

The Last Days of Katherine Mansfield

Olgivanna

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She stood in the doorway of our main dining-room and looked at all and at each with sharp, intense, dark eyes. They burned with the desire and hunger for impressions. She wanted to sit down and eat with all the students, but someone called her to a different dining-room. I asked whose that wonderful face was—I did not notice her body. “She is a writer, an Englishwoman, her name is Katherine Mansfield.” I wanted to know her.

This was in Fontainebleau-Avon, at the Gurdjieff Institute for the harmonious development of the human being. There were men and women from various countries, several from Russia. There were doctors, painters, dancers, writers, musicians. All believed that the possibilities of development, knowledge, and achievement are much greater than those already achieved; that interior life—through self-control, through non-identification with the ever-changing states of one’s being; through sacrifices, through never-tiring efforts to understand more and do more, through willingness to suffer more when needed—can be made real, can be made even immortal.

But immortality is far beyond. Let us say we aim to be real: let the conscious “I” be in the centre and there direct our actions harmoniously until we find the rhythm of Principle. But even this is far in the future. Just to be a completely developed human being, to have our mind, emotions, movement, body, mechanism, in well-proportioned order, is a difficult task. And most of us, indeed, are still far from even that.

So this, in short, was our work in the Institute and we were reaching it by way of ordinary life: in the gardens, in the kitchen, doing housekeeping, farming, until the day’s work to keep up the Institute was done. In the evening we worked in movement, exercises, memorising, concentration. There were some, weak physically, who did very little; some who did nothing. They were only in touch with the ideas and life that interested them. To these latter belonged Katherine Mansfield.

This class was not bound by the rules and duties of the Institute life, or, if they were, it was to a very small extent. In some ways their life was separated from ours, and they had a separate dining-room because, of course, they required different food. Many a time, later on, Katherine Mansfield had expressed her deep wish to eat in the

Russian dining-room with the others, but, to her great disappointment, she never did.

She was very ill indeed. I learned that a great many prominent sanatoria had closed their doors to her under various pretexts. Hotels, of course, refused her. She was in the last stage of tuberculosis. She was soon to leave this world, probably in a few months. One of the most humane acts Gurdjieff ever did was to accept her into the Institute.

I told him what a lovely face she had and how much I liked her. "You take care of her," he said. "Help her all you can."

I knocked on the door of her room. She was sitting by the fireplace. Very white face, dark hair cut short, "bangs" over her forehead, fine nose and mouth, a delicate chin. But the eyes! Just as intense as when I saw her first looking into the dining-room, avid for life, for impressions. And this is what called to me. Again I did not notice that she had a body.

"My name is Olgivanna," I said.

"And I am Katherine, please. That is all, just Katherine. Won't you sit down?" She motioned with a very pale, slender hand which opened half way, with the fingers put together: a very shy and restrained gesture.

"I will bring you some wood to make you warm first."

I was deeply touched by her loveliness, more so because I knew of the inevitable end that she was soon to reach. When I left her room I leaned against the wall for a few seconds. Why had she to die? For the first time in my life I saw one who was near death, one with such living eyes, so young and beautiful. Something became outlined in my mind. I understood her need.

I came back with the wood and sat down. We both looked at the fire in pleasant repose.

"What do you do in life?"

"I am a writer."

"Do you write dramas?"

"No." It sounded as though she were sorry she did not.

"Do you write tragedies, novels, romances?" I persisted, because she looked as if

she should write these.

“No,” she said, with still deeper distress; “only short stories; just short stories.”

Later on she told me she felt so wretched at that moment she would have given anything if she could have answered at least one “yes” to the “big” things.

“I would like to read your stories,” I said.

“I will get them for you, but they are not much. I have not written yet what I would like to write. Some day I will; that is ahead of me. But please tell me about yourself; how long have you been in the Institute?”

“About four years. First at Tiflis, then at Constantinople, then Berlin, Dresden, Paris, and now Fontainebleau-Avon.”

