

COUNTING DAYS

By
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In the following scenes from early in ACT I, we see middle-aged Mary Kniesen (MK) adrift, floundering for a path - in a doctor's office and water-color class and later in the play, in a flamenco class. Whether she knows it not or yet, MK is looking for meaning in her suddenly emptied life. She gets a whiff of a sense of purpose when reading the Journals of Katherine Mansfield - the glamorous and intense writer of the 1920's, who died of TB while young. Katherine Mansfield (KM) inhabits an elevated place on the stage and makes journal entries about the beauty and vibrancy of everyday life. Later in the play, KM's spirit enters MK's world and helps, enigmatically, to guide her.

ACT 1 **Scene 2**

(We are in a modern day doctor's office. MK is sitting, waiting, reading a book. A doctor briskly enters the room.)

(In another area of the stage, KM simultaneously inhabits her own world -- at a writing table, at a window...)

DOCTOR
(professionally)

And how are we today?

MK
(looking up, closing book)

Well...

DOCTOR
That's good. Those headaches have cleared up from last time?

MK
Yes, and...

DOCTOR
Now what about these recent symptoms... tingling in the finger-tips, ringing in the ears...

(reading her chart)

MK
Yes. I don't know what's wrong with me. I don't know whether it's serious or not...

DOCTOR
Hm-hm.

MK
So... I thought I'd better come in and have you check it out.

DOCTOR
Hm-hm.

(starts examining her)

Cross your legs.

(He taps at her knees for reflex responses.)

MK
I don't know what it is, but, last month --

DOCTOR
Now the other.

MK
-- when I was driving my daughter to the airport --

DOCTOR
(as he continues his examination)

She's off to college, isn't she?

MK
Yes. I was driving...

DOCTOR
So glad to hear she got in -- University of Pennsylvania, isn't it?

MK
Yes.

DOCTOR
A fine school. It's where I did my medical training. Now that's a town with a lot of hospitals.

MK
Yes, I noticed that.

DOCTOR
Philadelphia. Now your arms.

MK
Anyway, I was driving my daughter to the airport and I started feeling so strange. I felt as if I was awake and asleep at the same time. I was terribly drowsy and I could barely keep my eyes open. But I felt like I was... wired! Electricity running through my body.

DOCTOR
Hm-hm. Doesn't sound too pleasant.

MK
It was the strangest thing I've ever felt. Like I wasn't really in my body. There was no... shape to me... or something...

DOCTOR
Let me listen to your heart and lungs.

(puts stethoscope to her chest)

Breathe deeply.

(Lights come up on KM, who is writing or speaking a journal entry.)

KM
February 20th, 1918. I woke up early this morning and when I opened the shutters the full round sun was just risen. I began to repeat that verse of Shakespeare's: "Lo, here the gentle lark weary of rest," and bounded back into bed.

(focus back to MK and doctor)

DOCTOR
Now breathe normally.

(He listens.)

(focus back to KM)

KM

The bound made me cough -- I spat -- it tasted strange -- it was bright red blood. I don't want to find this is real consumption, perhaps it's going to gallop -- who knows? -- and I shan't have my work written. That's what matters. How unbearable it would be to die -- leave "scraps," "bits"... nothing real finished.

(focus back to DOCTOR and MK)

DOCTOR

Well, it appears that everything's OK. I don't see any need for further tests unless these symptoms continue or worsen.

MK

No CAT Scan?

DOCTOR

No.

MK

(relieved)

Good. I thought maybe I had MS, or something.

DOCTOR

No, MS doesn't really present itself this way. What's the book?

MK

The Journals of Katherine Mansfield. She wrote short stories in the 20's. She has this incredible way of seeing things. Everything seems to be clear, and... in focus. When she describes something -- like a... pear tree in full bloom, or... the moon, it's so... there. So...

DOCTOR

Ship of Fools.

MK

No, Ship Of Fools was Katherine Anne Porter.

DOCTOR

Of course. And this is Katherine Mansfield. You always have a book, don't you -- what was it last time? The Incredible... The Incredible Lightness...

MK

The Unbearable Lightness of Being, yes. Actually, I found this book in my book-case -- I don't even know where it came from. I'm taking this journal class, and I was alone that week, and kind of lonely, and...

DOCTOR

(He rises to leave.)

Hm-hm. Well, that's it, I'd say. Call me if there are any more problems. But I really think everything will sort itself out.

(before he leaves, turning to her)

No particular stress in your life, right now, is there?

MK

No, no. Everything's fine.

DOCTOR

Good.

MK
I have nothing to complain about.

DOCTOR
Good.

Scene 3

(KM is writing in her journal and speaking her thoughts aloud.)

KM
Since this little attack I've had, a queer thing has happened. My love and longing for the external world -- I mean the world of nature -- has suddenly increased a million times.

The moon is just over the mountain behind the village. The dogs know she is there; already they begin to howl and bark. The fishermen are shouting and whistling to one another as they bring in their boats, some young boys are singing in half-broken voices down by the shore, and there is a noise of children crying, little children with burnt cheeks and sand between their toes being carried home to bed.

Scene 4

(MK is sitting outside. On her lap is a pad of paper. In her hand is a brush and in her lap a pad of paper and palette of paints. Above her stands a man -- the WATER-COLOR TEACHER.)

WATER-COLOR TEACHER
That's all you need to do -- just get inside that rock as you paint it.

MK
That's all?

WATER-COLOR TEACHER
It's as if you were writing a poem -- what are those poems called that the Japanese write?

MK
Haiku.

WATER-COLOR TEACHER
That's right, haiku. And they had... what was it... like six lines or something?

(Distracted, he starts searching for cigarettes in his pockets.)

MK
Three, yes.

WATER-COLOR TEACHER
-- and there was a certain form you had to obey.

(still can't find them)

MK
Yes. I think it was 5-7-5 -- syllables per line. Something like that.

WATER-COLOR TEACHER
Well, that's not important.

(Finds one and tries to light it. Can't get the lighter to work.)

What is important is that before you worry about the form of the thing, you get inside it -- so you know its essence.

(pause)

Same thing with golf.

MK
Golf?

WATER-COLOR TEACHER

Because you have to really be there to... like be in it, you know? Learn the rules later -- the form -- all those golf pros telling you "cock your arm" and, and "bend your knee" and

(starts doing it)

"come right out of your stroke, with one long, extended movement."

(stops)

Anyway -- it's just like painting. You can't follow the form until you know the feeling. And here, with painting, the feeling means getting into the essence of things. Staring at it -- meditating with it -- being, if you will, being it. Being the rock. OK? Am I making any sense?

MK
(confused)

Yes. I mean, I think so.

WATER-COLOR TEACHER

No, no, no, no. Don't think. Be.

MK
I'll try.

WATER-COLOR TEACHER

OK, then. Start. Good beginnings to you.

(He walks off to the next student. MK is left alone with the rock and her paints. She looks from one to the other. Then she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath -- opens her eyes and looks at the rock. It's the same. Takes another deep breath and looks at the rock again. She begins -- she dunks her brush in water and daubs it into the pigment. Beat. Cautiously she puts her brush on the paper and starts to paint. She becomes absorbed.)

(Focus momentarily shifts to KM, in her world.)

KM
This is what I see out my window.

(looking intently)

A pine branch with its purple cones against the blue. How can I put it, that there is gum on the cones? "Gemmed." No. "Beaded?" No.

(finding the words)

"They are like crystals." The beauty of the garden. The beauty of raked paths... Then, the silence.

(focus back on MK)

WATER-COLOR TEACHER'S VOICE

The rock, Mary, look at the rock!

(MK looks up, startled.)