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## MY FIRM, FAT LIFE

The book rack in the entrance of Katherine Mansfield's childhood home in Wellington, New Zealand, is strewn with baby chicks. Tiny, bright yellow pom-poms with glued-on beaks, eyes, and feet nestle against elegant editions of her letters and short stories, and a few select biographies; they also peer out from behind postcards, stacks of tea towels printed with quotes from Mansfield's writing, bags of potpourri. *Don't touch them*, I hiss at my son, who is two.

"They want to be in the *nest*," he insists, pointing at a neat cup of sticks perched on a stack of T-shirts. "They *want* to be." One of Mansfield's glummer portraits stares sullenly up beside the nest, making me feel self-conscious. The words coming out of my mouth are so suburban, so mom-like. So, in Mansfield's words, vulgar.

"*Only* the ones on the towels. And *don't* pick up the cards. Okay, just that one. But no more."

I crane my neck—where is the desk attendant? I want to pay my six dollars and get on with things. Even my impatience is suburban: it's less that I'm anxious to delve into the rooms surrounding us and more that I know our time here is limited—Silas's snack alarm will go off in roughly an hour and we'll need to find a place to rest and eat and run about. I try to counter Mansfield's contemptuous gaze staring off the covers of exquisite editions of her works by picking up a book of interesting-looking criticism and flipping through it. As I do this, I try not to feel like I'm faking it.

"See? They're in the nest," Silas tells me proudly, pointing at his work. I nod. The chicks peek out cheerfully.

I've come to this little museum hoping for a bolt of Mansfield's unruly intellectual energy. I prepared myself well. Before we came to New Zealand I read her stories and the terrific biography by Claire Tomalin (*Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life*), poked through the extensive collections of



her letters and notebooks. I'm versed in the Katherine Mansfield controversies—was she a genius who changed the form of the short story forever or a querulous hack who plagiarized Chekov? And does it matter, when you're steeped in the weirdness of one of her otherworldly New Zealand stories? I love her anger, her intensity, her glistening, blistering prose, and I've girded myself for an artistic encounter, which is perhaps why the chicks give me such pause. They seem like something you'd find in my life. Bright, placid, cute. They're just the sort of thing Mansfield would abhor. The house's past voices crowd around me and I can imagine her standing in the vestibule, calling up to an invisible mother, rolling her eyes and stamping—"My God, Mother, you are so bourgeois, I can't stand it! What *is* this?"

"Hopelessly *vulgar*," Mansfield wrote about her parents upon her return from London in 1906. She was eighteen years old and hated her home country's materialism and philistinism, its preference for the conventional and the amateur in art. While her own writing had little more than talent and energy to recommend it at that point, she was already hard at work disciplining her art. She understood one of the key principles of artistic integrity and development: she refused to be satisfied. "I am ashamed of young New Zealand," she wrote in her journal. "All the firm fat framework of their brains must be demolished before they can begin to learn. They want a purifying influence—a mad wave of pre-Raphaelitism, of super-aestheticism, should intoxicate the country."

I check, but this isn't one of the quotes they've put on the posters or sweatshirts. Instead, the chicks.

"Why are we waiting here?" Silas asks in his newly perfected whisper.

I resist saying, *Because of our bourgeois sense of propriety.*

"We need to pay, kiddo," I say, ruffling his hair in a tugging way that ever so gently steers him away from the more breakable merchandise. And I mean this: I want to pay. I'd much rather spend my money here than on stale pastries at the Botanical Garden's crowded café, for example. And I want to do the right thing: the phrase itself feels bourgeois in my mouth, but it's genuine. I basically believe in convention, most of the time. But I still hunger after that energy, that





spirit, that intense life of the mind that Mansfield had and that permeate her work. What I'm hoping as I subtly shift my weight over the threshold of the nearest door—*notice me, notice me*—is that these aren't contradictory desires.

I, too, am trying to make myself into a writer. Back home, in our cavernous seventies split-level in the suburbs, I have a study. It's the spare bedroom, garden-level, and looks out through blades of grass and sprinkler heads. Reflected in the window are my books, the ones I struggle through: Alice Munro, James Joyce, John Donne. I wrestle my own words, too, piece together sentences, try to let my characters speak. I work to show the uglinesses and triumphs that I can barely stand to look upon, and I keep an ear out for Silas. The instant he needs me—or a sentence or two later—I save the file and go to him.

