

PART ONE: A PROLOG IN LETTERS

Scene for performers and projections, taken from the letters and memoirs of D. H. Lawrence, Frieda Lawrence, Mabel Dodge Luhan and Lady Dorothy Brett

FRIEDA

As I look back now it surprises me
that Lawrence could have loved me at first sight as he did.
I hardly think I could have been a very loveable woman at the time.
I was thirty-one and had three children. My marriage seemed a success.
I had all a woman can reasonably ask.
Yet there I was, all "smock raveled," to use one of Lawrence's phrases.

DHL

Will you meet me? Or else wire me very early.
I have worried endlessly over you. Is that an insult?
If I knew how things stood with you, I wouldn't care a damn.
As it is, I eat my blessed heart out.
Till tomorrow, till tomorrow, till tomorrow!

FRIEDA

How sure he was in life,
how generous we were with each other.
How much he gave me.
Whatever I gave I got back a thousand fold.

DHL

I love you so much.
No doubt there'll be another dish of tragedy in the morning,
and we've only enough money to run us a fortnight,
and we don't know where the next will come from,
but still I'm happy, I am happy.

FRIEDA

Our own world, so small and poor to others on the outside,
what a strong, unconquerable fortress it really was!

DHL

Australia is a weird, big country.
It feels so empty and untrodden.
The minute the night begins to go down, even the towns,
even Sydney, which is huge, begins to feel unreal.

FRIEDA

I should have liked to stay in Australia and lose myself in this unborn country.
But Lawrence wanted to go to America.
Mabel Dodge had written that Lawrence must come to Taos in New Mexico,
that he must know the Pueblo Indians, that the Indians say that the heart of the world beats there in
New Mexico.

DHL

I am busy doing a novel, with Australia for the setting.
It goes fairly quickly, so I hope to have it done by August.
Then we shall sail via New Zealand and Tahiti for San Francisco,
and probably spend the winter in Taos, New Mexico.

MABEL

Through the months while Lawrence and Frieda hesitated coming to Taos, I willed him to come.
Before I went to sleep at night, I drew myself all in to the core of my being where there is a live,
plangent force lying passive -- waiting for direction.
"Come, Lawrence! Come to Taos! became, in me, "Lawrence in Taos!"
This is not a prayer, but a command.
Only those who have exercised it know its dangers.

FRIEDA

We travelled from San Francisco to Taos in great expectation.
It was September and the journey through the inner American desert was very hot.

MABEL

In those days it was a long, difficult trip down to Santa Fe
over a narrow, dirt road full of ruts and rocks.
We always had to rest at least an hour at noon
to recover from the bumps and jolts of the car.

DHL

In the magnificent fierce morning of New Mexico one sprang awake,
a new part of the soul woke up suddenly
and the old world gave way to the new.

MABEL

We stood waiting in the sweet air,
all scented as it was from the charcoal kilns burning piñon-wood.
Lawrence and Frieda came hurrying along the platform,
she tall and full-fleshed in a suit of pale pongee,
an eager look on her pink face, with green, unfocused eyes, and her half-open mouth with the lower
jaw pulled a little sideways.

Frieda always had a mouth rather like a gunman.

FRIEDA

We saw Mabel standing there in a turquoise blue dress
with much of the silver-and-turquoise Indian jewelry,
and by her side a handsome Indian in a blanket
with a large silver belt going across his chest. I looked at Mabel.

MABEL

I made out, in the twinkling of an eye,
that Frieda immediately saw Tony and me sexually, visualizing our relationship.
I experienced her swift, female measurement of him,
and how the shock of acceptance made her blink.
She was the mother of orgasm and of the vast, lively mystery of the flesh.

FRIEDA

When people talk about sex, I don't know what they mean --
as if sex hopped about by itself like a frog,
as if it had no relation to the rest of living, one's growth, one's ripening.

What people mean by sex will always remain incomprehensible to me.
But I am thankful to say sex is a mystery to me.
I looked at Mabel. "She has eyes one can trust," I said to myself.

MABEL

Frieda was complete, but limited.

DHL

All women are alike, bossy, without any decency;
[to Frieda]
it's your business to see that other women don't come too close to me.

