

Katherine Mansfield Society

Online Creative Works Series

Short Story

‘An Epic Mistake’ by Alex Reece Abbott

AN EPIC MISTAKE

It was one of those oppressive, humid Auckland days and Kay Munroe was dawdling home from school, scuffing her sandals and kicking out at pebbles. She sent a chunk of pock-marked scoria pinging off the transformer box at the end of her street and it landed back at her feet, stubborn as the shame that trailed her home.

Most of her class had at least one parent at prize-giving that afternoon and her mother's very public display of disinterest had not gone unnoticed, although Kay had faced the principal's interrogation without lying. She'd stretched things slightly in the direction of untruth, that was all, saying that her mother was too unwell to attend.

The sky darkened and dumped down a shower. Kay walked on through the drenching rain without changing her pace, still basking in her book prize.

Not a prize, thought Kay, a sign...and the message: she could write. And, she'd write herself right out of this place.

The rainburst was over as suddenly as it started. Only Mrs Devine's old magnolia tree distracted her, laden with glowing lotus flowers floating in the air. The creamy goblet blossoms were swollen with promise and for a moment, it seemed like there was some magic in her neighbour's garden and like a lotus-eater, Kay forgot that she was heading home.

Kay braced herself and took a deep breath as she walked through the back door. She found Mrs Munroe in the lounge, coiled in her usual spot on the vinyl sofa, catching the afternoon sun as she smoked and worked her way through another cryptic crossword.

Kay held out her book prize and waited.

“Where did you get that?” said Mrs Munroe, glancing up from her *New Zealand Women’s Weekly*.

“The Governor General at prize-giving,” said Kay, aiming for the right mix of pride and modesty. “He didn’t wear the hat with feathers though. Best prose.”

“Self-praise is no praise at all, Kay Munroe,” said her mother, taking the prize from her. She flicked the Katherine Mansfield book open, pausing at the neat certificate glued on the alabaster flyleaf.

Don’t break the spine, don’t let your fag-ash fall on my brand new book, prayed Kay.

Mrs Munroe took a long drag on her cigarette. “Don’t go getting all big-headed on us,” she said, the cylinder of ash wagging dangerously close to the pages. She blew a plume of smoke that wrapped Kay in a stinking wreath. Then she snapped the book shut and swapped it for her dog-eared thesaurus.

Later that afternoon, Kay sidled into the kitchen and overheard her mother on the phone, talking about the prize as if it happened every day. When Mrs Munroe noticed her, she ended the conversation and hung up.

“Party line,” she said, stirring her instant coffee. “What did you get that book for again?”

Kay crossed her fingers behind her back. “My story was chosen for the

school magazine.”

Mrs Munroe’s eyes wandered to Georgette Heyer’s latest paperback on the kitchen table. Kay could feel two competing plaits tightening around her temples; one hankering for her mother to show some enthusiasm, while the other begged Georgette to divert Mrs Munroe from asking any more questions.

And they *would* have been awkward. Kay couldn’t say that the story was about a runaway who knew exactly what day it was because she could smell savoury mince stewing away on the stove, the same way that Kay could smell it now. Which meant it was Tuesday, *their* day for mince. She kicked herself for not changing her story title.

“Hope it’s better than that other story you wrote,” said Mrs Munroe, stabbing her words in the air between them with her cigarette. “You know, that one where you cheated.”



Kay remembers like it was yesterday. Racing home from primary school. Holding her breath, taking the certificate from her book bag. Sighing with relief – the cardboard’s only slightly creased. Carrying it with gentle pincer fingers to her mother.

Yawning, Mrs Munroe puts her paperback down on the *Formica* dining table.

“What’s this?” she says, taking the certificate from Kay.

“They read my story. In front of the whole class. Mr Russell gave me and Robin King a certificate. Each.”

“I,” says Mrs Munroe.

“Robin King and I.” Kay speaks slowly, to demonstrate that she stands corrected.

“For Composition.”