“How interesting it must have been. I wish I could have been with you then. And did you work as hard all the time as you do here?” And she looked at me almost with sympathy.

I smiled. “Oh, I never work hard enough. I am very lazy. I could do infinitely more. We did various kinds of work. Sometimes we would do only exercises, studying new movements all day. And then I had my own work to do. I had to learn how to cook and sew and clean. You see, I did not know any of those things, and they are interesting and quite necessary.”

“Indeed they are.” Now she smiled. “And will you tell me where you learned to speak English?”

“I had a governess in my early youth. Later I studied by my myself; that, too, was part of my work in the Institute.”

“Your choice of words is better than that of most English people.”

“Thank you.”

I had to go. I put another log on the fire and as I did so Katherine leaned forward and slightly touched my head.

The next day was a beautiful fresh October day. The white clouds were playing with the sun. I came into Katherine’s room with a little bunch of flowers that I “stole” from under Miss Merston’s sharp eyes.

"I have already committed a crime a crime for you. This is the stolen treasure. I will put them behind the carafe. Not a word to anybody!"

"How lovely. Isn't this a real 'good morning' for me?" at that moment the sun came from behind the fluffy white cloud and flooded the room. Katherine made a step towards the window. "This sunlight is just like you. It comes in the way you came in, and I know I feel that today is the beginning of a new life for me. It is wonderful. Could you go out for a walk with me?"

We walked slowly down the garden path. We had to stop every little while. Katherine's breathing troubled her. We sat down on a bench. I played with the sand. People went by, some with spades, some wheeling wheelbarrows. Everyone greeted Katherine with a friendly smile.

"Really, Olgivanna, I have not felt so well in years. It is such a relief to see healthy people about me. Even the sky seems to me a healthy blue and as though it belonged to me more. I mean, I feel mere entitled to it. What has disturbed me lately is that I felt apart from everything I loved, as though it was all to be denied to me—the very life, I mean, that I want to live. But here today I am back with it all, and more than ever I feel that I can build up a life within me which death will not destroy."

"And here is everything to help you do it." I was eager to say. "There is no death for one like you who perceives the possibility of sweeping death aside when the time comes as an unnecessary phase to go through. You, I see, treasure the substance of life, not 'living' itself; therefore your body is only a medium through which you receive the thing you love most. And if you learn to keep it, your body then has no more significance, you are not interested in what may become of it, disease, destruction, death, or life. They all are only phases of life."

"Exactly. At last I have it clear; the only truth I really care about. It was flowing in my sub-consciousness, it tortured me, but it never came up to the surface. Now I see the reality of it. I feel it as this sun that is warming my face and hands." Her head was bent down, her hands resting on her knees, receiving the light of the sun as though listening to new life emerging from within.

The busy days went by. Katherine Mansfield made many friends. She would often go and sit down in the workshop to watch the lawyers, doctors, and decorative painters do the carpenter work. She praised those who had precision of movement, whose hammer fell always on just the right spot, or when the saw cut the board in fine, even lines. She would go to the chicken-yard and watch and decide who was the one who was the best with the chickens; and she was interested to know how many

chickens were hatched. She remarked upon what a fine rooster the new one seemed to be.

She asked me once to give her some corn so she could feed it to them. And when the big army of chickens went rushing to her and surrounded her from all sides, she cried out in childlike joy. "Oh, this is wonderful! I feel terribly important. Please get me one. I want to pet it."

I managed to catch one after many failures and much running, and we both laughed. It was all gay, happy, full of sound and sun.

Gurdjieff built for Katherine a terrace in the cow—stable right over the cows. The air of the cow-stable was supposed to be good for her illness. Our best painter, Alexander Salzmann, painted the roof over the terrace in gay patterns of trees and flowers, animals and birds. He caricatured some of the people of the Institute in the faces of the animals and birds, himself included. The floor of the terrace was covered with fine oriental rugs and cushions. Katherine simply adored the place. She never ceased to express her gratitude to Gurdjieff for all that he had done for her. She would spend two or three hours of each day there. And when I could find time in between my duties I would run into the cow-stable and up to the terrace, always to find Katherine half-reclining in a most delightful state of repose.

