

I behave like a fiend

Deborah Friedell

[Deborah Friedell](#)

Virginia Woolf wasn't sure what she felt when she heard that Katherine Mansfield was dead. The cook, 'in her sensational way', had broken the news to her at breakfast: 'Mrs Murry's dead! It says so in the paper!'

At that one feels – what? A shock of relief? – a rival the less? Then confusion at feeling so little – then, gradually, blankness & disappointment; then a depression which I could not rouse myself from all that day. When I began to write, it seemed to me there was no point in writing. Katherine won't read it. Katherine's my rival no longer.

While Mansfield was alive, Woolf had found her 'cheap and hard', 'unpleasant' and 'utterly unscrupulous'. It bothered her that she wasn't sure if Mansfield liked her – letters and invitations often went unanswered. And she sensed that Mansfield was holding something back: 'We did not ever coalesce.' But, on balance, she hadn't wanted her dead, even if she had sometimes wished that she didn't exist: 'Damn Katherine! Why can't I be the only woman who knows how to write?' She decided that she would have preferred for Mansfield to 'have written on, & people would have seen that I was the more gifted – that wd. only have become more & more apparent'.

And on Mansfield's side? 'How I envy Virginia; no wonder she can write,' she told her husband, angry that he wouldn't take care of her the way that Leonard Woolf took care of his wife. 'That's one thing I shall grudge Virginia all her days – that she & Leonard were together.'

Mansfield thought that if only she'd had Woolf's life ('her roof over her – her own possessions round her – and her man somewhere within call'), she might have written novels too. But although she had sometimes looked up to Woolf (six years her senior) and admired the 'strange, trembling, glinting quality' of Woolf's mind, she couldn't forgive her 'intellectual snobbery', 'arrogance and pride', 'boundless vanity and conceit'. The 'Blooms Berries' had made Mansfield feel like a 'stranger – an alien', never letting her forget, as she wrote in her journal, that she was 'the little Colonial walking in the London garden patch – allowed to look, perhaps, but not to linger'. She wanted to 'be bold and beat these people'; she flirted with them at their parties while plotting to 'crush' them.

Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp was born in Wellington in 1888 to parents who had both been born in Australia but for whom 'home' would always mean England. She died 34 years later in France. Much of what happened in between is up for grabs: no two biographies seem to be describing the same person. She thought of herself as containing 'hundreds of selves', and often went by different names depending on which self was on top: 'Katherine Mansfield', her usual favourite, jostled for prominence with Käthe Schönfeld, Matilda Berry, Elizabeth Stanley, Julian Mark, Mrs K. Bendall, Kass, Katharina, Katoushka and Kissienka. The stories she told about herself often didn't add up – biographers pick and choose which to believe, and hope for the best. Her handwriting was close to illegible, so quotations from Mansfield's letters and diaries tend to be all over the place too. The title of Claire Harman's biography, *All Sorts of Lives*, points to the volatility of her subject and the difficulty of her task. But at least some facts are incontrovertible. The Beauchamps had five children who survived infancy; Kathleen was in the middle. Her father was chairman of the Bank of New Zealand. Her mother was a socialite.

In 'The Garden Party', Mansfield attempted to recreate the Victorian-Edwardian idyll of her childhood: tennis courts, servants, 'exquisite sandwiches', strict separation from the neighbours who lived just down the road, 'an endless family of half-castes who appeared to have planted their garden with empty jam tins and old saucepans and black iron kettles without lids'. The mother character has firm views about calla lilies and hat trimmings, and the death of a workman nearby means nothing to her:

'Mother, a man's been killed,' began Laura.

'Not in the garden?' interrupted her mother.

'No, no!'

'Oh, what a fright you gave me!' Mrs Sheridan sighed with relief, and took off the big hat and held it on her knees.

Harman describes a taped interview from the 1960s in which Mansfield's three sisters, well into their seventies, 'talk animatedly about their mother's femininity, daintiness and fastidiousness'. There was also, one of them suggests, something lacking in her personality: she was 'quite unmoved by other people'. A friend of the family remembered watching Annie Beauchamp reunite with her children in Wellington harbour after a long trip abroad. Kathleen would have been about ten.

