

Katherine Mansfield Society

Online Creative Works Series

Short Story

Kath MacLean

‘Floodgates’

Floodgates, crying gulls, the odd fish or two**(Or: any minute i'm going to sing)**

The first thing she does when she closes the door behind her is to fling herself across the bed. She hasn't really looked at the room; already she knows it is exactly what she needs. Flat on her back staring at the ceiling, she wonders by this time tomorrow, when she packs up her belongings and calls for a cab home, if she'll remember each small crest of plaster above her head. How they shift about; she might imagine wandering along an empty shoreline counting ribs of sand, the gulls oddly quiet, the sea-wind non-existent. It's morning, afternoon, evening; it doesn't matter. She's alone in this grand space; she can turn back the clock on the tabletop; she can keep the curtains drawn, the lights on or off; her choice.

She is deliciously alone until she opens the hungry jaws of her laptop computer, turns on its switch, and brings it to life with the touch of her finger. She marvels at the power of fingertips: small circles of flesh tapping out bits and pieces of words and phrases, stories that belong to her characters, lives she (re)creates tapping on keys. Sometimes she believes it's the sound of a roaring stomach – hers, the computer's, Katherine's, the woman in her story who has refused to eat now for some pages – as if the weight of the world is great enough and she won't add to it. If only words could fill the void between her world and the characters she writes -- like a good meal, a long drink, the writer needs satisfying. She needs to get to know her heroine, to convince herself she might also return to 1900, kick her heels on the floor and listen to their dull thud on the carpet. *Solid* she thinks: this can't deter ghosts floating between walls, drifting room to

room, walking across ceilings, sitting cross-legged on floors, stretching out long tongues teasing her to get on with her story. *Just say it, say it, do!*

Here at last, within the walls of a luxurious hotel room anything is possible: to escape the here and now, to enter the then. To do this over and over until she gets it right, until the story is -- She's convinced when this happens she can rest before the next character cries, before it spreads itself across her page: an ink blot; what is beautiful? What is old? Both offer themselves to her as if they need sorting, putting in the right place; they need to be listened to, translated. In this place of travellers and restless spirits, the writer absorbs the room's energy, imagines *what if what if what if*— she might wish to remain listening to the voices, shadows of what was, what might be. Why choose one life, one story, when there are so many? To revisit, to string them together and then, what do you get?

She had left Katherine by an open window leaning out over the street where she watches young boys on bicycles and tenants in nearby hotels or flats sucking heavily on cigarettes, their words rising towards her in a plume of smoke. The smokers seem to stare directly at her, almost through her, yet, they do not see the young woman in a black overcoat, for she hasn't removed it; she hasn't sat down, or ordered tea. It seems the right thing to do -- to order tea, to look out the window, to wonder what to do next. She removes a rather crushed handkerchief from her coat pocket, holds it her to nose, pauses, blows into it (although she seems to have nothing to blow out) wipes her nostrils (there is nothing to wipe), sniffs loudly, and plunges her handkerchief back into her pocket.

In several minutes there will be a familiar knock on the door. The writer will open the door to Robert, a tall, exceedingly handsome man with dark features and large brown eyes. He will be standing behind a serving cart where a white ceramic teapot, a china flowered teacup and saucer, and small blue pitcher of milk lay waiting to be used. She will decline the sugar, small wrappers propped up against each other thinking they need room to move about in the bowl; they need to find a sense of themselves, to detach each from the other.¹

But she won't look at the bowl; she'll hand it back to the server right away, just as he's turning from her she'll say, *excuse me sir, I couldn't possibly*. . . She'll feel foolish, she won't look at him after she's spoken, but she will have said it. She never takes sugar. (She does however, in another story take Robert many, many times¹) It's her fear of getting fat, of taking up so much space she might never fit her bones and imagines her skin stretched so thin over her bones she becomes transparent, Like the woman on the cover of Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own* she must set her jaw firmly, she must resist speaking her own words, she must listen for the voices to fill her mouth with sound and story. But who wants to tell? Which one? Each to the other and all at once. *What if, what if what if* --

She must share her tea. Placing her hands around the teapot's white body, her palms gently touch its surface, first one hand, then the other. She thinks of the sparrow she held yesterday, its neck broken, its head dangling as she lifts it from the welcome mat and places it in her hands, the cat, watching her, steps from the shadows to show itself, holds up its head as if to say, *this is for you, a gift* –

