

# The Intimates

Guy Mankowski

Legend  Press

Independent Book Publisher

## Acknowledgements

I'd firstly like to thank Rhian and Tom Lewis, as without their generosity I would never have had the means to write this book.

Lauren Parsons-Wolff first suggested that I develop this story from a novella into its current form, and I'm hugely grateful for the passion, enthusiasm and understanding that she showed while overseeing the editing process. Tom Chalmers and Lucy Boguslawski also played a big role in developing me from a short story writer and I'm grateful to them.

My family – Vivienne, Andrew and Oliver Mankowski, and Stanley and Shirley Firmin have been extremely supportive of my writing from when I was scrawling stories as a young boy.

As readers Quey Craddock, Jamie Burn, Jeremy Bradfield and Hal Branson were also supportive, often at critical junctures. I'm very appreciative of the technical advice Peter Walker offered; to have the support of such an established writer at an early stage was a great boost. I'm grateful also to Joan Deitch at Pollinger for pushing me to take my writing more seriously. Gary Murning has been something of an unofficial mentor to me throughout the

process; his Machiavellian attitude towards self-promotion has given me an assertiveness I otherwise would not have possessed.

I would lastly like to thank Elise, who is so different to her namesake, and who without a doubt inspired *The Intimates*.

*To Vivienne and Andrew Mankowski, with love.*

The pool had long been drained of any water. All that filled it now were leaves, brittle and gold in the bright morning sun. When I opened my eyes I saw the hollow shell of the pool, its walls stained with algae. I realised that I wasn't alone in its corner, as huddled against my torn tuxedo was a pale girl with dark hair, asleep.

I had no idea where I was, or how I had arrived there. The only feeling I had was one of slight post-coital nausea, the instinctive guilt a lapsed Catholic feels when waking up next to a stranger. My opening eyes passed over statues covered with vines, which had seemingly never been disturbed. I recognised nothing in the garden. When the girl in my arms stirred as if to awake, something told me she would offer more questions than answers. What follows are the thoughts that scrolled across my mind as I recalled the evening that had just passed.

The morning sun makes me remember lights. The feeling of it against my eyes reminds me of torches illuminating the lawn. Evening gowns flitted past, through shadows cast by statues. Laughter rose and faded like applause, passing through the evening, accompanied by the sound of clinking glasses. I remember champagne spilt on ivory carpets, pianos rippling through the summer's night.

Slowly faces emerged, at first only as delicate sensations, slightly preserved memories. Some appeared clearer than others. They were seated around a mahogany table, each glistening under a chandelier. Sequins sparkled as profiles creased with laughter. I saw sheaths of paper, a finished manuscript, a book perhaps? I had the feeling that I was in the company of special people, that I was recalling an important night. That it had been a somehow wonderful, yet eventually terrible night. What had brought us all together? Eight faces were seated around the table clad in evening dress, picking at delicacies, sipping wine and laughing. The emotions they provoked in me swam back first, followed by their names, and then each of their tragic stories. And as these details slowly emerged, I realised that in some way I was attached to every single one of them.

The first was Françoise, an elegant woman in her late forties. Something about her arrested my attention before all others. It wasn't just that she was the hostess. I gained the sense that she herself had grown assured of her unique appeal with time. Perhaps she had recently achieved something? I recall her as a slim figure in a black dress, her kind face full of Gallic beauty as she strokes the heads of her three dogs, each competing for her attention as she sits down. She had a soft French accent that enhanced the aura created by the warm lights. She smiled kindly at a butler before lowering her pastel lips to a flame offered by him. She held the cigarette in her slender fingers, inhaled deeply, and then blew perfumed smoke up in a fine jet at

the glass icicles above her. I remember watching it cloud there, before curling amongst itself and fading. Her eyes met mine, and she smiled at me with a mixture of coyness and bravado, before looking slowly around at her guests. My eyes fixed on hers, also fascinated by each guest in turn, and I noticed how she refrained from speaking until their words had somehow satisfied her. There was a quiet power in her restraint, as if she knew exactly how her withdrawal would benefit the evening.