I stood beside Mrs Beauchamp as she gazed down in a detached way at the group and to my mind didn't seem overjoyed as I thought she would be after such a long absence. Finally it was to Kathleen she spoke first, for everyone to hear. 'Well, Kathleen,' she said. 'I see that you are as fat as ever.'

In *Katherine Mansfield: The Early Years* (2016), Gerri Kimber suggests that 'if Annie Beauchamp had deliberately set out to create a difficult child, she could not have made a better job of it.' Teachers,

classmates, relatives would remember Mansfield as 'completely self-centred', 'careless', 'lazy', 'impatient', 'the last child in the world they ever expected to become a writer', less sweet than her sisters, and less obliging – 'those who were not her particular friends on the whole disliked her.' It was assumed that her night terrors, panic attacks and fainting spells were 'stunts' she pulled for attention. When she started writing stories, the Beauchamps thought she was trying to show off, probably in imitation of her older cousin 'Elizabeth von Arnim' (Mary Beauchamp), then famous for her novel *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898), later for *The Enchanted April* (1922). The first story in Mansfield's collected works, written when she was nine, is set in the English countryside. She had never seen it, but imagined it to be like New Zealand, with 'a great many nice ferns and some beautiful moss'.

In 1903, when Mansfield was fourteen, she made her first journey to England aboard a small cargo ship: her family was with her, plus a canary, a cello and a clavichord. With her two older sisters, she was installed at Queen's College in Harley Street, which their father intended as a kind of finishing school. Queen's College was more progressive than he'd probably had in mind, and in her journal Mansfield regrets that she didn't make more of it:

My *wasted, wasted* early girlhood ... Is there another grown person as ignorant as I? But why didn't I listen to the old principal who lectured on Bible history twice a week instead of staring at his face that was very round, a dark red colour with a kind of bloom on it and covered all over with little red veins with endless tiny tributaries that ran even up his forehead and were lost in his bushy white hair ... I never came into contact with him but once, when he asked any young lady in the room to hold up her hand if she had been chased by a wild bull, and as nobody else did I held up mine (though of course I hadn't). 'Ah,' he said, 'I am afraid you

do not count. You are a little savage from New Zealand.'

In *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life* (1987), Claire Tomalin argued that Mansfield's lies were 'more for effect than advantage' – she wanted to write fiction, so 'the obvious thought is that she was trying out her plots on her friends.' One of Mansfield's not-quite-friends would remember that 'her great delight was a game she played of being someone else. She would act the part completely, until she even got herself mixed up as to who and what she was. She would tell me that the acting became so real to her that she didn't always know which was her real self.' But if it was a game, it didn't draw in other people. Mansfield complained that although 'there are many people that I like very much,' she didn't know how to reach them: 'They call me false, and mad, and changeable.' One of her stories, told to two of the girls she lived with, was that a man had drugged and raped her, and that she 'might be pregnant'. The other girls didn't believe her, and neither have most of Mansfield's biographers; Harman does, arguing that 'the very fact that she told only these friends, and did so in tears, gives this distressing story credence.' I'm not sure that I follow Harman's reasoning: why would the story be less credible if Mansfield had told more people about it, or if she hadn't cried? But Harman's not wrong that Mansfield nearly always wrote from life, and that 'once you tune in to it, Mansfield's stories show themselves to be full of non-consensual sex': date rape, attempted assault, incest. Harman suggests that, whatever its origins, 'one senses some deep damage had been done' – and on that much, the multitude of Mansfield biographers would almost certainly agree. Mansfield often imagined her own suicide: 'I shall end – of course – by killing myself,' she wrote in her journal. She craved another person 'to nurse me – love me – hold me – comfort me – to stop me thinking'.

At Queen's, she met the person she would later refer to as her 'wife',

and also as 'the monster'. Ida Baker, just a few months older, was a 'colonial' too: her family was from Suffolk, but she'd spent the first years of her life in Burma, where her father, an expert in tropical diseases, had been a doctor in the Indian army. She was taller than the other girls – the reason Mansfield would also sometimes call her 'the mountain' – and clumsy, timorous, with few friends. In the memoir Ida published when she was 84, she described watching Mansfield 'lean out of the window, breathing, listening, absorbed and dreaming', not imagining that she might condescend to be her friend. But 'one day she suddenly asked me what I would do if I found she had done something really awful, like killing somebody with a hat-pin. I replied that I imagined that my first reaction would be to do something positive, not to criticise.' Pass! And with that, she wrote, Mansfield became 'the roadway of my life'. For Ida, their evenings together were 'precious beyond all things ... like pearls slipped onto a string, to be counted and treasured'. Mansfield wrote that she found Ida's body repulsive – 'I don't know why I always shrink ever so faintly from her touch. I could not kiss her lips' – but knew that she needed her, and would make use of her.

