

## My Alice

That's Alice. There. On the cover of my copy of *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*. Why haven't I recognised her before? She's unmistakeable. That could even be the bench seat by her back door. She always sat there, in the sun, to shell her peas. The yellow dress and the wide-brimmed hat are hers, too.

I phone my sister. She says that I've been reading too much fiction, that I can't tell real life from fantasy anymore. Tells me it's time to move on from Katherine Mansfield, at least.

'It is her,' I say. 'You know Gran was mentioned in one of her journals. And she's the servant girl in the Burnell stories. KM even gave her the same name.'

There's a silence at her end. The sort where the other person is trying to work out how to tell you, you've lost the plot.

'Never mind,' I say. 'I'll let you go.' Alice might be disguised in a fictional cloak in those stories but she's still our Gran, no matter what my sister might think.

Alice was approaching seventy when I was born, and famous for her pikelets, Sunday lunches with her growing brood of grandchildren, and her garden—especially her peas, which grew up tall, string vines.

Remembering her is like glimpsing a shadow in fog. Sensations triggered by the worn-out, raspy voice of my elderly neighbour, the smell of fresh peas, and recognising her on the cover of a book or in a story.

In real life, the retorts that Katherine Mansfield had Alice fashioning in her mind were spoken aloud—as often as not. Especially if someone, anyone, including patrons of her father's guest house, said something inane. About preparing food, for instance.

'Oh, you're making watercress sandwiches, how delightful,' the young visitor might have said, observing everything, knowing nothing.

Likely bored and with a job that needed doing, I can hear Alice, now: 'Well, they don't make themselves.' As it turns out, neither do stories. But that was for Katherine Mansfield to know and me to discover, a century later. The comment would have burst from Alice. Followed, perhaps, by the hot, red flush of shame for speaking out of turn. Or not, depending on her opinion of the recipient.

My sister and I have inherited her knack for answering back. Along with a certain intolerance for fools. Of course, neither of us fall in to that category.

I am the one with the sharpest memory when it comes to our childhood. Like the time Alice gave us an old bowl and told us to fill it with peas for lunch. The sun was warm, our tummies empty, and her peas sweet. We sat in the dirt between the vines and scoffed them until Alice, her apron tied tight around her waist, her eyes flashing blue sparks, appeared.

She grabbed the bowl with its scant yield. ‘Get away inside, you two. I’ll pick them myself.’

‘But we’re hungry,’ I said. For which my sister delivered a kick to my ankle. She’d guessed what was coming. There was no home-made ice-cream and jelly for the two of us for dessert, and instead lots of mock horror from our cousins when our grandmother said why.

The bowl is on my kitchen bench. The rim is chipped, there’s a crack running from the edge to the base, and the brown exterior is webbed with crazing. I keep apples in it—Granny Smiths, at the moment.

There are so many stories Alice might have told.

About growing up beneath a hill named Te Waka, on the coach road between Napier and Taupō, life in her father’s guest house, the pungent smell of felled tōtara, the screech of the sawmill, the taste of kererū.

About how, a husband and five children later, the Great Depression brought men knocking on her door. Looking for a job or food. Some were after her jewellery. She had a bit, back then. She sold it off piece by piece; my grandfather was a drover and his wages didn’t stretch far enough to feed six hungry children.

And then there was the ’31 earthquake. There are hundreds of stories to read about that. This is my grandmother’s. The chimney came down and her new season preserves smashed to the floor. She had to cook over an open fire in the backyard. It was just her and the children. They all slept out side. From the back paddock she could see the smoke from the fires in town. My grandfather was on the road somewhere up north, bringing a flock of sheep to the

Works. Alice said the ground was like jelly for weeks. I told her it must have been terrifying. She said, ‘You just got with it, because that’s what you did.’

Alice was ten when Richard Pearse first achieved lift off near his farm down south. By the time the first men walked on the moon she was elderly and had never taken a flight. She watched the lunar landing live, on her tele. And then went outside to gaze at the moon and wonder.

Alice’s life was long and is almost forgotten. And yet, her stories were plentiful enough, for a book, or two. If she’d been that way inclined. If her circumstances were different.

Katherine Mansfield’s life was short, fabulous, and will be long remembered. I’ll tell you something, though. My Alice would have had no truck with the girl who wanted to be a real writer. She was preoccupied with other, more pragmatic things.

On gardening, for instance: *Get the peas in the ground on time. Wait for the last frost before planting the spuds. Stay on top of the weeds. Give flowers away, or leave them in their beds. Do not bring them inside.*

On dispatching a chook: *One quick wring of the neck will do it.*

On fashion: *Make your own clothes.*

About her first and only electric oven: *The temperature is unreliable. The range does a better job.*

On reading: *Put that book down and get on with setting the table.* She read second hand copies of *The Woman’s Weekly*, and copied out the recipes. I doubt she ever read about the Burnell’s and their servants.

On writing: *Haven't you got anything better to do?* I do have a letter she wrote to my mother. It's unsentimental and packed with practicalities. Love, grief, and worry are jammed between every line. For those who know how to read it.

Not long before she died, I asked Alice, 'Do you remember Katherine Mansfield?' Gran was making pikelets at the time. She was still famous for them—the way both sides were smooth, their texture light, each a perfect conduit for her homemade raspberry jam and whipped cream. Try though others did, following her recipe to the letter, no-one, myself included, made them quite like Alice.

'Who, dear?' she asked, her voice raspy with age, like my neighbour's.

'Katherine Mansfield, the writer. She stayed at the guest house.'

Alice kept her eyes on the pikelets. The smooth under side was all about the timing.

'Oh, we had a lot of famous people through,' she replied.

The sweet aroma of the cooking batter wafted about us. My mouth watered. Small bulges began to appear in the pikelets. 'She wrote about you in her journal. She described you sitting on the verandah of the guest house with your sisters, shelling peas.'

Alice reached for her egg-slice. The knuckles of her right hand were swollen from arthritis. It didn't slow her down. With a quick flick of her wrist she flipped each pikelet before the bubbles forming in the batter had a chance to pop.

'And you're in two of her stories.'

We watched the pan. After three or four minutes, she said, 'They're almost ready.'

How she knew, I can only guess. A shift in the depth of the batter, or a slight crisping at the edges, perhaps. She lifted one, examined its underside. I could see it was perfect.

‘They’ll do,’ Alice said. One by one she lifted them from the pan and placed them on a wire rack to cool. She said to me, ‘Pop the kettle on. We’ll have a cup of tea.’

I held back from repeating my question. Her likely rebuke—I heard you the first time—loud in my imagination. I filled the kettle, aware of her gazing at me with the same appraising look I’ve seen on my sister. Eventually, she said, ‘It’ll all be made up, you know.’

Which, now that I think about it, is true enough, from her point of view.