To her left sat an angular man with a familiar face, one that may have seemed cruel to others and yet the remembrance of Graham is comforting to me. I recall how exactly he held his wine glass, as if it was an instrument to be employed with precision. As I picture his hand I see flashes of red nail varnish on the tips of his fingers, and as his face moves into the light a smear of glitter illuminates his cheeks. He is poised, aloof, and yet his arch demeanour in my eyes is nothing more than mischievous. As I recall his long fingers he looks up at me with a smile, and something sparkles around his lips. But only for a moment, before his attention is transferred to the cloud of conversation being steamed by other guests.

At his side sat Georgina, a vivacious woman who expressed herself using her hands and her generous smile. Her hair was tousled into a stylish swirl, her lips pouted when she laughed. She was at once childlike and voluptuous, wearing a sky blue dress, an arc of diamonds illuminating her neck. Unlike the man to her left, she had a calm likeability, a look of someone brought up in the warmth of foreign holidays, taught perhaps by the most

reassuringly expensive voices.

The man next to her looked as though money had been bestowed on him when he lacked the maturity to let it take care of him. Franz's skin was a bright copper colour, as if it had been blasted with sun to promote the illusion of health. He wore an expensive silk shirt, and yet remained the type of man who looked roguish even in evening wear. A cigar bristled in his fingers, but as he sprinkled ash around him it was apparent that he was not altogether comfortable with it. I noticed that the tips of his fingers were chafed, as if they had spent years persuading steel guitar strings to stay down. When I look at him he doesn't return my gaze, as I'm sure he once would have. He seems occupied with involving himself in any conversation, even when he has nothing to contribute. He spent a great deal of time looking at the blonde woman next to him who is now returning my gaze.

Elise had small, cold features and bright red lips, and her profile was almost aquiline. She carried herself resolutely, as if she'd decided to be beautiful, and in doing so had almost become so. Her slim body was wrapped in a red dress, and a shawl hung around her small shoulders, which were beginning to lose their winter paleness. Her hair was pretty but thin, a sharp lock of it cutting across her forehead. In my memory she is almost doll-like, occasionally resembling a girl dressed as a woman, but the thought of her is still somehow erotic to me. But this feeling is tempered with a sense of clamminess, the belief that our bond has not developed naturally, but more out of determination on her part. When Franz becomes animated she twitches

her fingers, reaching to hold my hand under the table. But the act does not seem spontaneous or smooth. The way she grasps my hand evokes a sense of claustrophobia, a feeling which I realise is becoming increasingly familiar around her. The conspiratorial look she gives me, at once frightened and exhilarated, suggests not just that we have come together but also that she is separate from the others. I recall the feeling that she often demands protection from me in social situations, protection which is unnecessary but ensures that she can cling to me throughout.

Next to her is a much older woman, although I sense that she would object to this description. To the passing eye she appears a ravishing buxom blonde, but on further inspection she lacks Françoise's grace. Her hair is bright platinum gold and her slightly aged fingers appear expensively manicured. Her dress seems designed especially to push her slightly withering cleavage forward. Despite her loud and frequent laughs, she is able to only adjust herself in small movements, suggesting she is wedged in by a tight corset. I sense from her constant bustling and pouting that she feels a need to assert herself, and then I remember she is the only one of us from an older generation. Her name is Barbara, and after she tells Elise this she looks away guiltily. Before moving my gaze to her neighbour I see that her face has a plastic stillness to it. She is now laughing coquettishly with the peculiar man at her right, whose nails appear driven to the bone.

He had the weary, tense look of someone wired to a grid, perhaps aware he's at the constant mercy of the next burst of electricity he might receive. His veined arms suggest an

artistic temperament, which has perhaps become more of a duty than a pleasure. The hairs on his hands are flecked with paint, and his slightly open shirt reveals a sun-starved chest. His name is James and, although he smiled weakly at the other guests around him, he retained the pained look of a martyr, of someone who spends a great deal of time alone. When he finally turns to face me, I recall the shock on seeing that his eyes appear covered in thick white paste; I remember that he is blind. Perhaps this explains why he does not feel embarrassed at his constant consideration of the woman at his right, unlike me.