When Mansfield was seventeen, she was sent back to New Zealand with her sisters – for good, her father thought. Ida 'lived on her letters'. Mansfield wrote in her journal about the 'Suitable Appropriate Existence' that she thought awaited her: 'the days full of perpetual Society functions, the hours full of clothes discussions, the waste of life'. She missed 'London. O London – to write the word makes me feel that I could burst into tears.' New Zealand girls were fools: 'I am longing to consort with my superiors.' Her parents resisted letting her go back to England: according to Ida, Mansfield 'had written of something that had happened at a ball when she had sat out one of the dances with her partner, and which her mother discovered. In her usual fashion, Katherine had embellished the facts when writing

them down, and her parents, taking them seriously, not unnaturally thought twice about letting her go.' But she wore them down, and two years later was allowed to return to London by herself, with an annual allowance of £100.

She took a room in a hostel for women students near Paddington, with a plan to write and study the cello. What happened next is fuzzy – 'Katherine took care to cover her traces,' Harman writes – but within months she was pregnant by one man, a violinist, and married to another, a music teacher called George Bowden. In her memoir, Ida writes that Mansfield thought she was in love with the violinist, who also came from New Zealand, but his parents hadn't liked her and wouldn't consent to their marriage (required since he wasn't yet 21). When Mansfield realised she was pregnant, she persuaded Bowden – 'a kindly person and, I believe, very much in love with Katherine' – to marry her immediately (she lied that she was of age). The evening after the ceremony, she 'turned cold and distant,' and left him. When Mansfield told her mother some version of what had happened she was written out of her will, and in August 1909 she was dispatched to a convent in the Bavarian spa town of Bad Wörishofen to wait out the pregnancy alone. Ida wanted to go with her, but 'Mrs Beauchamp wished to separate us.' Ida knew that she was being talked of as Katherine's 'lesbian friend,' but 'I did not know then what a "lesbian friend" meant.'

The vignettes Mansfield would write during her confinement, mostly set in a Bavarian spa town, rarely tell a story, but they create a sense of place and mood. They were darker than anything Mansfield had written before – Elizabeth Bowen was struck by her 'terrifying faculty for contempt' and 'compulsive brooding upon the ugly'. Harman suggests that the 'anti-German atmosphere' in England as war approached probably worked to her advantage: editors wouldn't object that her German characters are almost unvaryingly coarse,

cruel, sweaty, beer-drinking and gluttonous. In *Katherine Mansfield: The Story-Teller* (2010), Kathleen Jones notes that the pieces are also almost overwhelmed by allusions to pregnancy and childbirth, and to how little young women know about what's in store for them:

Frau Lehmann's bad time was approaching. Anna and her friends referred to it as her 'journey to Rome', and Sabina longed to ask questions, yet, being ashamed of her ignorance, was silent, trying to puzzle it out for herself. She knew practically nothing except that the Frau had a baby inside her, which had to come out – very painful indeed. One could not have one without a husband – that also she realised. But what had the man got to do with it?

According to Ida, Mansfield wouldn't tell anyone how her pregnancy ended, only that she wasn't going to be a mother. It's usually assumed that she had a miscarriage or stillbirth, but Harman is right to acknowledge that it might have been an abortion. None of Mansfield's biographers seems to have worked out what to make of what she did next except to say, as Harman does, that it's 'strange'. Mansfield, 'depressed and miserable', decided that what she needed to recover was a temporary child. Ida procured for her a 'delicate' eight-year-old boy, persuading his parents that he would benefit from a holiday. He was 'labelled like a package and put on the boat train, and spent a few weeks being petted and sung to by Katherine (or "Sally" as she asked to be known)'.

