

UNDERSTANDING MEN

by Julia Pascal

Katherine Nagel. She was the most famous woman war correspondent alive. I had to meet her. Spain. Dachau. The Nuremberg Trials. Vietnam, The Six Day War, Nicaragua. But it was Nuremberg I wanted to hear about. Nuremberg that drew us together. I wanted her memories of that time for a play I was researching. Other women writers tried to scare me off her. She's a bitch. She's hard. She'll crush you.

I wrote her and fast there was an American edition of her war journals on my desk. She included a postcard with best wishes and her London number. On the phone her voice was sharp, educated, American. I asked her if I could take her to lunch. That's what younger women do when they want information from older ones. Her voice got louder.
'I don't eat. I DRINK'.

We drank. She Scotch. Me vodka. If I was going to keep up with her, I needed purity. She smoked continually and talked of Germany in the late 30s and how she couldn't wear a chignon because the Nazi doctors had ruined her ear in a botched operation. She turned to me with disapproval. 'You should wear your hair up. A woman has to look good. It's a public service'.

I have to explain how we looked, sitting and drinking in the luxury Belgravia apartment. We were two women divided by forty years. She highly educated in select women's colleges, the child of enlightened German settlers. Me the child of parents who cared nothing for female education; small, dark, inelegant with a lot of hair, maybe Italian, Greek, Gypsy or downright Jewish. And yet, we connected. And, when I left, she called me dear girl and offered her cheek.

'Why isn't your hair up?' she demanded on my second visit. This time I brought smoked salmon to go with the alcohol. She was pleased at the food – did she ever eat? – and angry at the frizz. She had claimed she was half blind after a cataract operation so how could she see my hair? I was already in trouble with her for being late and her mood was waspish. She was already on the whisky and lit up in irritation at my appearance. As for me I was getting through a bad migraine and massive fibrous tumour blood loss. She was right. I wasn't at my best. But I had to come as she had read one of my plays and I wanted her reaction.

'You can't do men. I admire your skill, not that I understand playwriting. But you've got the men all wrong. It's taken me all my life to understand men and now they come to me and they tell me how they experience women; they tell me now that I am no longer in the running. You know I had men chase me all my life. But, after a certain age, that just stops happening. A woman becomes invisible. Still there are compensations. Young men now come to help me carry my suitcase. Not out of interest. Out of pity. And then they become my friends.'

Those women who warned me she was terrifying. Surely, they were wrong. Here was the great woman telling me her inner thoughts. This was not terrifying at all, it was a pleasure. They told me she was no friend to women. That she had spent her whole life in the company

of men. That she was a man's woman. But she was the mother or grandmother I always wanted. She had gone where men went and taken some of their territory. She had walked into war zones without a passport, without papers and cared nothing about danger. No wonder I felt proud to know her. Of her generation I was used to frustrated bitter, littlegirlwomen who had jettisoned their lives to be some man's wife, preferably a doctor, lawyer or at least a dentist. I had never met anyone like Katherine.

She had, of course, been William Fitzgerald's wife. Well one of them. He, the great womaniser, drinker and genius American novelist. Shooting himself in the head was the final dramatic act of a life which was to dominate the century's writing. And she hated his name, hated to be reminded of him. And yet it was she who kept bringing his presence into the London apartment. 'Never get married', she told me. 'You start with romance and end up talking about gas bills.'

William divorced his Catholic wife for Katherine, pressurising her to marry him as soon as the decree was absolute. It was a mistake. He was jealous of her writing, 'So he screwed around to get his own back'. Not that she discovered this til afterwards. The world's most famous American novelist was jealous of his wife. How was she to know that. She only considered herself a journalist He even wanted her to change her name to his so that Katherine Nagel would be Katherine Fitzgerald so that her writing would credit him. She refused.