An egotistic feeling tells me I'll find that it is her in my arms. Her name's Carina, she has Mediterranean looks and intense, knowing eyes. In the way she remains above conversations, never indulging the men who try to engage her, it seems she's aware of the power she gains through restraint. My memories of how she looked in the early evening are vague, as I only ever stole glances at her, reluctant to reveal how she'd intrigued me. She wore a black dress with a diamond brooch that glittered in the candlelight. Somehow its multi-faceted glare seemed garish next to the subtle swirl of colours on the skin below her neck. Her flawless hair was lit into a bright sheen by the chandelier above her. She had the manner of someone bored of being told she's beautiful. I recognise the feeling she provokes in me immediately. She is one of those enchanting people we sometimes meet who perhaps intentionally divulge little so that we remember much about them. Flitting figures like her enthrall and frustrate; they reveal enough to suggest an essence you could chase

for a lifetime, but reveal so little that they render that quest ridiculous. When I spoke to her at the table she replied in short, staccato sentences, long enough to allow engagement but short enough to prevent her revealing anything. Yet when I busied myself with a wineglass, or turned my attention to someone else, I felt the glare of her eyes on the side of my face. Something about the way her eyes looked through me suggested she had considered me for a long time. Yet despite these peculiarly intimate glances she seemed keen to keep that a secret. As a result we exchanged looks that seemed intended to make the other feel as if we had dismissed them. I wondered if an opportunity had once arose to open ourselves up to each other, a window that had blazed open for only a few moments before being shut snapped by a fear of admitting something that might cast us in a mutually vulnerable light. The tension between us suggested that for many years we had stayed on this trapeze with one another, familiar enough to imply closeness but distant enough to suggest this was merely circumstantial.

Carina spoke very little at the table, and the few words that she did utter there now possess a certain resonance. I only remember her saying one line while we were seated. I can't remember its context or why it stands out, but I can recall the slight air of melancholy when she said: "I've lost whatever it takes to stay a girl, without gaining whatever is needed to be a woman".

One other feeling occurs to me in tandem with the memory of those characters. It's a feeling of intimacy, and that

word itself seems to possess grave importance. This was not merely a dinner party; this was a celebration of intimacy, with Françoise as its centrepiece. I turned her image round in my mind; I examined it from various angles. I remember the way she held a cigar for Franz as though it was an expensive pen, and then I remember that she is a writer, and what's more this party was held to celebrate the recent publication of her first novel. Françoise had lived a decadent lifestyle of luxury, had frittered her life away on weightless pleasures, and this book, *The Intimates*, was her sole achievement. It had been started eight years ago about this group of people she met when returning belatedly to university, and had been finally published in the early summer that beckoned in that evening. It described seven men and women whose futures had glistened with potential. Françoise, Carina, James, Franz, Graham, Georgina and me; seven people who had since failed to deal with the weight of expectation laid upon their shoulders. Who had each failed to do justice to the cursed gifts that had briefly offered each of us a passage to transcendence.

Although the night was a celebration of her success, it did seem tinged with a potent sadness. Perhaps someone had been unable to make it? Passing over those faces, so familiar and yet still so foreign, it occurred to me that the sadness was amongst us, *The Intimates*. Looking at the seven faces I saw that they all carried a certain melancholy; a sense of remorse hung over the proceedings like a ghost. Our times had passed, our glistening careers hadn't blos-

somed, and we had not become the people we'd once seemed destined to be. We shared a key characteristic with certain people born into the world on a seemingly arbitrary basis – we were marked. We had been expected to bend our lives towards the creation of everything unique. And yet looking at the forced happiness on each face, it was apparent that every one of us had conspicuously failed to achieve this, and now it dogged us permanently. Our shared destinies were a weight coiled round our necks, which only grew heavier with time. A maid leant over Francoise, holding a tray of drinks. She smiled sympathetically, and for a second I wondered if she knew our curse. This expectation, inherited to us and encouraged by the world, was a gift if we matched its demands, but a curse if we left it to flounder. Tonight, even in the light of Francoise's recent success, it seemed brutal to create an evening with which to confront us with our failures. If that had not in fact been Francoise's intention, then it was still how it felt.