It seemed to work: Mansfield's mood lifted and she had a brief relationship with a new man – Floryan Sobieniowski, a young Polish émigré – and, more durably, with Chekhov's stories, which Sobieniowski had given her to read. Harman thinks that Mansfield was 'determined to emerge from that desolate time in Bavaria with something to show for it'. When she came back to London after seven months away, Bowden, legally still her husband, gave her a

place to stay. He later wrote that he had assumed she'd left him because she was a lesbian, and felt sorry for her. He also introduced her to Alfred Orage, the editor of the socialist weekly the *New Age*, then in the ascendant as the publisher of George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells.

Mansfield's first story to be published in England, 'The Child-Who-Was-Tired', appeared in the *New Age* in February 1910:

The Frau got out of bed, walked in a determined fashion into the kitchen, returning with a bundle of twigs in her hand fastened together with a strong cord. One by one she laid the children across her knee and severely beat them, expending a final burst of energy on the Child-Who-Was-Tired, then returned to bed, with a comfortable sense of her maternal duties in good working order for the day.

The Child-Who-Was-Tired is a maid-of-all-work – sweeping, lighting fires, drawing water, caring for children, all while being terrorised by the beastly Germans who employ her. In the end, exhausted, unable to get a baby to stop crying, she has a 'beautiful, marvellous idea': 'She laughed for the first time that day, and clapped her hands. "Ts-ts-ts!" she said, "lie there, silly one; you *will* go to sleep. You'll not cry any more or wake up in the night. Funny, little, ugly baby," and smothers him to death. A decade on, Mansfield would write that she couldn't 'go on foisting that kind of stuff on the public. *It's not good enough,*' and wouldn't allow the story to be republished. In 1951, a letter in the *TLS* argued that the real reason Mansfield had turned against 'The-Child-Who-Was-Tired' was that it had been plagiarised, and she worried about being found out. Chekhov's story 'Spat khochetsya' ('Sleepy' or 'Sleepyhead'), written in 1888, also ends with an exhausted servant girl deciding to 'kill the baby and then sleep, sleep, sleep'. Harman acknowledges that 'there really is no

doubt that Mansfield had "Sleepy" in mind all the way through her own composition,' but valiantly insists that 'it remains her own composition, quite emphatically so.' She lists Mansfield's emendations, none of which was an improvement. Chekhov wasn't yet widely read in English translation, and during her lifetime she got away with it.

The joke at the *New Age* was that the paper should really have been called the 'No Wage' – contributors were mostly paid in prestige. A small publisher reprinted Mansfield's 'Bavarian short stories' as a book, also for almost no money, and it probably disappointed her hopes – the circulation of *In a German Pension* (1911) wasn't great to begin with, and copies bound for America went down on the *Titanic*. But socially, the *New Age* gave Mansfield a place in the world: she was 'meeting people with a mental capacity nearer to her own', Ida wrote. 'I began to know the almost physical ache that comes with the realisation of being inadequate.' At one dinner party of *New Age* contributors, Mansfield – who was going by Yékaterina – met John Middleton Murry, an Oxford student who was starting up an art and literary magazine of his own, *Rhythm*. He was already her fan: '*In a German Pension* seemed to express, with a power I envied, my own revulsion from life,' he would write in his autobiography. Beside her, he felt 'clumsy' and 'very provincial'.

She was 23, older than he was by a year, took taxis and said 'auf Wiedersehen' instead of 'goodbye'. He'd grown up in Peckham, the son of a clerk in the Inland Revenue; the only money he had was from his Oxford bursaries. 'It was my duty, I knew, to work at least moderately well and get the First that was expected of me.' But instead of sitting his exams, he moved into the flat Mansfield was renting on the Gray's Inn Road, decorated in what she took to be the Japanese style: 'brown paper on the walls, rush matting on the floor, and hardly any furniture'. Ida prepared a 'cupboard with good things

to eat – hiding a £5 note among the provisions', then left them alone. Murry thought he was 'finished with women' – he'd recently had a bad experience. When Mansfield said, 'Why don't you make me your mistress?' he refused, then relented. Their plan was to edit *Rhythm* together, supported by Mansfield's allowance. Ida would pick up the slack: she tried to charge society girls for 'scientific hair brushing', which didn't take off, so put her small inheritance at Mansfield's disposal. Even so, in her memoir, Ida writes of how anxious she was, always, that Mansfield would tire of her. When she missed the last bus home, she slept 'on the stone staircase outside Katherine's and Murry's door' rather than 'putting them to the trouble of arranging somewhere for me to sleep'.

