavoury – existence, travelling round Europe, tubercular, somehow dangerous. Cheap, thoughtless gifts had arrived for Christmas and birthdays, a handkerchief, a ribbon. But she had learnt to forgive them.

After her time in Fontainebleau she had no longer felt able to go back to Jack and the 'old life'. Instead, to the delight of her father, she had returned to New Zealand for two years

to rest, recuperate, take stock and rediscover her roots. One could call it surrendering, but it was an act which saved her life. Gradually the tuberculosis had loosened its grasp. Miraculously, slowly, she started to get better. Royalties from her books at long last put her on a firm financial footing. She bought herself a little house in Wellington and spent her time writing and reading. The result had been her first novel *Karori*, based on the characters she had created in her short stories 'Prelude' and 'At the Bay'. At last she had found the ability to sing a longer tune, to overcome that incessant hurdle of only ever being able to write short stories. Darling Leslie had taken centre stage, her promise to her dead brother fulfilled. The book's worldwide success had astonished her and she had become a household name. The 'feel good' factor the novel evoked had eventually led to it being turned into a film. She had been invited onto the set and had gloried in this. The director had even found her a small non-speaking part, which brought back memories of her forays into the world of silent films as an extra when she was in her early twenties.

Seven more novels, three further collections of short stories. She was a 'national treasure' in both New Zealand and England. She returned 'home' to New Zealand for a long holiday every two or three years, employing someone to take care of her house in Wellington during her long absences. During the war however, she had remained in London, in the perfect house she had bought herself in the thirties, stubbornly refusing to move. She had taken in three young nurses as lodgers, who had stayed with her throughout the war, and who still came to see her to this day.

She walked slowly downstairs to the gleaming kitchen where her daily housekeeper had laid out her supper on a tray. Routine, blessed routine. Everything just as it should be. Friends and family when she needed them, but solitude, privacy and a generally quiet existence were essential to her well being.

There had been no permanent partner since Jack. She had come to an understanding on her journey back to New Zealand in 1923 that ultimately she was a solitary creature. Relationships – with Jack, with Ida – had drained her, emotionally and physically. Breaking away had been painful for all concerned but ultimately the best possible outcome. Ida now lived in the New Forest; they met up twice a year and shared memories over lunch. Simple. Undemanding. She and Jack had eventually divorced and he had gone on to remarry – several times. He had named his daughter Katherine, which both touched and embarrassed her. She had gone to his funeral last year, though had shied away from attending the wake. Who would ever have believed when she had been such an invalid during their life together, that she would have survived him? Although quite frail and easily tired, the best possible medical care, together with the luxuries which financial security can bring, had enabled her to lead a more or less 'normal' life, though everything was approached in a measured, careful way, with no excitement or stress.

She unfolded her napkin and placed it carefully in her lap, sprinkled a tiny amount of salt onto her cold salmon salad, and ate slowly, carefully, listening to music on the radio. Tomorrow, she was to be the guest of honour at a dinner party hosted by Laurence Olivier, who was directing and starring in a stage version of one of her novels. She had first met him in New Zealand in 1948 when he had toured the country with his wife Vivien. Katherine had never warmed to her, and now word was they had separated. What a relief for poor Larry. She had bought a new evening gown for the occasion, deep purple taffeta, which her dressmaker had altered very slightly so that it fitted to perfection. With her striking amethyst necklace and black velvet wrap, she knew she would create a stir and this always pleased her. For as long as she could remember, even as a child, being the centre of attention had always brought her the deepest pleasure.

She put down her knife and fork, carefully wiped the corners of her mouth and replaced her napkin, neatly folded, back on the table. Mrs Parker would see to everything in the morning, as she always did. Dear, loyal, Mrs Parker. She poured herself a small brandy and soda, walked through to the drawing room, and sank down into an armchair. Letters to read, a few to be answered, and then perhaps a long hot bath. Life was Bliss.