“Where is it?” Her mother drops the certificate on the table and reaches for her cigarettes. She rolls her eyes. “If you don’t want to show me your story...”

Keen not to squander this flicker of interest, Kay scrabbles through her satchel.

Mrs Munroe lights another cigarette and drums the *William Tell Overture* on the certificate with her fingers.

Just as she stops, Kay finds the page with the gold star.

Mrs Munroe wafts the A4 sheet between them. “Not very long.”

Kay shifts from foot to foot. “We only had half an hour — .”

“— Shhhhh, I’m concentrating. God! Your handwriting.” One long crimson nail stalks the words down the page. At the end of the second side, she grinds her cigarette butt into her glass ashtray very slowly until every little spark is extinguished. “I’ve read this before.”

Kay hesitates, gored by her words. “I don’t think I’ve showed...”

“*Women’s Weekly* last month. Cheats never prosper, Kay Munroe.

You’re grounded for the rest of this week.”

“But I didn’t even see...” Words swirl in her head but Kay can’t get them out. Her unused explanations sink to the pit of her stomach and turn to acid.

“But nothing. Make it two weeks for lying.” Mrs Munroe stands.

“Anything else?”

Kay shakes her head and goes to her bedroom to the sound of ripping cardboard. She stays there for most of the next fortnight - about long enough to re-read all her *Secret Seven* books.



On prizegiving night, Kay went to bed early with Katherine Mansfield cradled in her arms. A proper hardback, big as a Bible, the biggest book she'd ever owned. The black dust-jacket had a picture of posh Edwardian ladies enjoying a garden party, their arms swathed in leg of mutton sleeves.

She repeated the title like a mantra: *THE COMPLETE STORIES*. All the stories, in her hands, won with her own writing. And the stories belonged to her – not some battered book in a cracking cellophane cover that had to go back to the library.

My eyes, first to read these words. And stories, all written by a woman from...well, Wellington, but...still from New Zealand and good enough to be published fifty years on.

A literary giant, shouted the blurb. Not eccentric or wealthy like Dame Ngaio – or Janet, who they'd said was mad. And, Katherine had mixed in London's rarefied world of letters.

London. The word set Kay's mind buzzing like the transformer box at the end of her street. She was a writer, free to tap away at her typewriter, the ring of her carriage return sounding each fresh line of her latest story.

If she could survive high school then, like Katherine, she could read what she liked and write what she liked – and go wherever she liked - away from this stifling world

and her mother's judging eyes. Then there'd be other pressures, other eyes. But, she wouldn't be stuck under the same roof with them.

While she brushed her hair, Kay studied the black and white portrait inside the cover. Katherine's haircut was modern, a dramatic China-girl bob. Not like the helmet that she'd been assigned by Mrs Devine, snipping away in her kitchen with an old tea-towel for a hairdresser's cape.

Pale Katherine gazed straight into the camera with soulful, knowing eyes, eyes that wouldn't miss a thing. Yes, she looked like a real author alright.

Kay practised her successful writer poses in the mirror: amused; intense; friendly; reflective; moody; intellectual. Then she examined the portrait again. Katherine was a frail giant.

When she started reading the introduction, numbers leapt out from the lines of text. Kay rubbed her eyes. The numbers were still there on the page in crisp black and white.

Was she dreaming? Katherine Mansfield had *her* exact same birthday. First, the prize and then, like a fairy tale, this mysterious coincidence...no, omen. She longed to tell someone about October the fourteenth.

She slowed down her breathing and made herself read on. The caption said Katherine had about three years to live when the photo was taken. *Circa*. Thirty four years old. Me in twenty years, thought Kay.

But Katherine's story started to shift. There were charges of plagiarism, she was a restless nomad, a Bohemian living on an experimental commune

in France – and dying from TB that was probably curable – certainly curable now.

It was all turning unsavoury and tragic. She preferred *her* Katherine, the innovator, the adventurer, the rebel. She studied that solemn gaze and decided that no-one could take Katherine away.