Murry admitted that he had no idea how to run a magazine: 'When the printers, who were also the publishers, told me to print three thousand copies, I took their advice supposing it to be disinterested.' He was locked into a contract even though 'not one-sixth part had been really sold,' and went into debt. He was determined for *Rhythm* to be avant-garde; nowhere in his memoir does he articulate anything like an artistic vision, but he possessed, as Tomalin puts it, a 'quick responsiveness to fashions in taste' and an 'earnest enthusiasm' that charmed contributors. *Rhythm* was often uneven, but at its best published poems by Rupert Brooke and drawings by William Rothenstein and Picasso. D.H. Lawrence called it 'a daft paper, but the folk seem rather nice' and gave them a story for free.

Lawrence was 28 and about to publish *Sons and Lovers* when he asked to call on the *Rhythm* offices. He had 'formed the curious idea,' according to Murry, 'that we were wealthy and important people: the kind of people, I suppose, who finance daft magazines. We liked one another, and when it emerged, as it quickly did, that Katherine and I were not married, and that Katherine like Frieda was waiting to be divorced, it began to appear ... that we were made for

one another.' For a while, it was 'all straw hats, and sunshine, and gaiety', and the four of them tried living together in Cornwall. But Lawrence didn't believe friendship with a woman was possible, and Murry writes that Mansfield finally tired of watching him fight with Frieda:

One evening when Katherine and I were sitting by the fire ... we heard a shriek. Suddenly, Frieda burst in at the door crying: 'He'll kill me!' Lawrence followed, white as a ghost, but in a frenzy of fury. Round and round the long table they went, Lawrence crying: 'I'll *kill* her, I'll *kill* her!' The chairs were scattered; I just managed to save the lamp. Katherine sat still in a corner, indifferent, inexpressibly weary ... Quite suddenly, Lawrence collapsed into a chair by the fire. The frenzy had left him, bleached, blanched and inert.

The two couples fell out, but not before Lawrence may have put some of Mansfield's early erotic experiences into *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*: Mansfield liked to shock people by talking about her sexual experiences with both men and women, and Harman suspects that the scene in *The Rainbow* of Ursula and Winifred swimming together naked came directly from one of Mansfield's anecdotes about an affair she'd had with a woman artist in New Zealand. Lawrence may also have given her tuberculosis – he had it when they lived together, but was trying to downplay his symptoms. Tomalin writes that Murry and Frieda were probably 'robust enough to be resistant', but Mansfield was already ill from gonorrhoea. Ever since her affair in Bad Wörishofen she'd had irregular periods (she often assumed that she was pregnant), fevers and horrible arthritis; she told people that she had rheumatism. 'I can do nothing,' she wrote in her journal in February 1915. 'My head is so hot, but my hands are cold. Perhaps I am *dead* and just pretending to live here. There is, at any rate, no sign of life in me.' When she wanted to have

a baby with Murry, she realised that she'd become infertile. In his memoir, Murry admits to being useless in a crisis and terrified of illness. Mansfield needed Ida to nurse her, even though listening to her talk 'nearly makes me die with fury': 'Katie mine, who is Wordsworth? Must I like him? It's no good looking cross because I love you my angel from the little tip of that cross eyebrow to the all of you. When am I going to brush your hair again?'

When the war began, Murry was able to avoid conscription on spurious medical grounds. Mansfield wrote patriotic sketches of Belgian refugees, and told her family that she felt well enough to report from France, 'not far from the firing line', for a newspaper, though actually she went to the front illegally (with false documents) in 1915 for an assignation with a soldier in the French army, which she wrote up as the short story 'An Indiscreet Journey'. Harman calls it 'one of the most unusual stories to come out of the Great War', with 'syntax and grammar that continually defy expectations, and a perspective that places us in what seems like an adjacent reality':

Is there really such a thing as war? Are all these laughing voices really going to the war? These dark woods lighted so mysteriously by the white stems of the birch and the ash – these watery fields with the big birds flying over – these rivers green and blue in the light – have battles been fought in places like these?