The New Zealand trip is for my husband. He's been invited to an ecology conference in Wellington—somewhere across town people are having dynamic discussions about statistical techniques and the importance of designing the correct null hypothesis. Meanwhile I, a year out of my MFA program and still unemployed, am wondering if they sell string cheese in New Zealand, and if they do, where I might find it.

Touring Mansfield's birthplace is going to be an antidote to this nothingness. I've been dreaming all week of how the house will smell of wood and paper and upholstery, how it will be small and creaky but will feel, once I step inside, infinite, the way a good story feels while you are inside of it. In a way, it has been a promise: here would be a locus of intellectual energy I could confront on my own, without having to answer puzzled questions about what I *do* all day. Just going, I thought, would be enough. Now, confronted by the quotidian earnestness of this old house, I'm not so sure.

Finally an attendant comes hurrying down the stairs, apologizing and nervous. In return for our money and our backpacks, which could brush against the restored antique wallpaper and damage it, Silas and I get a stack of laminated pages, a detailed tour guide rich with quotes from Mansfield's writing. This house is the one she was born in, on October





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14, 1888, and where she lived until she was seven; it's the one she describes leaving in her haunting story "The Prelude." It has four bedrooms, four downstairs rooms, and a modest yard. In Mansfield's time, it held a family of four small children, two parents, a grandmother, a maiden aunt, and two servants.

I see at once that my bourgeois concern for property is thoroughly in place here. Mansfield may have lived in artistic poverty and relished the shocking and artistic over the proper ("a couple of candles stuck in a skull, another between the high windows, a lamp on the floor shining through yellow chrysanthemums, and herself accurately in the center, in a patterned pink kimono," her biography quotes a visitor to one of the many cramped rooms she rented across England and France), but her parents did not, and the restored museum is emphatically their house. The rooms are opulently wallpapered, furnished with painstakingly gathered antiques and relics—overstuffed chairs, writing desks (the kind on which you address invitations to your party, not a place to pen furious essays on Art), painted screens, china sets, clocks. The dining room is laid out for a full afternoon tea, complete with a polished silver tea service and a green and brown layer cake made out of plastic. The rooms are tall and crowded and eminently respectable, as the house of a businessman's family at the beginning of the twentieth century ought to be. Except for the laminated cards, with quotes from her own writing that make the rooms suddenly breathe—"Even when I am alone in my room they come outside and call to each other, discuss the butcher's orders or the soiled linen"—there's no trace of Mansfield the author; no trace, really, of the intellectual zeal I had hoped for. Everything here speaks of satisfied materialism.

"Look," I tell Silas, pointing out the cranes on the fireplace screen and the plastic food on the dining table. "That's where they used to eat." He's more attentive than I thought he would be—he's too young to know that this outing is totally nerdy and boring and that he should hate it—and obeys my instructions not to touch things or duck under the rope. "Why can't I go under the rope?" is all he asks, a little mournfully.

I explain to him about breakable things that are expen-





sive. It's a word I'm using a lot these days. *Don't touch that, it's expensive. Don't waste the shampoo, it's expensive. Don't spill your juice, it's expensive.* As though if only we had enough money, we could behave how we wished, touch and break and waste and spill—but when I try to go deeper, to explain my moral repudiation of waste and carelessness, he giggles. “But I *like* to go under the rope,” he says now, his eyes glinting slyly, one finger brushing the rope. “They’ll come and yell at you,” I respond. “And me.” He nods thoughtfully, and pulls back. The bourgeois reverence for higher authority: it's what works.

*Bourgeois.* It's a term I'm borrowing from Mansfield; if I were complaining about myself in conversation I might say, “I've been feeling so *suburban* lately.” Or: so *domestic*. The terms are not quite equivalent; *bourgeois* can't quite be separated from its fin-de-siècle European context, its aura of high lace collars and Victorian morals, just as *suburban* will never shake the consumeristic imagery of endlessly repeating driveways and pristine lawns. *Domestic* falls somewhere in the middle: it speaks of home, of vacuuming and tucking children in at night and making sure everyone gets a bath. They all describe a universe in which material and social well-being are given preference over fancy notions of artistic excellence or intellectual endeavor.