After nine years they divorced. She remarried. 'Another disaster. Men are only after one thing', she told me. 'They have this liquid inside themselves and they have to get rid of it. All my life I tried to understand men and now I begin. Men will say anything to get a woman in to bed. But have you noticed that when a man talks he expects the woman to be listening to him all the time but, when a woman talks, a man never really listens because he's really just wanting to get her into bed.'

I said nothing. A woman who had walked through borders, crossed battlefields, lied and cheated to get herself into men's wars to tell the world what she saw, this woman was telling me what my mother had told me; what all our mothers had told us. It was as if sex was just something that concerned men and which women suffered. How could I say that my life was different. That sometimes, if I didn't have sex, then I too was, 'only after one thing', and if conversation happened too then so much the better.

I didn't need to respond. She was on a roll. 'When my periods stopped that was a goddamn relief. Menopause was the best thing that happened to me. If I'd known I'd've had a hysterectomy at thirty. Get rid of all that. And sex itself? I used to think, well, it's only ten or fifteen minutes. If it means so much to them. What's ten minutes to me'.

And then it was back to William and how he had never satisfied her in bed. She talked of faking orgasm. So, the great macho icon had a wife who faked it. Well, well.

Haven't you ever been in love? Something changed. She put out her cigarette and poured more whiskey.

'There was a man once. He was Jewish. I used to go to his place in a town several miles away

from New York. We met for weekends and just stayed in bed. It went on like that for several months. Then, one morning he touched me. I was repulsed. I knew it was over. I spoke to a friend about it and said maybe there was no tenderness. He was younger than me. Well, we didn't have a lot in common. He was a friend of Eleanor Roosevelt. Everyone thought she and he were lovers but that was wrong. That was a cruel thing to say about 'dear Eleanor'.

As she spoke of this man, I felt the blood seeping through my black skirt and excused myself to visit her toilet.

'Have you blocked it?' she yelled through the door. I was flushing it to get rid of the blood and tissue paper. I needed to clean myself up.

'You shouldn't put anything down that toilet' she said angrily coming in as I went out. I felt panic. 'You don't have to clean up my blood. Wait til the toilet flushes properly and I'll do it. But she forced me out and made straight for the bowl fishing out the tiny offending tampon as I looked on from the hall.

I went back into the lounge. I had offended her sense of decorum. I had arrived late, without my hair up and worst of all I had allowed an inch long tampon to block her toilet. I thought of the great Katherine Nagel, war correspondent, touching the tampon which had just been inside me, she who hated her own blood and the whole mess of sex, plunging her hand into the essence of my womb. I looked at the couch where I had been sitting. There was a stain. More blood. What was I to do?

The sofa was dark blue. Perhaps with her rotten vision she wouldn't notice? I turned a cushion on top so that the bloodstain was hidden. I washed our glasses. By now she was lying on her bed smoking and watching television. She motioned for me to sit on the chair by her side.

In our silence I felt the disgust of a generation of mothers cleaning up the blood of their daughters. But she had had no children and I was not her child.

We watched a documentary about the break-up of the Soviet Union-now-Russia and the rise of the Russian Orthodox Church. One leading cleric, in his forties, told the camera how the Jews had controlled Russia with their Communism and now the revenge belonged to the Church. Although the room was warm, I shivered and Katherine sighed, 'Oh God will they never learn.' Russia was not a far-off country to me. It was the land my great grandparents had fled only thirty years before Katherine was born. The report cut to a young woman attending Church services against her parents' wishes. Her face was close up, soft focus and then her mother's clenched fist filled the screen, her face sharply angled against a photo of Lenin on her wall. The mother's revolution was to reject the Church: her daughter's to run to it. The documentary ended with a packed service. The priests of Katherine's age looked triumphant. 'I feel so sorry for them.' she said. I looked at her lying on the bed. Grace Kelly, at 83, was suddenly frail and thin.

It was late. I should leave.

She got up from the bed to see me out.

As she opened the front door, I wanted to hug but knew that my blood had built a wall between us.

This time she didn't kiss me goodbye or call me her dear girl.