FRIEDA

Mabel had prepared us a house all to ourselves, in her "Mabel-town."
The house stood on Indian land and belonged to Tony.
It was a charming adobe house, with Mexican blankets and Indian paintings of Indian dances and animals, clean and full of sun.

DHL

The big house is about 200 yards away -- an adobe pile,
I don't like very much being on the grounds of a *padrona*
but Mabel Sterne is quite generous.
Whether I *really* like it is another matter. It is all an experience.

MABEL

Anything that was likely to make Frieda glower, Lawrence avoided.

FRIEDA

I think the greatest pleasure and satisfaction for a woman
is to live with a creative man. Often before he conceived a new idea
he was irritable and disagreeable, but when it had come on, the new vision,
he could go ahead, and was eager and absorbed.

MABEL

When he was at outs with her, he was thrown off his balance,
for she was the root of his existence.
He drew life from her so that when anything shook or disturbed that even flow,
he was like a cut flower, drying up.

FRIEDA

What does it amount to that he hit out at me in a rage,
when I exasperated him,
or mostly when the life around him drove him to the end of his patience?
I didn't care very much.
I hit back, or waited till the storm subsided.
We fought our battles outright to the bitter end.
Then there was peace, such peace.

MABEL

Lawrence hurried over to our house in the morning
ready to begin our work together. As I never dressed early in the morning,
but took a sun-bath on the long, flat, dirt roof outside my bedroom,
I called to him to come up there. I didn't think to dress for him.

I had on moccasins, even if my legs were bare;
and I had a voluminous, soft, white cashmere thing like a burnoose.
We went out into the sun on the long, flat roof;
the house seemed to be sailing on a quiet green sea
– the desert behind us bordered by the cedar-covered foot-hills,
and the alfalfa fields in front,
and Taos Mountain north-east of us, looking benevolent that day.

FRIEDA

Yet Lawrence really understood me.
From the first he saw through me like glass,
saw how hard I was trying to keep up a cheerful front.
I thought it was so despicable and unproud and unclean to be miserable,
but he saw through my hard bright shell.

DHL

Take that dirty cigarette out of your mouth!

And stop sticking out that fat belly of yours!

FRIEDA

You'd better stop that talk or I'll tell about your things.

MABEL

It was right away in these first few days that Frieda and I had together
that she told me so much. We started being friends.
She was excellent company.
She had the gift of immediate intimacy that I had myself, which,
compared to ordinary intercourse, is like a live baby beside a talking doll.

Well, that is all I have to tell you about Lawrence in Taos.
I called him there, but he did not do what I called him to do.
He did another thing.
Though we both came back to Taos the summer following,
I did not see him. He, up on the ranch, avoided me, and I avoided him.

DHL

Dear Mabel: We'll all soothe down a bit, then we'll come back to Taos and see if we can't really get into a harmony. If everybody does his or her bit, I'm sure we can. Instead of being all wild like the horses. We'll all chew the cud of contemplation in our little corrals, then trot out for a reunion.

MABEL

I always mistrust, in written or recounted memories, those long, interesting conversations that we sometimes enjoy very much. Because talk, real talk between people, is as unexpected and surprising to them as it is uttered, as any movement in nature. It flows through one like the wind. The forms of clouds or waves or sand are sudden and immediate. And as quickly gone. Does the sea remember every pattern in the sand? One cannot remember one's own real talk. The most one can do is to recall the general feeling or mood of a long conversation.

DHL

Dear Mabel: You certainly are an egoist, and your letters are egotistic, as you say. Soon you must learn to forget yourself, you must learn not to care, not to think. and simply to laugh. Poco a poco.

MABEL

He simply couldn't bear to have anyone question his power, his rightness, or even his appearance. I think his uncertainty about himself, a vague feeling of inferiority, made him touchy. Did Lawrence realize, I wonder, that in spite of all his charm, his sensitiveness, and his sympathetic intuition, he had a vulgar nose?

FRIEDA

We wanted to go back to America in the spring, and live at the ranch that Mabel Luhan had given me. She had taken me to the little ranch near Taos and I said: "This is the loveliest place I have ever seen."

MABEL

I give it to you.

DHL

We can't accept such a present from anybody.