At the table it seemed that this weight was not the only factor weighing upon the minds of The Intimates. As Francoise smiles up at her butler, assuring him the evening is unfurling to plan, I remember why this is the case. This evening she's to finally read us the opening chapter of her book, and in effect open a time capsule to each of our pasts. Even in the early evening I can feel a sense of trepidation amongst us seven. Although Francoise at this moment has a gentility that seems without threat, the looks exchanged between us suggest that we are all aware of how stinging her portraits of us might

be. The glances we each exchange are ones of gathering fear.

I remember looking round those faces, each busy with their own façades, and feeling a little nauseous. Elise saw the look of shame on my face and placed her hand on my thigh. But that only made it worse. She didn't share this guilt; she wasn't condemned. Her comfort seemed to be a mocking message from another world, where this weight only existed in light sympathy. I'd achieved nothing, I remember thinking. And an evening had been organised especially to drive that knife home.

My thoughts were disturbed by the sound of clinking glass, which cut across the babble of conversation, smothering it. Francoise was rising to her feet, a faint smile on her face. People elbowed one another into silence, every face craned up at her. Basking in the light of this attention she assumed an elegant pose.

"Friends," she began, smiling warmly around her. "*Thank you* for coming tonight to share this wonderful evening with me. And Elise; I'm glad that you could join us too. As you know, *The Intimates* was inspired by the six of you, who I met when I finally began a university education – the last wish of my father just before he passed away. Some of you had been close since childhood, but I came to join this unusual group later in life. In time each of you became as precious to me as a family member, without the attending conceit that so often affects such bonds." The guests tittered politely.

"I had left school at eighteen," she continued, "and as a daughter of privilege I had been given the room to

indulge myself at a time when many are consumed with establishing a stable footing in the world. My sole achievement was a controversial journal article I'd written, satirising the harmless pretensions of my father's friends. Amongst that affluent little group it caused quite a stir – with its pointed caricatures and waspish observations. It offered me brief celebrity status and the opportunity to enjoy a few years masquerading as a novelist, while lazing about on boats. Fortunately, on my return to university this appetite for decadence was quenched when I met the seven of you. Inspired, for the first time in years I started to write a book which many years later would become *The Intimates*. I wrote it as a shrine to an intriguing time of my life and to an enchanting set of artists. See it simply as a testament to each of your wonderful talents. It occurs to me this evening how naïvely it was written; I hope that you bear this in mind when I present my dusty portraits of each of you later on tonight. But perhaps its naïvety lends it some charm.

“At that time Franz was starting to light up the world with his gift for music, having encouraged each of us to address our talents. While Barbara was taking on the world of film, her daughter was becoming drawn to the stage. This interest had begun in her childhood when Vincent wrote plays for the two of them to act out in his garden.” Georgina smiled at me, and I felt myself blush with the attention. The guests laughed, and Elise squeezed my hand. “Vincent too had begun to find ways to express his potential, and James and Graham had started to bow to the evidence that they had something unique to offer.

Since then life has taken each of us on a course, which I could not have predicted, which I was naïve to prematurely prescribe. As a young woman I felt my writing contained a watermark of destiny, but I now see that as the arrogance of youth. My predictions for each of you were deeply flawed, and the blame for that inaccuracy lies purely with me. As I spend time in your company I realise that my portrayals could never have done any of you justice. Each of you has blossomed in myriad ways I could not have foreseen, with a versatility the world can encompass but that my adolescent worldview could not. So tonight let us celebrate that, and let us celebrate too a rare evening together, to warm ourselves against the chill of passing time. I am privileged that each of you have returned for an evening in my company, to celebrate perhaps the only piece of work I will ever be determined to finish.” At this the guests laughed generously.

Francoise raised her glass. “To The Intimates,” she toasted. “*The Intimates*,” came the echo; Elise’s voice a step behind the rest.

I took a sip of wine, felt its curious effect begin to take hold. What was restraining my thoughts from returning fully, permitting them to only stumble into my consciousness? Was it sleep, or wine that spread itself like a film over my mind’s eye?

I remember the music that struck up as the guests sipped wine after dinner. When it started to fill the room I saw Barbara start, her tight face stifling an indignant anger. Francoise had urged her maid to play one of the vinyl’s