"How I wanted you to come. I must have hypnotised you," she said one late afternoon, sitting among the cushions of that most charming, fantastic little terrace. The cows were chewing rhythmically, the odour of the hay was sweet and soothing. The twilight was approaching, and the narrow line of the sky was turning deep red. "I should not break this silence. But. Olgivanna, this life is so beautiful. I want to speak, I must speak, I wanted to see you so. I want to tell you, I want to ask you how could I have lived before, without knowing that this existed? What were all my teas and dinners and people, my writing—yes, my writing, too—in comparison with the *real* life that I find here? What were all the doctors in comparison with you? At your very approach I fell better and stronger. And when you go I am left with so much energy that the legion of doctors could not give me a tiny drop of it with all of their prescriptions and pretensions."

"Why, you should not say that. It is not I; it is you, your own effort not to put too much weight in the life of the body, your own capacity to take the highest form of life wherever you see it or feel it, that gives you the energy. I am just one medium of life, and you have found the way in which I am most useful to you, that is all."

Mrs. O. came in to milk the cows. She was tall, beautifully proportioned. She

wore a black dress of an old German style, tight in the waist and around the breast, with the skirt flowing down in rich folds. Her beautiful head was tied with a black scarf. A gentle smile, sad and lovely, was always on her lips. The grey-blue eyes looked into the distance with just a little touch of fear in them. A superior face. And what arms! Plastic, graceful, with the wrists softly curved into the long-covered hands. Those hands began to milk, evenly, rhythmically; her head pressed against the cow's body. The cow stood perfectly still.

Katherine had a great admiration for Mrs. O., who could not speak English. They often conversed with smiles and gestures.

After Mrs. O. left, Katherine again broke the silence. "I think she is splendid. I am certain that the cows are in a state of exaltation while she is milking them! They must experience a super-cow-sensation, if they are at all decent cows!" We laughed.

"And I always envy Mrs. O.," I sighed. "I do want to milk the cows so much, but I never have been trusted with that work. What do you suppose the cows would think if I milked them?"

"Well," Katherine looked at me, putting her head on one side and looking down at the cows, "you know, I think that if you milked them they would smile a little, but they would like it. It would be a very unusual experience for them, I am certain, because you somehow are too different from their ideas of the personalities they come into contact with through milking. You see how much I know? I almost feel like writing an essay on 'The Psychoanalysis of a Cow'."

But there were days when Katherine felt very low. And the cause was, almost always, that she was not what she would like herself to be. "I am wicked, Olgivanna, terribly wicked. I shall never be able to change. Why should I dislike some people to such an extent that it is simply nauseating to me? Mrs. N., for instance. Even meeting her in the corridor is enough to spoil my whole day." As she said this she was sitting up in her bed, playing with the ribbons of her bed-jacket. She looked fragile, anxious, and beautiful. "Olgivanna, why are you smiling?"

I got up and brought her a mirror. "Look. You see how nice and sweet you look?"

She blushed like a child. "Why, what do you mean?"

"I will tell you. I mean that if feeling so 'terribly wicked' you can look so sweet, your wickedness surely is not so very serious. Evidently your physical likes and dislikes do not affect the real You. And that must mean that you are on the right way,

and even if you yourself do not know it yet. You will always have your physical functions; you cannot throw your body away, but your attitude toward your physical likes and dislikes has changed. And I know that at this moment you are ready to smile together with me at your dislike of Mrs. N. After all, the poor woman is not guilty of anything."

Katherine covered her face with her hands. "I am a fool, and I don't want you to see me smile. Don't look at me." And she laughed. (She knew I disliked Mrs. N. myself.)

"I will tell you something worse that will make you laugh more. Guess what new work I am going to have this week."

"Milking the cows," she burst out with joy.