FRIEDA

I had a letter from my sister that very morning telling me
she had sent the manuscript of "Sons and Lovers,"
so I told Lawrence: "I will give Mabel the MS. for the ranch."

So I did.

DHL

Dear Mabel:

I am still planning to come west at the end of February or in March,
with Frieda, Murray and Brett.

I hope you are looking forward to it.

But on your honor, Mabel, no seriousness.

The seriousness of the Great God Pan, who grins a bit,
and when he gets driven too hard, goes fierce.

MABEL

Frieda and Lawrence, with their new friend Brett,
reached Taos from New York the day before Tony and I came home.
They were staying at the big house.
And when we rolled through the gate, blowing the horn,
Lorenzo came running out to meet us.

FRIEDA

Brett was always with us.
I liked her in many ways; she was so much her own self.

MABEL

A tall, oldish girl.
She had pretty pink round cheeks and a childish expression.
Her long thin shanks ended in large feet that turned abruptly
like the kind that children draw.

BRETT

I have made a mental picture of her, of course,
but like all such pictures, it is totally wrong.
She is shorter than I am, of a square, sturdy build;
the thick brown hair, bobbed like a Florentine boy,
swings as she walks and gleams here and there a bright chestnut.

DHL

Mabel Sterne is very nice to us --
though I hate living on somebody else's property and accepting their kindness.
She very much wants me to write about here.

MABEL

Brett had stuck a brass ear-trumpet into her ear
and was eagerly turning it in all directions to pick up any scraps of conversation.
She was an amusing and an attractive grotesque.

FRIEDA

We stayed with Mabel Luhan.

DHL

Mabel Dodge: American, rich, only child from Buffalo,
forty-two years old, has had three husbands. Now she has an Indian.
Is a little famous in New York, and little loved;
very intelligent as a woman, likes to play patroness.
She wants to be a witch
and at the same time a Mary of Bethany at Jesus's feet.
A big, white crow; a cooing raven of ill omen;
a little buffalo.

FRIEDA

We stayed with Mabel Luhan but, somehow, we didn't get on.
I was longing to go to the ranch and live there.

DHL

Brett, which of the cabins will you have? You can have either of these two.
Frieda and I must have the large one, as we need a room each and a kitchen.
But you can have either this one or the little one.

FRIEDA

We got a cow and had four horses: Azul, Aaron, and two others;
and then we got chickens, all white ones, Leghorns.
The beautiful cockerel was called Moses
and Susan was the cow's name.

DHL

You know, Frieda is quite proud of her ranch and her horse Azul,
that's the one with two wives:
my Poppy, who is very shy but beautiful, sorrel, and quick.
And then Old Bessy, Brett's horse.

BRETT

Ah, those rides, the beginning of hundreds of rides.
You always ahead, in your little tweed hat, brown doeskin jacket,
gray trousers and black cowboy boots;
leaning forward, holding the reins lightly.
Forever I have the vision of you...and I...riding over the pale, ochre desert.

DHL

Look, Brett. Look at the marvelous color,
and look at the storm sweeping over the desert.
The sand is rising to meet the rain.

BRETT

The Ranchos Hot Springs are away in the mountains behind Ranchos.
You are white like ivory, but oh, so thin; Frieda fat and jolly, like a Rubens;
Mabel square and thick.
Frieda, with a shout, catches hold of your legs as you swim.

Frieda swims off, but you catch her by the leg.
It is no horse-play with you, but the threat of man against woman --
the male against the female.
You look wicked and Pan-like, standing in that shallow water up to your waist,
the water dripping from your beard, your hair lank over your face,
the eyes gleaming wickedly through the wet strands of hair.

DHL

You are too romantic, Brett.
If people were like horses or cats or any wild animal.
If they were as natural. A horse is never anything but itself.
It never swerves from its pattern, its horsiness .
A tiger in the jungle is always a tiger, but men you can't trust --
they always let you down and themselves.

BRETT

You suddenly spit.
You constantly spit, so there is nothing new in that.
But this time a splash of bright red blood comes with it, which is new.
You cast a look of consternation at Frieda. She looks flabbergasted --
while I pretend not to see at all.

DHL

We leave here September tenth.

Expect to be in England by first week in October.