And now giving her tea to the small ever-shrinking creature who has only just pretended to blow her nose, she thinks, what's next? Will Katherine, to relieve the boredom she must feel feign

unconsciousness? Will she swoon to the floor gracefully, one gloved hand above her head, the other beside it in a dramatic pose?¹

No, there is tea seeping and a lovely cup and saucer. She pauses balancing the cup in the saucer and gazes into the amber liquid swishing it round its rim as if she might find something, someone, there. *Robert*, she says aloud. (She knows she's pathetic to think of him. She'd like to let him go. Why won't he let her go?) But there is just one cup. She hasn't been thinking.¹ *Oh, Robert, Robert* she moans. She knows it is very rude to ask for just one cup, when Katherine, arriving cold and damp and so very tired, might appreciate something warm. She wouldn't blame Katherine for not speaking, for refusing to do anything, anything at all under these circumstances. Must she give Katherine her tea? No, she won't.

Katherine's hand remains around the handkerchief in her pocket: she has not been given anything to do. She opens her mouth, closes it, takes her hand from her pocket, turns from the writer and sinking into a chair by the window, rests her chin in her hands as if she is pushing it shut, as if she can prevent what might come pouring out if she were to open it.

Floodgates, crying gulls, the odd fish or two.

Katherine looks as if she might cry. Her eyes begin to water.

The writer pondering this last bit – the meaning of Katherine's tears, gulps her tea too quickly and scalds the roof of her mouth. Perhaps Katherine's been jilted? Ditched? Abandoned? Her fiancé has left her in a foreign country; she hasn't much money and she's wondering how, if

ever, she can possibly face her family and friends after they warned her about *men like him*. . . *She hears them questioning the appropriateness of her departure: a girl of her position, a wealthy father, a well-connected family. She'd be throwing away her future, and for what? To leave her party suddenly after having unwrapped her gifts, to hurry up the stairs to her room, to return to her guests in the parlour with a suitcase, her coat, hat and gloves slung over her arm, and the taxi already waiting outside the house. To say, "I have a ferry to catch at half past four" and then hours later, leaning over the boat's rail, watch the shore and all that she knows get smaller and smaller until soon she doesn't recognize anything at all: it's one big blur and then nothing but wind and water and salt stinging her eyes and lungs.*

Has she learned regret? Where is her young man? Has she a young man? No, the writer won't give her one. Katherine needs to be independent. Not victim, never, but heroine.

Katherine doesn't know what it is to be hungry, how she'll flirt for her dinner, or melt the eyes of whoever pays for dinner as if to say, "yes, yes I don't mind if you do —." She'll sing a song just a little too loudly leaning over the piano so that her blouse gapes and there is the possibility one might see her undergarments. Once, just once, she convinces herself that because he is older and sings so very well and lives in his own flat, he might be worth marrying. She won't tell anyone, especially her parents; she won't let them talk her out of it standing up before the minister dressed in black (because she's a writer after all she's not nearly as innocent as she looks) and the moment seems exactly right to say, "I do, I do." She might even believe herself, although it's unlikely.

"Where'd you get that wretched hat? Let me get you something decent child."

Perhaps this is what Katherine remembers gazing into her hands. Her mother's disapproving gaze as she looks her up and down; Mother who doesn't recognize her 'rags' as her wedding dress, her 'wretched' hat as her perfect crowning

touch: a hat that claims Katherine no longer cares what anyone thinks. Damn the world, damn the only thing that matters is the healing of her soul – all else is incidental.'

But it isn't incidental to be left in a chair, chin in her hands, for all this time. As if Katherine's hands are a mirror; she sees waves of memory circling round and round swimming between the spaces of her fingers, swirling around her thumbs. Or, perhaps she's just tired, not remembering anything, not thinking how getting married one day and changing your mind the next can be a little draining. Bags to pack, arrangements to make, what to say? Sometimes it's far nicer not to talk, to sit very still, absorbed in the moment, wrapt by the possibility of words; what they might mean strung together, and then to articulate them just so --

Rolling her r's, pressing her tongue slowly against the back of her front teeth, choking on a foreign accent. She knows phrases depend upon pitch and timing. *He had made it sound glorious: the slow desperate pitch of his voice as he'd mouthed, "let's get engaged," and standing beside him, leaning against his arm, thinking that very moment, "this is what it's like."*