What could be more thrilling than to sneak into a war zone to have sex? The sentences are jaunty, excited, as banal as catalogue copy:

I buttoned on my age-old Burberry. (That Burberry was very significant. It did not belong to me. I had borrowed it from a friend. My eye lighted upon it hanging in her little dark hall. The very thing! The perfect and adequate disguise – an old Burberry. Lions have been faced in a Burberry. Ladies have been rescued

from open boats in mountainous seas wrapped in nothing else. An old Burberry seems to me the sign and the token of the undisputed venerable traveller, I decided, leaving my purple peg-top with the real seal collar and cuffs in exchange.)

Narrative convention tells us that the tone is going to change: we know, even if the narrator doesn't, that she's on a journey to hell. Only that's not what happens. 'What darlings soldiers are!' Her papers aren't questioned; her lover is waiting to meet her in the Zone of the Armies, just as he said he would. Until they're alone, they have to pretend not to know each other, which only adds to the fun:

Terribly pale, with a faint smile on his lips, his hand at salute, stood the little corporal. I gave no sign, I am sure I gave no sign. He stepped behind me. 'And then follow me as though you do not see me,' I heard him half whisper, half sing.

Harman calls the story 'irrepressibly joyful'. It's unlike the other stories Mansfield would write during the war, after her friends started dying and her brother, Leslie, was killed in a training accident. She hadn't seen him since childhood, but they met when he passed through London on the way to join the British army, and he gave her the money she needed to go to France. Talking to him about 'all the remembered places' made her want 'to write recollections of my own country ... until I simply exhaust my store'. The story 'Prelude' describes the move from Thorndon to Karori when Mansfield was five years old. In her journal, she decides that she's no good at plots, but that it doesn't matter; she urges herself just 'to tell everything, even of how the laundry-basket squeaked':

The dining-room window had a square of coloured glass at each corner. One was blue and one was yellow. Kezia bent down to

have one more look at a blue lawn with blue arum lilies growing at the gate, and then at a yellow lawn with yellow lilies and a yellow fence. As she looked a little Chinese Lottie came out on to the lawn and began to dust the tables and chairs with a corner of her pinafore. Was that really Lottie? Kezia was not quite sure until she had looked through the ordinary window.

Mansfield was proud of the story's form: fragments, short sections, no transitions, no narrative arc, 'stream of consciousness' before the term had made the jump from psychology to literary criticism. 'I expect you will think I'm dotty when you read it,' she told Murry. 'Its queer stuff.' Virginia Woolf wasn't sure 'how much I like it as literature', but would spend almost a year setting it by hand for the Hogarth Press, only just established and in need of material. The two women first met because Lytton Strachey thought they should – he wrote to Woolf in 1916 that he'd met 'Katherine Mansfield – if that's her real name' at a party; he was dismissive of her 'storyettes', but thought Woolf would 'find her entertaining'. At first Woolf was 'shocked by her commonness' and wrote that Mansfield 'stinks like a – well civet cat that had taken to street walking'. But she admitted that she 'was fascinated' by her too: 'She's had every sort of experience.' Woolf would write in her diary that she was 'jealous of her writing – the only writing that I have ever been jealous of', though later clarified that actually she'd stopped reading the stories because of their 'cheap sharp sentimentality'; it was only 'because they were so praised' (she doesn't say by whom) that she'd been jealous. 'I must read her someday.' When Mansfield's stories didn't win the Hawthornden Prize, Woolf knew that she was a little too pleased, and noted in her diary: 'I write this purposefully, to shame it out of me.'

In letters to friends, Mansfield writes that the 'Woolves' are 'smelly' and 'I don't like them either.' But she wooed Virginia with praise, and in a letter urged her to 'consider how rare it is to find someone with

the same passion for writing that you have, who desires to be scrupulously truthful with you – and to give you the freedom of the city without any reserves at all.' Harman suggests that Woolf 'never really appreciated how ill Mansfield was' and assumed she was being snubbed when Mansfield didn't reply to letters. But what most stung was that although Mansfield told Woolf that *Night and Day* (1919) was 'an amazing achievement', her review in the *Athenaeum* presented it as pointlessly old-fashioned, as though Woolf were trying too hard to be 'Miss Austen up-to-date' instead of accepting 'the fact of a new world'. In a letter to Murry, Mansfield said that Woolf's novel was a 'lie in the soul', pretending that nothing had changed since 1914. 'The novel can't just leave the war out. There *must* have been a change of heart ... as artists we are traitors if we feel otherwise: we have to take it into account and find new expressions new moulds for our new thoughts & feelings.'