Katherine Mansfield wanted to be a mother, or claimed she did. One of the first tragedies in her tragedy-filled life was getting knocked up and then abandoned by the man she loved. She boasted to friends that she was looking forward to having the baby; when she miscarried at five months, alone in a German hotel room, she lamented the event for the rest of her life. It's impossible to say whether the infant would have eventually been stranded by the wayside as so many of her friends were, or whether it would have allowed her, or forced her, to emerge from what her biographer Claire Tomalin has called the “randomness” of her life and work, the way she often wasted her energy in “persistently dispers[ing] herself in different styles and tones. . . . It gave her freedom, but also became a weakness.”

In any case, a baby would have impacted her writing life. She might have stopped writing altogether, as mothers often





do, and never become more than a promising imitator. I try not to draw the obvious conclusion: that the waste and carelessness of her life—or her freedom to engage in such waste and carelessness—were necessary for her writing.

I gaze at a framed portrait of her as a plump and rather sullen schoolgirl. She was the third child, the “fat” one, the least loved and most difficult; she liked an audience, and she learned quickly that shocking her audience helped keep their attention. As soon as she left home she began putting her words into action, and within two years she was pregnant by one man, married to but untouched by another, and was shortly to contract gonorrhea, an infection that was never treated and probably made her vulnerable to the tuberculosis that would kill her by age thirty-four. She had also found the first London audience for her short stories, the distinguished literary journal *New Age*. She wowed them as much with her personality as with her stories, and soon joined the fashionable and gossipy London literary world.

The more I get to know Mansfield, the harder it is for me to like her. She lied, she self-dramatized, she showered friends with demanding attention and then wrote cutting reviews of their work, neglected to answer their letters, or said snotty things to mutual acquaintances about how fat and repulsive they were. When she died her sometime-friend Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary, “One feels—what? A shock of relief?—a rival the less? Then confusion at feeling so little. . . . Did she care for me? Sometimes she would say so—would kiss me—would look at me as if (is this a sentiment?) her eyes would always like to be faithful . . . [but] the small lies and treacheries, the perpetual playing and teasing, or whatever it was, cut away so much of the substance of the friendship. One was too uncertain. And so one let it all go.” In short, she’s just the sort of person I can’t stand. She has no desire to do the right thing. She exemplifies for me the worst narcissistic excesses of intellectualism, of people who lie about all day discussing Nietzsche and let somebody else take care of the dishes. People who declare that they live life more artistically, more genuinely, more whateverly, than the complacent fools in the suburbs, but can’t be bothered to clean up their own messes, or write thank-you notes, or buckle down and work.





All my life, I've tried to flee that narcissism: leaving the Ivy League for a state school, dropping anthropology for biology, taking work with the Forest Service over work with a research lab. Having a baby in the middle of my MFA program. I'm always telling myself to be sensible, to look on the bright side, to enjoy what I have. And here's where I've ended up: in a comfortable house in the suburbs, financially secure, writing in my spare time.

Despite her narcissistic excesses, however, or because of them, Mansfield did find time to work. In between coughing fits that left her bedridden and her endless quest for a better apartment, she wrote. Five books of short stories, two volumes of letters, two more of diaries, an unfinished novel, a regular review column. All of it probing, bewitching, experimental, pushing some internal artistic border I can barely imagine.

In the kitchen is the famous dollhouse, mentioned in all the guidebooks. It claims to be an exact replica of the one described in Mansfield's story "The Dollhouse" ("When dear old Mrs. Hay went back to town after staying with the Burnells she sent the children a doll's house . . . a dark, oily, spinach green, picked out with bright yellow"), although frankly it looks a little cheap, like it's made out of cardboard or thin plywood, some material that wouldn't in a million years actually be used to make a real dollhouse. Children would tear it apart in two minutes. Silas, in fact, could tear it apart in two minutes, a fact I am just realizing as he pokes open the flimsy front door with his finger. "Why are they not in the house?" asks Silas of some dilapidated china dolls and animals under a glass box in the corner.