In the evening Katherine throws herself onto the bed, becomes lost for a moment in its pink tassels, sniffs its hotel-antiseptic-too-clean smell, and the room blushing a healthy glow in the light of a pink lamp seems to agree.¹ Pinned by his body she has lost: her scruples lie in knots beneath the bed sheets. The window is open and the wind feels as if it's blowing her away bit by bit. Skin stretches over bone -- her toes and feet, then her legs, and then, following not far behind, her hips wiggling to catch up with the rest of her escaped bits, sashay into the light. Her neck and head, her useless arms hanging down by her sides and the wind blowing the night, takes them in its great mouth and blows out the lamp. The room fades and shrinks into a puddle of grey when Katherine spots his handkerchief by the bed scrunched in a ball. How he has wiped the evening clean, erased every trace he's ever been. There --

Darling,

I've had a change of mind. I can't go through with this.

You were so lovely yesterday. I shan't forget. . .

Your wife,

K

No, that seems inappropriate. Not quite –

The writer tries again.

Darling,

Yesterday I loved you, or thought I did.

Today I'm not so sure it just isn't the idea of being a wife I'm in love with. But I can't do that either.

I'm returning your ring.

I'm returning the title, WIFE too.

Live long, laugh.

Katherine.

p. s. I'll always love your voice and the way you round out your vowels, every one of them, perfect. Tone is everything!

Better, but would she write that? She must wake Katherine and find out. The writer calls to her guest. *Katherine, would you say that? Ever?*

Katherine lifts her chin from her hands, sighs, and nods, *yes*.

That was easy, the writer thinks.

Sitting on the edge of a chair the writer has placed in the middle of the room before her desk, Katherine straightens her back, thrusts out her breasts, bends back her neck so that she is staring at the ceiling and breathes deeply. Something rattles in her lungs – no, it's too soon -- you scarcely hear it above the whirl of the air conditioner.¹ “Write noise” the writer calls it when her husband asks. She needs distraction; the world is too noisy without it she can't hear what her characters are saying.

Katherine gets up from the chair and begins circling the room. She appears to be looking for something.

What?

Your cello? the writer asks.

Katherine doesn't appear to hear her, or at least she doesn't acknowledge she has heard her question. Sometimes fictional characters don't react as we'd like them to. Katherine feels fated to circle about the room looking for her cello until something is made to happen. The writer notices how self-conscious the story has become, like Katherine, it paces on the carpet; one foot, the other, then the dull thud of its thin breath -- a page turning, almost -- something is about to happen! *thump thump thump thump* its little heart beats.

I sold it, Katherine says suddenly stopping in the middle of the room gesturing wildly, her arms spread above her head as if she is flying off somewhere back to a moment in her life. But she isn't flying. One hand begins to finger the imaginary neck of a cello. Stretching her hand over its strings, she rocks back and forth, her fingers shaking, the walls vibrating with melody. Katherine lifts her right hand as if it is holding a bow and slides it back and forth across the bridge of the cello. What's she playing? Mozart? She likes Mozart. Light, airy, hard to play well.

Arnold played this one she says looking behind her to the writer sitting at the desk the laptop humming *merrily merrily merrily*, the writer scribbling notes on the stationary she's found in the drawer:

-find out more about cello?

- did she play one?¹

Where'd you learn to do that? the writer asks Katherine. But Katherine doesn't answer. Instead, she continues to gesture absurdly before the window pausing now and again to check her reflection in the glass. How long had she been doing that? How long had her mouth been open, so very open looking as if it were trying to squeeze out a song of operatic proportions, but nothing escapes it, not even a hiss of air, not even the rattle (don't mention the rattle – it's far too early, too tragic --)¹

Why does music not come to this little room? Are ghosts forbidden to sing?

The writer doesn't believe it.

Perhaps it's part of the act.

ACT ONE:

Scene I: Spring 1910

Katherine sits in a passenger carriage on a train, the very train from *The Great Train Robbery*, an early talkie the young lady has heard about, but never seen. She is wearing an enormous black Peter Pan Hat and has placed a bottle of Veronal beside her to help her sleep. On her lap is a small blue book in which she writes. She seems content; she is smiling and is perhaps pleased with herself.