"No," I said very sadly. "Far from such honour. I am going to take care of the pigs—Mr. and Mrs. And dozens of little ones."

"Pigs? Take care of the pigs? Oh, it isn't possible!" she was very much concerned. "Pigs! But what will they do with you? Or rather, what will you do with them, I mean? Or both? Incredible! Laughter quivered in the depths of her eyes.

I went on sadly. "Those pigs are such strange animals. Madam O. said to me that they are very intelligent and that it will be quite interesting for me to get acquainted with them. But I don't feel like meeting them at all. She is so enthusiastic about them, but somehow that does not give me any encouragement."

"My poor Olgivanna, we simply must do something about it! I have an idea." Her eyes flashed. "After everybody goes to bed tonight, you and I will go out, open the back gate into the street, and chase the pigs out. They will wander into the Avon and somebody will steal them. And tomorrow morning I will innocently tell the people that when the pigs learned that Olgivanna was to take care of them they simply could not endure the idea of such high privilege and decided to go and seek a more commonplace life."

My week with the pigs proved to be a complete success. Katherine came down every day to watch me feed them. She insisted that she saw old Mrs. Pig come to me after each meal and wipe her nose on my apron. "Such insolence," she said. "Oh, do kick her once, for my sake. But you know, I must say they are much fatter; you do splendidly with them."

Most certainly I was delighted to hear *such* praise! It quite compensated me for

the care of the pigs. Meantime the building of our study-house was well on its way. The walls were up, and the roof was going on. Again no workmen were being employed. All was being done by our own people. It was fascinating to have a share in actually building something. And one morning I myself felt somewhat weary and restless. I straightened Katherine's room, talked with her as usual, being as careful as I could be in everything I did or said. But underneath it all she felt my restlessness. I wanted to go to help in the building of the study-house. I wanted to go and work in the cold, fresh air; I wanted to be part of the activity, hear the sounds of the hammers and shovels and wheelbarrows. And I clearly saw that Katherine wanted me to stay with her.

"It is a bad day," she said, "it is so grey and cold. I have been so cold." The wood logs were red in the fireplace.

"I will go and bring you some more wood."

"Oh, no, there is plenty."

But I went. My heart was heavy. I had nothing to give. I came back with the wood, warmed my hands by the fire. I looked straight into her eyes. "Katherine, would you mind if I go out to the study-house? I want to go and work there for a while."

She turned her eyes away, and with that familiar gesture of the hand with the fingers put together, she said, "No, indeed. Why shouldn't you go?" But I knew if I stayed another minute she would cry—and I ran out. I did not come back all day. Why did she want me so that day? Just that day when I felt that my supply of energy was too limited to be of any value to her? Her Soul was lonely and fearful. She called to me, and I heard it but could not stay. In the past weeks my life seemed to be an unbroken string of effort and work that started in the early morning and went on late into the night. Many of my nights, until two or three o'clock in the morning, or even later, were spent in Katherine's room. She could not sleep, she told me. So, at first noiselessly, I used to come into her room after everybody had gone to bed, and found her sitting up, looking at the red, blazing coal of the fire.

Many nights I spent there sitting on a little low stool by the fireplace. Sometimes listening to her, talking a little, most of the time dozing, until I saw her fall asleep. Many, many nights. It was my own choice. I tried to go to bed at the same hour the others did, but just as the sweet state of falling into sleep would begin to overcome me, I would see Katherine sitting up by the coal of the fire, sleepless. How could I leave her like that?

But that day I left her. I spent it in oblivion of all sorrows. Just in the mere physical motion of gathering old leaves and bringing them to the study-house, or painting the windows. That day I lived like an automaton who does not have to help to rescue a human Soul, or does not have to try to destroy evil, or inspire peace, or justify any purpose: just an automaton living in mere physical motion—letting all human problems go.

Towards the evening I approached the door of Katherine's room. I hesitated before it. I felt miserable.

"Come in."

Katherine was sitting at the far end of the room. I stood at the door.