Kay slipped off the shiny book-cover and stashed it in the bottom drawer of her tallboy with her certificate that she'd rescued from the rubbish bin and repaired. She'd done her best but the rips were still visible, fingerprinted faultlines taped on the grubby ivory cardboard.

She kept the book hidden underneath her bed. Every night she read, blankets propped around her like a *tepee*, tracing the words with her torch-beam, loving the directness and ordinariness of the moments and lives distilled and made fresh by Katherine.

After devouring every story, she went back for seconds. But the joy of her prize was dulled by knowing the grim risk she was courting. Niggling worries began to corrode her pleasure. Kay ran her hands over the pages, hoping to absorb Katherine's courage. If her mother found the book, then she'd remember the prizegiving.

So far, Mrs Munroe hadn't asked to read her winning story, but it could only be a matter of time and then she'd use it like a weapon. And Kay would end up confessing to *Tuesday: Mince*, her harmless flight of fancy. And in the face of such outright disloyalty, the backhand compliment would soon turn into one of Mrs Munroe's backhands.

The next morning, it still felt too unsafe to keep the book but her plan had crept forward: Katherine had always been a rule-breaker. Kay took out her journal – the other part of her prize – and drew her initials in black pen, then decorated them like she'd seen in a photo of the Book of the Kells. Inside the journal cover, she copied Katherine's words: "*I don't mean that any eye but mine should read this.*" Then she hid the journal under her mattress and got ready for school.

She lugged herself to school, the strap of her battered leather satchel biting into her shoulder all the way. Double maths class dragged but the numbers on the clockface held her attention.

As soon as the bell rang for morning interval, she hurried to the library where Mrs Hogben-Troutt presided with her plum-in-her-mouth and her silent "G".

She twiddled with the gold chain of her glasses as she gave Kay the once over.

Kay pushed her shoulders back, emboldened by her new status. "I'm here to make a donation," said The Benefactor.

"I see," said Mrs Hogben-Troutt. She peered across the borrowing counter and let out a heavy sigh when she spotted Kay's brown paper grocery bag.

But when Kay gently placed the pristine book on the counter, Mrs Hogben-Troutt caressed the spine and inspected the volume for damage.

"Quite generous," she murmured. "And in very good condition, even the cover. Hardly used. Are you certain?"

Kay nodded, not feeling at all sure.

The librarian lifted her cats-eye glasses onto the end of her nose. She pointed to the certificate. “It says that this was your prize...”

“I’ve read all of her now, so I thought that other students might...” Kay had been expecting gratitude, not the third degree, and her voice came out as a croak.

Mrs Hogben-Troutt raised a mouse-brown pencilled eyebrow. “I can remove the page with the certificate if you like?”

Kay stared at the floor and said thank-you.

Mrs Hogben-Troutt rested the book on the counter and went to her desk.

Kay thought about legging it with Katherine but her clammy wave of courage passed too quickly and before she could make a move, Mrs Hogben-Troutt was at the counter, wielding a craft knife.

She slipped a thin sheet of cardboard between the pages and made one perfectly straight cut near the binding, then took the flyleaf back to her desk.

Kay stared at her mutilated book and wondered...no, knew that she’d made an epic mistake. But before she could work out what to do, Mrs Hogben-Troutt handed her a dull manila envelope.

Kay’s stomach turned. The gum on the top flap smelt sour as sick.

“Your certificate. Thank you.” Mrs Hogben-Troutt tucked glossy black Katherine under her arm and marched off to silence some squabbling third-formers.

Kay wandered to English, remembering the words she’d copied into her journal that morning.

Care no more for the opinions of others.

That’s what KM would have told her.



Kay Munroe strode along Micklegate, pausing to sneak a look in her favourite bookshop. When her phone buzzed a reminder, she hurried on to her hairdressing appointment, still thrown by the sight of the fat black anthology of short stories in the window.

It had started her thinking about Auckland and the first time that she'd seen Katherine Mansfield – not that anyone knew who'd taken the photo or the exact date. Typical enigmatic, elusive Katherine, all *circa* and probably.