Enter a mature lady. She sits across from Katherine and adjusts the slit in her narrow skirt. Wiggling discretely into a comfortable position as any lady would; monobosomed, drawn at the waist, her long neck seems to bob this way, that, as if she is aware that each movement causes the large grey feather in her hat to wiggle. Like a pigeon settling into its nest, *coo, coo*, her dress looks very much like a large upside down lampshade, but this too is the current fashion. She begins to tap her yellow parasol upon the train's floor in a very perplexing manner before she speaks.

Lady: I don't mean to impose child, but are you off alone to a funeral?

Katherine: (Pausing, finishes writing in her book before answering). No, Mme. I'm off to find a new flat. Something far and away from England.

Lady: Why dear, your hat perfectly says, "I'm going to a funeral!"

Katherine places a hand over her mouth, thinks better of it, removes it and laughs.

The Lady begins to tap her parasol again on the floor.

Katherine: Perhaps then I'll remove it (pointing to her hat) if it bothers you.

Lady: No child, I didn't mean. . .

Katherine: (Removing her hat and placing it in the shelf above her head) There, done.

And with that said, orchestral music begins to play in the background. How it sounds very like the sound of a train and air gushing through an open window. Still standing, she opens her mouth to sing the tragedy of a hat, but all that comes out of her mouth is a hiss, some kind of asthmatic wheeze. She looks alarmed, gestures dramatically at her now bare head, and continues to try to sing but when she opens her mouth soft grey feathers fall from it. She reaches out her hand inviting the other woman to stand beside her and join her in song. The Lady rises, points to her own hat and its whimsical feathers and leans over to shoo birds gathering at the window. The Lady is frightened. Perhaps she wonders if the birds will think she is one of them or want to fly off with her hat for it would make a lovely nest. As she rises a chorus line of gray swans – half human, half bird wearing coloured elbow length gloves beneath their wings chirp: *hat hat hat* and press their fingers against the glass.

Swans: (chirp) *hat hat hat*

The writer flinches, puts her hands over her ears, pushes her breath out in noisy puffs. But still she hears the birds. Perplexed, she tilts her head. Will a different angle help?

Swans: (Becoming louder and more aggressive) *Hat Hat HAT*.

The sounds of the swans grow. The birds begin flapping their wings and moving their gloved hands and wrists up and down in wave like motions. Feathers continue to drip from Katherine's open mouth. The Lady points to the hat on her own head and begins to laugh, covers her mouth with her hand knowing that ladies do not laugh with their mouths open -- She removes her hand from her mouth and points two fingers one to each eye as if to say, *I'm watching you*, but Katherine is already posing dramatically. In profile she appears hawkish: her arms outstretched by her side, her neck titled back, she is ready to swoop upon the birds. Realizing they have only one eye amongst them, Katherine leans towards the open window, quickly darts her hand out, plucks the giant blue eye from the one bird's forehead and places it between her own eyes where her third eye ought to be.

Enter the conductor. He knocks on the door of the carriage.

Startled, the Lady jumps to open the carriage door. Instead of a tall man in a big hat as we might expect, the conductor wears some sort of cap, a shiny soldier's shield over his uniform and winged -tipped shoes. He carries an umbrella as if it is a sword, its silver handle flashes when he begins to swing at the blind swans by the window as if he is imagining beheading them. As he does this, feathers from Katherine's mouth turn from a soft grey to a brilliant red. Soon she clutches her throat. She can sing no more.

END OF SCENE ONE.

What are you waiting for?

To cross over, to follow the light, to float from room to room, to walk on the ceiling. Choosing a life, not your own, but one you fancy, one that seems so much more - liveable. What you don't know hurts; what you know you learn as you enter it, stepping onto the stage, proceeding to the centre, gesturing dramatically, finding your audience; (is) anyone listening (?) listen -- you want to speak, but you don't always know what to say, to call out in the dark, *any minute I'm going to sing*, a feathered note, a swallow's song, what shall i sing?

More than anything you want to remember the person you are now, the one you've selected from all the other lives you might have had this one, that, who *is* that girl in the dreadful hat?

Choose to live as you never have.

As if she has crossed over, the writer finds herself in a house where someone is playing Mozart's *Fantasia in D Minor* on the piano. Katherine says one can remember details only on the piano.¹ How each note is played and how long one holds down the pedal makes all the difference. Don't breathe, (*legato legato*), the arm lifting, falling back on the keyboard, the wrists held high. The notes so smooth they hang in the air: crystals of sound. It's best to play lightly with a sure touch: you've got to know what you're doing, where you are, "*who's there?*" the writer asks.