"How have you been?" I said slowly.

"Splendid; just fine." She threw her head back. "Very well."

And silence. I looked at the fire.

"Who brought you the wood?"

She laughed, a little, short, bitter laugh.

"Who do you think would be so kind to me? Only one person, one dear friend, *our* favourite friend—Mrs. N. Oh, I had quite a charming chat with her. You see, I am reformed; I remembered all the nice things you told me one day. 'The poor woman'—and everything else you said really sounded affectionate; so partly for your sake I talked to her for a long time, and I can assure you that it is for the last time!"

We both smiled; something was released.

"Katherine, you are wonderful! Will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you? *My* guilt before you is much greater. Did I not tell you I was wicked? I complained about you to Mrs. P. who always comes in to hear or to say something disagreeable. That must be her vocation. I wanted to dull my pain by hurting you some way. I said to her I was cold because you left me without the wood; I did. Now will you forgive me?"

She looked distressed. I did not answer. It really hurt me for the moment. "Oh, don't you know how much I love you? This was the most terrible day I've spent in the Institute, and just because I didn't have your companionship."

“Let us forget it then. Let’s not mention it again,” I said sincerely. “It was a bad day for both of us.”

She opened the drawer of her dresser and took out three scarves with oriental patterns. “Choose the one you like best; I want you to have one—please!”

All three were beautiful.

“You choose it for me. Which one do you think will be the best for me?”

She took a black one with a dark orange pattern around the edges and gave it to me. I have it still.

In spite of all the things I lost travelling on this globe, of all the things that were destroyed in the fire at Taliesin, this little black silk scarf stayed with me. It sealed a strange, unhappy day in my memory, the very day I tried to forget.

As the years of my life still go on that day comes back to me, more and more significant, even beautiful.

New people were constantly coming to the Institute, mostly English people who had attended Ouspensky’s lectures in London, and Americans who through various sources had heard of the work. The few old students were their instructors in exercises. In the large living room of the Prieuré (the name of the old estate) we worked in the exercises almost every evening. Some evenings were spent in building the study-house; we were all anxious to finish it soon.

Katherine loved to watch the exercises. She sat in a comfortable chair near the big fireplace. She always dressed beautifully, simply, with some little touch of colour. She used just enough rouge and lipstick to give glowing brightness to her face. Her hair neatly outlined her head. She lately combed the bang straight back from her forehead. I often sat by her and we would watch together. She understood the beauty of symbolic movement. She watched so eagerly, she seemed mentally to do the movement together with the rest. There was one “group”, “The Initiation of the Priestess”, to which she reacted with much emotion.

“If only I could have just a little place in that group, if I could sit in front of Mrs. O. with my arms crossed on my breast. I would listen to the beautiful music, I would feel Mrs. O’s marvellous arms raised above me in prayer. How grateful I could be for it.

“The music here is an entirely new experience to me. I used to have an overpowering hunger for reading, but not for music. Here I never have enough of it. I

want to listen forever. At the present time music to me is one of the swiftest carriers into the Beyond; it makes me fearless of all fears."

It was the last day of December. I came into her room. She was sitting at the table.

"How is everything this morning?" I asked gaily.

"I feel marvellous."

"Did you know that you have been here more than two months already?"

"Two months? Two thousand years you mean! You and I are thousands of year old."

She drew something with her pencil.

"Olgivanna, will you tell me the truth? Do you still believe I am on the right way?"

"I certainly do."

"But what if I tell you that I am back again with all my old feelings, habits and desires, all those which only a month or two ago I pushed away as worthless? What if even the very clothes which one dear to me is wearing—are precious to my eyes and touch? What then? Would you still believe I am on the right way?"

"Yes, you are on the right way. Yours are not 'old feelings, habits and desires'; they are all new, the same in expression, but born of a different quality. We spoke of it two months ago. You did not believe in anything you possessed. The world in which you lived before, you said, was false; you destroyed it. You went on with much courage to build a new one. You did it. Why should you doubt it now?"

