

## Katherine's Ghost

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Katherine looks to the woman on her left in the otherwise empty room. The woman looks back. She is always looking back. *She seems out of place*; the author notes to herself as she shuffles the papers on her small wooden desk. The rays of the late afternoon sink deep into her traitorous bones.

The woman has dressed for a summer morning whole worlds away, and Katherine can see that every door to her soul is open, letting the sweet, warm air flow in and out of every atom in her being. That was a word Katherine liked.

"Atom," she says to herself. "Atom," she says out loud, proudly addressing the woman and the walls of her abode, in her semi-slurred voice. The woman just looks back.

*Pretty*, Katherine thinks tipsily.

*Doe-eyed*.

*Big hat*.

*Positively Spanish*.

It is only then Katherine realises she isn't pretty. She isn't anything. They are sitting face to face, nose to nose at the wood-panelled writing desk. And yet, Katherine can't quite make out her face. However, she knows she is watching, through the tug in her gut, and she knows her soul is open. Katherine could plunge her fist into the very centre of the human existence, and pull out the woman's secrets, the very reason for Katherine's own suffering. The sweet night air wafts in through the open window in the corner of the room; it is too saccharine to be anything near pleasant. The cloying breeze and the swirling, heaving expanse of the open woman's face make poor Katherine double over.

The sight of blood is always wrong. There is something humans are predisposed to hate about the colour of life. Perhaps it is too close to death for comfort. Too close to showing them how fast it can run from a wound, how quick their bodies are to betray them. Her manuscript is ruined now. But what do manuscripts and music matter to the dead? Katherine has to remind herself she isn't dead. Only the ghost at the writer's desk and her words on the spotted page know what lies beyond the veil. She sighs and with tremulous hands disposes of the ruined corpse of a story. The woman looks on from afar, her open soul filling the heavy air with swirling colours as she speaks.

"Darling," she starts. Katherine appears lost and dazed as if she has been abandoned by her sense of vigour, left sweating in the sweet, maudlin room. "Darling, the world is a garden party; you cannot expect us to wait for you."

"Why not?" Katherine replies. Her voice seems to come from everywhere all at once, and yet it sounds so very far away, echoing from somewhere beyond the white mottled walls of the sanatorium. "Why can you not wait for me? How can the party continue if I am not there?"

A pitiful smile spreads across the woman's mouthless face. *How can that be?* thinks Katherine to herself. *How on earth is she smiling?*

“The party must go on, darling! We have other guests waiting to arrive, waiting to gorge themselves, to experience all we have to offer. Surely you cannot want us to call it all off just because you’ve had your fill.”

Her words are white hot in Katherine’s mind, burning themselves into her very being. She coughs and coughs, trying to expel them along with her fear, along with her mortality, but all that she brings up is blood.

“Write another story,” the woman suggests, ignoring the horrible cough that rings out in the night. “Your stories are positively divine, Katherine dear. Go on, give us one more gift before you go.”

Katherine does not want to give the world a gift. She wants them to stop the music and the dancing, she wants them to see her pain. The ghost blows a breath of sugary smoke into the author’s face. Oh, how it soothes the burning in her soul.

Katherine’s whole world is white. The walls of the hospital, the dress she wears, her faceless companion, the disease that riddles her with holes. She has white coursing through her veins. “The white plague is a romantic’s disease, Miss Mansfield,” they tell her. “Katherine, Katherine, a disease fit for a writer!” She feels like a slighted lover, it’s true, betrayed and abandoned by her own body in every possible way. At the end of everything, Katherine Mansfield is not ready to leave the garden party. However, she is ready to rest.

“Was the air here always so sweet?” she asks the ghost absently, crawling between her starched sheets, but the woman is silent once more, only looking, from the corner of the room.

The next night and the following, the room becomes sweeter than before, and the ghost of the woman is accompanied by patterns of strobing colours and a man who will only speak in French about dosages and pain. Katherine will talk only to the ghost; no one else will matter soon. She stumbles through her days from the writing desk to the bed, and back again, like a hamster on a wheel, just waiting for the day when the jazz band will play from the garden, and she will not be around to hear it.

“Write a story, Katherine,” the woman cajoles. “Make it a good one! The best! Make them remember you!”

Katherine wants the garden party to stop for her. *What kind of people continue a party when a tragedy has occurred?* she thinks angrily to herself, staring aimlessly at the blank paper in front of her. The woman had made it clear, however, that the band stopped for no one and the drink would still flow, the best she could do now was make those selfish guests aware of what she thought of them. Not even the candy sweet of opium in the air could soothe the white that plagued her now, but she could write a story. For death so young is an absent god’s curse.

She had time left, she knew, time left at the party to make her announcement, to make sure she was heard all across the garden so that even the bees and the heads of the roses would remember her words. Katherine was going to open every door to her soul like her own ghost, who looks on from the desk in the corner.