Does the writer know why she is singing a train song about a hat, chirping as she imagines a swan might chirp? Do swans chirp? She doesn't think so, but these aren't ordinary swans.

Katherine still wearing the swans' eye, has moved it to the centre of her chest as if it were an enormous heart able to see love. What does love look like? Is that why she's come to the hotel?¹

SCENE III

Katherine is sitting in her seat in the train holding the swan's eye close to her chest. The floor is covered with red & grey feathers. The Lady is sleeping on the seats across from Katherine in a most unladylike pose, her belly in the air, her legs splayed as much as possible in her ridiculously narrow skirt. Katherine's hat lies across her face. It is evening so that the light of spirits, fellow travellers of the night & train, appear to dance across the carriage.

Katherine: You can come out now.

(Who's she talking to?)

Katherine: (Patiently trying again) I said, you can come out now.

She looks at a dancing orb on the ceiling of the train and reaching her hand towards it tries to snatch it in her fist.

(Whispering) I want you. (She snatches at the orb.)

And you. (She snatches at another orb).

The light rests in her palm. Katherine closes her hand quickly, jumps to her feet, and places the light in her handbag above her. The light glowing through the bag, flickers on, off, then on again. Katherine sits in her seat watching lines of words rising from the Lady's mouth as if they were black strips of newsprint.

Fragments of dream. Should she read them? How does one read the unconscious? Dreams belong to the dreamer, but since Katherine was first to sit in this carriage, first to claim it, she feels (somewhat) entitled:

Sorry to hear,

we are coming, the weather is

lovely

John is

the children

mis

behave.

When can you come?

The carriage is filling with words, odd phrases out of context that linger a while above the woman's head, then drift slowly to the floor, like the feathers escaping from her hat. Katherine leans over to touch a wave as it emerges from the dreamer's mouth and passing her hand through it, as if it doesn't exist, here, as if she knows it belongs elsewhere, in another time, another place --

What words feel.

What ?

Katherine might hold fragments of dream in her palms; she might read them backwards: the ending, how it all begins. Here, & here, & here again. The middle a muddle, what happens? Articulating each syllable, she knows timing is everything. Her vowels are perfect, her r's rolled. Her tone is lovely and smooth; there is no trace of an accent.

Katherine opens her hands (the light fades, her hands are hands again, empty, dreamless. Words no longer linger in the air, no longer rise to the ceiling, but instead drip as if from a tap onto the train's floor. Reaching up she pulls word wet & tangled from the dreamer's mouth. There are so many she keeps pulling and pulling at them until the sound of the dripping deepens, until they seem more like stones hurled into a large body of water, each echo longer, and deeper than the last. Katherine looks horrified. She steps onto her seat carrying the words

she's stolen from the dreamer's mouth under her arm. Unraveling them she begins to wrap them around her neck and body. There are too many words. She covers her body until mummified, she can no longer move freely.

Lady: (Screams waking to see Katherine mummified).

Jumping to her feet she frantically tries to unravel sheets of dreams from Katherine's body, but they won't loosen. She tries removing her hat, as if removing it might set off some sort of reaction, a gesture to prompt action, something, anything -- but when she lifts her hat the audience sighs. She is he and he is bald!

The carriage begins to shake violently and birds return to the window. In this strange light they knock about the glass blindly, frantically, since Katherine still has their eye. The eye begins to tear, drops glisten and wet Katherine's blouse. This, however, is a blessing: now wet, strips of dream-words slip from Katherine's body. Some might say the strips look more like snakes; others will find this image too disturbing, hopelessly Freudian, and setting their jaws firmly, wait for the characters to speak of Medusa, to recover their hats and their wits, to reduce words to nothing more than newsprint, fragments of thought, sodden, by now almost illegible.

Katherine: I am undone!

Enter mature lady through the carriage door. She is dressed as an old sea captain. Imagine her parasol, his cane; her hat, a seaman's cap. She wears the same coat, but her narrow skirt has split down the middle & resembles trousers. Haunted by crew and passengers he couldn't save, the Captain sees ghosts before him -- arms and legs, a foot floating on the surface of the ocean. When he tries to reach them, to hand them something, anything to hold onto, waves of words one might have said crush the ribs of the carriage and push him down, down, until he doesn't remember falling to the floor. He doesn't remember the dark cold, only that he tries to reach the surface where the light is bright, but he can't recall what happens next. Grabbing his cane, he runs frantically around the carriage jabbing at tiny balls of light drifting across the ceiling, arms and legs floating before him. Dazed; he makes no progress, and saving no one becomes frantic.