"Maybe there are already dolls in the house," I say, pre-occupied. I'm wondering how this replica dollhouse is supposed to bring us closer to Mansfield. In the story the dollhouse serves to divide: the upper-middle-class family who owns it from the ragged children down the way who are not even allowed to come into the courtyard to look at it; the little girls who can appreciate the perfect little lamp inside ("It seemed to smile at Kezia, to say, 'I live here.' The lamp was real.") from the older girls who are more interested in enforcing the grownups' rules about access ("Isabel's voice,





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so very proud, went on telling . . . choosing the two who were to come back with them that afternoon and see it”). The dollhouse unifies, too, shows us the way aesthetic appreciation bridges class and age, separates those who are pure at heart from those who care too much for external appearances (“I seen the little lamp,” breathes the ragamuffin child, at the end of the story, at one with respectable Kezia despite her bad grammar). If you’re pure at heart, you’ll be able to love the dollhouse in all its miniaturized glory. Especially that perfect little lamp.

I am so not taken by the lamp.

I feel like I ought to be getting something from the dollhouse. It’s an avatar, a manifested boundary, an art-imitating-art-imitating-life. Yet to me it looks like a dollhouse, nothing more, nothing less, and not a particularly careful or clever dollhouse—there aren’t even any stairs, as the attendant points out, coming up behind us to close the house up. “The children always notice that, it seems. ‘Where are the stairs?’” We both turn to Silas, who is so absorbed in his effort to not touch that he’s barely noticed that the house has furniture.

I take Silas by the hand and we head upstairs—he wants to put his head between each pair of banister rungs as we go, so it takes a very, very long time. As we go I try to imagine having a house like this—even, in the Victorian tradition, *running* such a house. Minus a few servants, plus a little dirt and processed foods, I can imagine living here much better than I can imagine living in a broken-down Parisian apartment, entertaining guests in my kimono. Paying the butcher, collecting the rents, seeing to it that tea and supper are laid out at the proper times: all those wearying, comforting routines.

Basically, this is who I am: careful, conscientious, neat. Several of my talents, adapted slightly, are little more than good housekeeping. I can keep the checkbook balanced. I can keep the paperwork straight. I can file meticulous, well-researched reports, and lay out the five most important points in easy-to-read boldface type. I can comb painstakingly through a technical manuscript and find the three incorrectly formatted citations.





When my writing comes, it must crawl out from beneath this layer. I budget my time carefully, prepare myself, and wait. Sometimes it comes. Sometimes it doesn't.

We hurry from room to room, me holding up Silas to see moldering copies of *Mother Goose*, more china dolls, animal figurines. A wooden Noah's ark complete with pairs of animals, a doll's pram, a hairbrush and mirror set, an embroidered lace nightgown, the thin iron beds that seem too small for full-size adults, let alone for the arrangements the laminated cards describe—Mansfield's two older sisters in the bed by the far wall, six-year-old Mansfield and her grandmother crammed into this one. How could they bear it? Someone's elbow always in your side, their sour breath in your face.

But this is what Mansfield worked with. And her scenes, like this one from "The Prelude," are infused with such glistering intensity that ordinary objects take on purposes of their own, neither wholly benign nor wholly sinister:

"I dreamed about birds last night," thought Linda. What was it? She had forgotten. But the strangest part of this coming alive of things was what they did. They listened, they seemed to swell out with some mysterious important content, and when they were full she felt that they smiled. But it was not for her, only, their sly secret smile; they were members of a secret society and they smiled among themselves. Sometimes, when she had fallen asleep in the daytime, she woke and could not lift a finger, could not even turn her eyes to left or right because THEY were there; sometimes when she went out of a room and left it empty, she knew as she clicked the door that THEY were filling it. And there were times in the evenings when she was upstairs, perhaps, and everybody else was down, when she could hardly escape from them. Then she could not hurry, she could not hum a tune; if she tried to say ever so carelessly—"Bother that old thimble"—THEY were not deceived. THEY knew how frightened she was. . . . What Linda always felt was that THEY wanted something of her, and she knew that if she gave herself up and was quiet, silent, motionless, something would really happen.



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“It’s very quiet now,” she thought. She opened her eyes wide, and she heard the silence spinning its soft endless web. How lightly she breathed; she scarcely had to breathe at all.

Yes, everything had come alive down to the minutest, tiniest particle, and she did not feel her bed, she floated, held up in the air. Only she seemed to be listening with her wide open watchful eyes, waiting for someone to come who just did not come, watching for something to happen that just did not happen.

We write from where we are. Mansfield, in exile from domestic life, wrote to expose the eeriness and loneliness within the heart of a prosperous family; through her stories she gets at the solitary self at the center of each of us, that cold wind that blows through us all.