"It is wonderful to hear you say that." She was somewhat excited. "You know, I was a little ashamed to speak to you this way. I am so glad now, I am going to write today to my husband. I want him to come here."

"How nice; and we shall all have a chance to meet him."

"I have another great desire: I want to write a book. This is after a long period of passivity; I am going to write a wonderful book. I must soon get well enough to start to work on it. I cannot tell you how eager I am to write again."

“And I to read it. I might read it to you aloud—you will hear your own voice speaking.”

Somebody was calling me in the corridor. I turned to go.

“Just a minute,” said Katherine. “Do you think it will seem very foolish if I comb my bangs down again?”

“Certainly not. I think it is charming and very becoming to you.”

The next day John Middleton Murry came. I met them in the study-house in the afternoon. We had tea together. We felt a little uneasy. Later in the evening Katherine and I sat down on some rugs in the study-house—it was almost finished. They were painting the windows. The sun was low and the dim light was reflected through the rich green, red, blue, yellow pattern of the window glass.

“Olgivanna, look who is standing shoulder to shoulder with Mr. Murry. They are painting the same pattern on the glass. Life is glorified in its precious nonsenses.”

There she was—our Mrs. N! For the last time she came to mark a tiny dot (to some purpose, perhaps) in the pattern of life that Katherine was to finish weaving a few hours later. We looked, and talked very little. Middleton Murry had taken the brush to please Katherine. It pleased her that he was nice and friendly to everyone. The rain sounded on the roof. I wanted to go and bring an umbrella, since it was about time to go to supper, but Katherine stopped me. “Oh, no, I love the rain tonight, I want the feeling of it on my face.”

The bell rang. “Until later,” smiled Katherine to me, and slowly walked out with her husband. Everyone was gone. I stayed where I was. And suddenly, for no reason whatsoever, the tears began to flow down my face. I could not understand just what I was crying about. Nothing happened, nothing at all! But the sadness of life, a presentiment, seemed to have pressed down on me and would not let go of me.

I got up and walked in the rain and the dark towards the house. After supper we were called into the living-room to do the exercises. There sat Katherine in her favourite place by the fire. I sat down by her as usual.

“I want music,” she said. “Why don’t they begin? It is quite late; they should begin. Are they not all here?”

She seemed strange, paler than usual, unfamiliar to me.

"I simply must see the 'group' to-night. Will they do the 'group'?"

"I hope they will. Have you seen Mr. de Hartmann?" I asked.

She did not answer. She looked, it seemed to me, above the heads of the people in the room, but I could not see just where her eyes were directed. She was dreadfully far away from me. Could she be angry, I wondered. But for what? No, it could not be; she simply did not hear me.

"Did you see Mr. de Hartmann?" I repeated.

"I wish they would begin. I want the music. They simply must do the 'group'. When will they begin?"

This was her answer, and her eyes again looked somewhere above the heads of the people in a direction I could not follow. Neither could I find Katherine. I was alone. We were called and started the exercises. It took great effort to move my body. Katherine's eyes met mine once, but I knew she did not see me. They went straight through and I had a desire to look back and find where they did go.

We began the "group." Katherine's face was pale, but the familiar beloved music did not seem to bring her eyes back. To me that sound was relief. The movement of the prayer became the essence of all that is significant and beautiful. I myself must have been far away, for it took me a few moments to realise that we were stopped abruptly in the middle of it. "We are going back to the study-house," I heard someone say.

Katherine stood up, ready to go to her room.

"Good night, Katherine," I said.

"Good night, Olgivanna." She smiled a pale, indistinct smile. We parted.

I went straight into the study-house, and with the brush in my hand had made just one slow motion on the pattern of the window-glass when I heard the voice of Mr. Orage: "Please come quickly; Katherine is bad, very bad."

I ran all the way to her room. She was lying down on her bed, with several doctors bent over her. They were going through some hopeless motions with hot water bags. She was dead. I touched her hand, still warm.

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