Sea Captain: (Loudly) **ENOUGH! ENOUGH!**

Lights fade. Words glow in the dark carriage. Characters, like orbs on the ceiling, are also brilliantly lit. We hear the banging of the Captain's cane against the floor. The eye focuses on the captain as he lifts his knees one after the other as if ascending a set of stairs. Katherine is humming the first few bars of Mozart's *Fantasia*. China cups rise and fall and rattle in their saucers; passengers taking their tea, refuse to break routine.

Writer: (moaning) Oh Robert, Robert –

The hotel curtain opens as if it's leaning in a little too close to the sound of a piano being played. Looking as if its undergarments are exposed: the open window, the glass shaking, the ledge gleaming white, the wind swallows the morning, afternoon; it is not yet evening, have they finished their tea? Not yet, already – china rattling in its saucer.

We hear a gunshot and look for the writer. She is not at her desk. Instead, we see large hole in the wardrobe door. It might tear like the swan's eye, but it doesn't. A hole is a hole is a hole Robert slips in and returns to where he came from. In the mirror we see the writer holding a smoking gun looking pleased with herself. Now she can get on with her story.

She will order tea for two; she will hang up Katherine's coat. So, *this is what it's like* she thinks, to completely lack social graces. *Will anyone notice? Does anyone care?*

Spirits wander in and out of the room between walls. One, lounging on the ceiling, a Gibson Girl, pretends to be a pigeon and flapping her arms about her sides sticks her long tongue out rudely at the writer and answering the writer's question replies,

I shouldn't think so.

Floodgates, crying gulls, the odd fish or two (OR: any moment I am going to sing)

ⁱ She too needs to detach from Robert. Will he ever go away? This story, that; refuses to conclude. She has told it several times musing for a cappuccino on Bloor, waving her hands above her head as if to push aside Toronto's humidly, as if posing enlivens the story. But she hasn't told it as it's meant to be told. And stories, she knows, whether wanted or not, demand a good telling.

ⁱⁱ Robert is sugar. She's addicted to him and taking him many times over and under in various rooms, at various times of the day, night, years and years she over indulges; she is greedy and must take again.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is decidedly more Gaynor Rowlands, or Isabel Jay, or Phyllis Dare than Virginia Woolf although characters in Woolf's *Waves* and *To the Lighthouse* see to skim over time as if it's a second skin one hand behind their ear listening for its beat. Does time have a heart? Is that pounding the heel of her shoe, an impatient foot waking toes from slumber? The body demanding once upon a time, *once upon a time*. . .

^{iv} Clearly.

^v I've 'borrowed' this idea (with changes) from Katherine Mansfield's journal entry of February 1922. Is nothing sacred?

^{vi} It might have happened this way. According to Alpers, an early Mansfield biographer, Mrs. Bowden (the name Katherine Mansfield takes if ever so briefly), gives a similar account. The pink tassels in this hotel room might match.

^{vii} Like many of her generation, Katherine will die from consumption. But that is another story and the writer will not refer to this again, although now you know in case you were wondering.

^{viii} Yes, she did play the cello. What a marvelous instrument! Sliding it between her legs she was conscious of the change in fashion from her full flared skirt to the streamlined one that became "practical" after 1910. Was it really a symbol women had joined the narrow ranks of democracy? Did they really tie ribbons around their thighs to keep their legs from parting? All but Katherine. You can't play the cello with your legs tied up.

& the cello player? Did he exist? It doesn't matter. She had loved him over and over again.

^{ix} I believe we settled on this earlier. The narrator will try not to mention it again.

^x Katherine Mansfield writes of this particular belief in her journals February 1922.

^{xi} Just then Robert steps out of the wardrobe. In one hand he carries a flute of champagne, its bubbles so charged they seem to jump from the glass. In his other hand he carries a box of chocolates and on top of the box he balances a handgun. Its barrel is very thin. He doesn't want it to fall off the box so he's moving slowly towards the writer. Which gift will he give her first? Which will she take?

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