I am quite well. It grieves me to leave my horses, and my cow Susan,
and the cat Timsy Wemyss, and the white cock Moses,
and the place.

BRETT

You are busy packing, your journey all arranged.

MABEL

The mountain hung quietly purple in the rich autumnal air.

The mountains hung quietly purple around the crescent horizon,
and the vast magnanimous mountain, above the pueblo,
continued in its unperturbed life as it has done for so long.

Yes, we were peaceful and I felt it and said,

"It seems like nothing, yet perhaps we shall look back on this afternoon
and think how happy we were."

DHL

It is good to change the rhythm.

FRIEDA

I believe the chief tie between Lawrence and me
was always the wonder of living...
every little or big thing that happened carried its glamour with it.

BRETT

One fine day, Mabel comes with the car. The shutters are up.

The house looks desolate. And we are ready for her.

Our trunks have gone ahead in an Indian wagon.

We pile in the car and drive slowly across the field.

In the field the horses are grazing, indifferent to our coming and going.

Their long tails idly swishing, they look up as we go by in the car.

We wave and call our good-byes to them,

and they stand looking after us as we vanish in the trees.

MABEL

The next day, when they went away,

Lorenzo leaned out for a last goodbye.

There was a wistful look in his wide-apart eyes.

DHL

We'll write. I know you're going to feel better soon.

MABEL

And then they left and I never saw him again.

DHL

Dear Mabel: It's true it's a long time since I wrote you.
But my health went down with such a slump in Germany,
and I got depressed too.
The doctors seem to think the lung is not troubling --
but bronchitis and asthma are awful.
I'm glad you and Brett are friendly -- so long as you keep cool about it,
it is the best way, I think.
Some things are inevitable, even some people.

Well, when shall I come to New Mexico again? God knows.
At present it seems further off than Babylon or Nineveh.

BRETT

I sit in my studio in my many-windowed cabin.
Out of my windows I see the whole desert,
swinging in a great half circle below me.

DHL

Dear Brett; I really think I shall try to come back in the spring.
I begin to believe I shall never get well over here.
My health is no better this year than last. It's really worse.
And I hardly take a stride. How I hate it.
Perhaps if I came back to New Mexico I would get up again.

BRETT

The lifelong struggle to keep Frieda from what he called
"pulling up her skirts at every man" ends...in a lusty Roman,
and I feel chilled to the bone.
Lawrence could not, I know, sexually satisfy a woman like Frieda.
He had not the physical strength.
This lusty Italian keeps her nerves quiet... keeps her satisfied.

DHL

The doctor from England came on Monday --
says the bronchitis is acute, and aggravated by the lung.
I must lie still for two months.
It is by the body we live.
And we have forced it too much.
Now it refuses to live.
Now we try to love, to think tenderly of it, to feel tenderly towards it.
It is a bit late -- but better late than never.

FRIEDA

I know now how completely he trusted his life to me,
he in whom death was always so near.

DHL

If we can manage it, and I can come to New Mexico,
then we can begin a new life, with real tenderness in it.
Love from us both.

FRIEDA

It is enough! It is enough!
Nobody should have to stand this.

DHL

I must have a temperature, I am delirious.
Give me the thermometer.

FRIEDA

This is the only time, seeing his tortured face, that I cried.

DHL

Don't cry.
I ought to have some morphine now.

FRIEDA

Then the doctor came and gave him a morphine injection.
He was breathing more peacefully, and then suddenly...
his face changed, his cheeks and jaw sank.
Death was there, Lawrence was dead.

BRETT

His death is our tragedy, not his.

That unconquerable spirit flamed daringly...flamed up and went out.

FRIEDA

Here the ranch,

with the Sangre de Cristo mountain range behind it to the northeast,
slopes to the desert.

The big pine trees stand like dark sentinels in the night
at the edge of the twenty acre alfalfa field.
Beyond them floats the desert.

You can see far.

A few lights twinkle at Ranchos de Taos.

A shepherd's fire glows.

All is covered by an enormous sky full of stars,
stars that hang in the pine trees,
in Lawrence's big tree with his phoenix on it that the Brett painted,
stars that lean on the edge of the mountains,
stars twinkling out of the Milky Way.

It is so still.

Only stars, nothing but stars.