Sometimes it seems like the place I write from is simply the wrong place. Where Mansfield pursued instability, the chaos and carelessness of freedom, I have chased stability and sense and limits. I budget and control myself. I color between the lines: there is no way to describe my life that doesn’t sound fatal to art. Of all the great writers I’m most like Anthony Trollope, famous for rising every morning at five o’clock and cranking out ten pages in three hours before heading to his job at the post office. William Dean Howells compared him to an ox, “cropping the field of English life and converting its succulent juices into nourishing beef.”

This, however, is where I am.

Silas is starting to squirm. I hold him up, and he twists himself down; tired of looking, he runs back and forth across the landing. Time to go.

Our last stop is the painstakingly restored garden—“It’s very autumnal,” apologizes the attendant as we collect our backpacks. “Not at its best.” It isn’t. The flowers are all shaggy and gone-to-seed; a late-season brown has begun to stain the leaves. From out here the house looks entirely ordinary, indistinguishable from the rental properties on either side. In a way this ordinariness is fitting; after all, Mansfield, like most writers, emerged from absolute, unbearable ordinariness. The things she writes about—moving; having a new toy; the bustle and blithe ignorance of an elegant Edwardian





household—these are ordinary, too. And yet in her hands these events become strange, exotic, their sensuality almost physical.

And yet. Silas plunges his fingers into the throats of the surviving flowers, peers down into the hardening bed. “What are these thinking about?” he asks conversationally, apparently referring to the raggedy flowers. “Um, oh, I don’t know. That they’re ready to go to sleep for the winter?” I say, not quite looking forward to a day of conversations like this.

“Yeah. Them are,” he answers, nodding briskly. A Mansfieldesque moment starts to coalesce:

Mother looked off; Silas began to grab at the deep dark mouths of the flowers. Presently, creeping over the fence, the sunlight burned into the prickly grass. It grew brighter, the fog was curling away. Now he could see that the flowers had slow, soft eyes. Now he could see that the eyes were blinking at him. Silas stopped grabbing. He dashed toward the stairs as if he were going to go back into the house. Then he waited. The flowers nodded deeper, and between their stems the sun marched forward, very bright, crackling through the shadows with its long sun-fingers on their throats. Silas jumped down into the gravel; he snatched up a handful of rocks; he threw the rocks.

“Aigh! Silas! What are you doing?” I reach down to swat at my calf, which has just been peppered with gravel.

“I throw rocks!” he answers brightly.

“Please don’t throw rocks at me!” I struggle; the firm, bright directions of some cheerful parenting manual filter down through my brain: *Redirect unwanted behavior. When you see your child getting ready to kick the cat, offer a ball instead.* I want to flail. I want to scream, *Tell me you’re sorry!* He stands, ready to giggle or cry, waiting for my response. I breathe in: humidity, autumnal garden, grit from the M1. Steady. “How about you throw the rocks into the bushes instead? Five more handfuls, and then let’s push on toward the park.”

Measured, sensible, restrained. The garden subsides into its ordinary self, a tangle of weedy flowers in need of a trim. No mouths here. No eyes. No throats.



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Mansfield would say I need to be intoxicated; I need to be purified; I need to be ravished by life and left for dead on the curb. I wish I had a quick comeback for her. *My place is just as good a place to write from as yours!* Only, of course, it might not be. Secretly I'd come here hoping for confirmation: *You're on the right track, Emily! Great job! Just keep writing!* No such luck. All I can be certain of is that I'm not Katherine Mansfield, that her stories aren't mine to write any more than her life is something I could live.

I do feel something, though, as I pull Silas's stroller out of the bushes beside the driveway. It's a hard knot of resistance, a refusal to let my circumstances, my habits, my personality, define what I am allowed to make of myself. The rushing excitement of trying to write it all down; the joy of a character who won't shut up; the nourishment and comfort of carrying a half-finished story around in my head all day: these are mine, as surely they were Mansfield's. There is as much truth in Trollope's beef as there is in Mansfield's sensuality, after all, even if it is truth of a different kind.

"Hop in, kiddo," I say, opening the stroller and flicking a podocarp needle off the seat. I buckle the strap over Silas's squirmy little hips, square my shoulders against the noise of Tinakori Road, and head out through the gate.