By the time that Chantelle had freed her from the black nylon cape with a rip of Velcro and a matador flourish, Kay was still thinking about the book prize and Katherine who'd haunted her for thirty years.

Kay admired her sleek bob in the mirror as the tips of her dark sculpted hair tickled her cheekbones. Congratulating herself for making Chantelle do something different, she decided that she'd have the fat anthology for a birthday treat.

The next week when she went back to the bookshop, the ransacked window held only a few scraps of paper and a battered chair.

Walking back to the agency, she kicked out at the autumn leaves and falling conkers all the way.

“Someone's not happy,” said Nic at reception, when Kay collected her messages.

Kay shrugged. “My bookshop's closed after twenty years and I wanted to get a birthday present...”

Nic took less than five minutes to track down the same prizegiving edition at a bookseller in Tasmania.

“English wasn’t she?” said Nic, handing her the receipt. “One of those Bloomberg people...”

Kay scowled. “Only if you think New Zealand’s still one of your colonies. And it’s Bloomsbury.” She sipped her coffee.

“Didn’t you have any heroes when you were growing up?”

Nic screwed up her nose. “Does Margaret Thatcher count?”

“No,” said Kay.

While Kay waited for the book to arrive, she looked online for an article about Katherine so that she could educate Nic. Instead she uncovered a virtual shrine, photographs for anyone with prying eyes or prurient interest to see Katherine’s letter knife with the *pounamu* handle. And her portable, prematurely stilled – the shiny black baby Corona 3, a poignant symbol of her freedom to write wherever she wanted. Even her clothes and her perfume. And her hair. *Her home, her life. Is nothing sacred. Everything is sacred.*

By now, Kay knew all about that nagging drive to escape her despised confining Paradise at the edge of the world.

The price that Katherine had paid for all her attempts at freedom had taken longer to comprehend - the restless, sharp-eyed colonial girl who’d traded her privileged Karori villa for a London life of wretched urban squalor,

the dark-eyed tramp, the outsider among the Bloomsbury set, shabby and inky, triggering Virginia's jealousy and conjuring up the dream babies with Dora.

And, her productive flurry in Manton, the tick-tick-tock of Katherine's energy waning and still so many stories to tell.

The Timekeeper had shown scant respect for Katherine's youth or talent, her intentions or her ambitions. And as October fourteen loomed, Kay knew that there was nothing – nobody – holding her back. Not like Katherine with her self-appointed archivist husband who'd trapped her like a moth in *kauri* gum with his definitive versions.

She shuddered as she pictured Katherine's words – her drafts, her stories, her letters, even her journals and notebooks - submerged like bleaching bones in his simmering pan of boil-up, as he fed off her stock again and again.

When the book finally turned up from Tasmania, Kay knew that her purchase was a childish indulgence yet somehow it was completely natural to reclaim Katherine, as if a book could lay the past to rest.

She studied Katherine's portrait once more, that bold straight hair, those clothes. *Your armour to mask the maze of twists and turns inside. Compulsive liar?*

No, imaginative and misunderstood, a closer relationship with fiction than the truth. *Kathleen-Kass-Katie-K.M.-Mansfield-Katherine-Katharina-Kezia-Kissienka-Katya* was telling stories. Wasn't that what made her a great writer?

Kay smiled as she flicked through the pages. No inscriptions. No excisions.

Only Katherine's words.

Mine, she thought.

She left work early that evening with Katherine wrapped tight in a brown paper coat. Over the weekend she took her time and consumed the book again. And was consumed. Funny and fierce, stories of women alone, who didn't quite fit, women like me, thought Kay.

Eight hundred and thirty pages, hers to read, hers to keep. Katherine's words had long outlived her, stable and timeless on the page – whether or not she'd intended them for any eye but her own.

After reading the last story, Kay rested the fat black book on her shelf so that solemn gaze was in her eye-line. More than any birthday or hairstyle, words had brought her back to Katherine.

Free, free to risk, risk anything, she thought.

She switched on her laptop and began to type.