Woolf's next novel, *Jacob's Room* (1922), would be as experimental as Mansfield could have wished, but she would be too ill to read it. By 1918, Mansfield's handkerchiefs looked like they belonged to 'a pork butcher', and although her doctor told her she would die unless she went to a sanatorium, she wouldn't go, telling Ida that it would be like checking into a 'lunatic asylum'; her main worry was that she wouldn't be allowed to write. Instead, she wanted to convalesce in the South of France, even if it meant crossing a battlefield; Ida made it happen, then moved heaven and earth to get her out again (wartime France wasn't very comfortable). Mansfield tried Switzerland and Italy too before going back to England, then France again. 'I seem to spend half of my life arriving at strange hotels. And asking if I may go to bed immediately.' She would have a surge of energy that would allow her to finish a story – 'Bliss', 'Miss Brill' – then collapse.

She thought that she'd finally figured out what she was doing: 'I

begin to wish to God I could destroy all that I have written & start again.' Her themes were loneliness, disappointment, the fear of being forgotten after death. In 1920, when she was 31, she wrote that 'nearly all my days are spent in bed or if not in bed on a little sofa that always feels like lying in a railway carriage,' but was still 'working very hard'. She was dependent on Ida, though she found everything about her irritating. Ida's lack of confidence meant that she was always interrupting Mansfield with questions about how she wanted things done, or would be too frightened to ask her and then get it all wrong. According to Harman, one of Mansfield's running jokes with Murry was that she was 'tempted to shoot Ida with the revolver they had for self-defence, except the body would be such a nuisance to dispose of afterwards'. Mansfield's letters to her are either cruel or apologies for having been cruel:

You mustn't be so silly as to imagine because I am such a horrible creature I don't love you. I am a kind of person under a curse, and as I don't and can't let others know of my curse you get it all. But if you knew how tenderly I feel about you after one of my outbreaks. You do know. I can't say 'nice' things to you or touch you. In fact I behave like a fiend. But ignore all that. Remember that through it all I love you.

In Mansfield's notebooks, she insists that Ida is a character worth pinning down – 'had a long talk with Ida, and suddenly saw her again as a figure in a story' – but for years couldn't work out how to do it. Before she became ill, she tried writing a novel, to be called *Maata*, in which 'Rhoda' devotes herself to her more talented friend – but, like all Mansfield's attempted novels, it doesn't go beyond the first few chapters. Almost all of the stories she wrote in her last few years are about women 'who find themselves at the mercy of monsters', as Tomalin puts it, and none more so perhaps than 'The Daughters of the Late Colonel'. The germ of it was Ida's journey to Rhodesia to

care for her father. In her memoir, Ida writes that no one else 'could tolerate and manage the occasional fierce outbursts of temper from which he suffered, a legacy of long years of service in India'. She left him to go back to England because she thought Mansfield needed her more, then blamed herself when 'he had a fatal "accident" with his gun.'

In the story, the colonel has been dead a week, but his daughters haven't understood – and may never understand – that they're free of him.

Josephine had had a moment of absolute terror at the cemetery, while the coffin was lowered, to think that she and Constantia had done this thing without asking his permission. What would father say when he found out? For he was bound to find out sooner or later. He always did. 'Buried. You two girls had me *buried!*' She heard his stick thumping. Oh, what would they say? What possible excuse could they make? It sounded such an appallingly heartless thing to do. Such a wicked advantage to take of a person because he happened to be helpless at the moment.

Mansfield would say that when she started writing the story she'd seen 'the two sisters as amusing; but the moment I looked deeper (let me be quite frank) I bowed down to the beauty that was hidden in their lives ... All was meant, of course, to lead up to that last paragraph, when my two flowerless ones turned with that timid gesture, to the sun. "Perhaps now." It's not too late for them, even though they don't know it yet. Mansfield wrote it in a rush 'for fear of dying before the story was sent', and finished it in the middle of the night, just as Ida was bringing her tea and egg sandwiches. 'It's about you,' Mansfield told her.