

Darkness, and Its Dreams

by James Como (June 2018)



Paysage Londonien, Raoul Dufy, 1934

Mina climbed through her bedroom window and down the drainpipe and walked to the front of the house. Once on the ratty, poop-colored lawn she turned and thought, "I'm never going back." She had run away before, when she was eleven, but that was half-hearted, and the beating she got when her half-brothers—she never called them her brothers or even ever thought of them like that—that beating was the most painful ever. And they were jerks, too. Today was her thirteenth birthday, and they actually believed that a book of silly riddles and a doll—a *doll!*—were fun gifts.

Her broken leg had never healed right so she limped towards the dirt road. Across that lay a wide meadow as far as her eye could see. She felt safe there, especially when she had gone exploring with Poppa. But now it was 2 a.m. so she couldn't see very far anyway. Didn't matter. "Once I'm across the road, I can take off my sneakers, feel the grass, and when I get real tired I'll just fall down and go to sleep."

Only once across the road she couldn't see the meadow, it was so dark. There was no moon and there were no stars, even though there hadn't been any clouds. When she looked over her shoulder she couldn't even see the house. But she was—she should be—in the meadow. With Poppa she had picked flowers and learned about the creatures there. Poppa knew everything about the meadow. "C'mon, Dolly"—that was his nickname for her—"I believe there's a fox in that brush." She dreamed about Poppa a lot and used to tell her mother, but she stopped because she would get slapped hard. Still, she didn't stop dreaming.

Mina was brave, like Poppa, so she walked on. After all, she had been in the meadow hundreds—suddenly, after maybe fifty steps she felt something very strange, very, something closing in on her, squeezing her, as though her skin were drying and her insides were being squished together. Her bare feet still could feel the grass, soft and cool, but the darkness was changing, becoming darker so that she couldn't see the grass anymore.

When she held up her hand—and right in front of her face, too!—she couldn't see that either. And the darkness had become thick. Not very thick, like her blanket in winter. She could still move her arms and legs and hands and head. Thick like a jacket you need for fall, the kind you couldn't wear while playing volleyball. It was as though the dark—not something in the dark but the darkness itself—had begun to *absorb* her. But she wasn't afraid yet.

“Just let me keep walking,” she thought, “and sooner or later I will get to the other side of the meadow.” So she walked and walked and walked, for hours, and not only did she not get to the end of the meadow but the darkness never got any less. Where was the dawn? But she could still feel the grass, even smell its sweetness and wetness and freshness. That re-assured her.

Still, with this darkness—an absolute darkness—came absolute solitude and silence, which she wasn’t used to, at least not so absolute. That’s when she first began to be—not really afraid, not really, but uneasy.

Slowly she realized these thoughts were dangerous, because the more she thought them the more the dark seemed to squeeze her. She felt it now on her back and even on her face, as though it were a presence, even a person, rubbing her.

“Oh my God,” she thought, “it’s going to tell me stuff!” She decided to be still and to wait, and as she waited she turned. Of course she saw nothing. Then she thought, “maybe I’m dreaming.” And in thinking that she lay down. “Maybe, if I sleep now, when I wake up I’ll be home in my bed. But if this were a dream,” she wondered, “what kind is it?”

Poppa said there are four types . . .

The first is the sorting dream, where the day or the week—or even your own troubles—are “rinsed,” but in ways that don’t always make sense. Everybody has lots of those every night but they don’t remember them. The second, according to Poppa, were prophetic: they tell something about the future. Lots of people have those but since most don’t believe in them they don’t even recognize them or connect them to stuff that happens. The third are visionary dreams. They are the ones—and Poppa warned they might be nightmares!—that show you things beyond the everyday. Very few people have those and some don’t recognize them for what they are—or even remember them. Lots

of great poets had those. Poppa was particularly fond of William Blake. "Tyger, Tyger"!

The last kind of dream, according to Poppa, is the portal dream. That's a dream where when you're dreaming it you actually go somewhere else. Not necessarily a place on the map, but somewhere. "Oh, it's a dream all right," he said, "a dream like a path that moves you along. And you have to know your way back, Dolly. You don't want to get stuck in one of those, that's for sure." Almost nobody has those.

Poppa said that he had all four kinds of dreams and that I probably would, too. "But," he added, "remember that dreams do not respect time or space." I asked, "can a person *make* them happen?" He answered, "No. A person can call for them—like with prayer—but they don't always come. And remember this, Dolly, sometimes you don't know you're dreaming. It's like being at an unmarked boundary; you might not know that you've crossed a line. Borderlands are always very, very tricky business." I was really concentrating. "And, oh, be careful with other people. You can get them mixed in with you." There was not much Poppa did not know.

Mina lay a long time with her eyes closed, and finally, but slowly, oh so slowly, did sleep come. When she awoke there she was—in her bed, with the sun shining through the window turning the room a warm, glowing yellow. She was more rested than she had been in a long, long time and was hungry too. She decided to get up right away and go to the kitchen. Sure, her mother might be there, but the jerks would gone to work. And anyway, because her leg didn't hurt at all she *had* to just *spring* out of bed — just because she could, and because it had been so long! In that instant she forgot all about the darkness, which she now thought must have been a dream.

Then she woke up—exactly where she had fallen asleep, right there in the darkness. Everything was exactly

the same, including the pain in her leg. So she cried. And cried and cried and cried, so much more than when they had beaten her or locked her up or . . . or tied her down. Much later, exhausted, Mina stopped crying and just sat.

Then she lay down on her back. And fell asleep. Then she woke up, at home again, and again she felt secure and happy and hungry and pain-free. And then she woke up again, in the darkness and in pain.

When she woke up at home the third time she wasn't happy or refreshed, though she was hungry and pain-free. The first two times had taught her a lesson, so by now she knew what would happen next, and it did, so there she was, in the darkness and in pain.

But this time it felt different somehow, though at first she didn't know why. So she paid attention to how the darkness actually felt. That's when she noticed something.

She didn't care if she slept or not and wouldn't even try. Her leg hurt as much as ever, sure, but she wasn't hungry or thirsty or even tired, even though she hadn't eaten, drunk anything, or slept for more than a few minutes at a time—at least, that's how it felt. She realized nothing bad had really happened to her. Sure, the darkness was tighter, especially on her back, but . . . the darkness was tighter and tighter and tighter and wasn't that bad?

That low murmur of fear that had been rumbling in her—what with her half-brother memories, her confusion, and the clenching anger that tightened her heart like a wrench, all of it together rattling through her—that fear began to rise. And this thought in particular really scared Mina: this darkness wasn't just night.

The whole world shrunk to one thought, an image that came up her spine.

Maybe there was no end to it, no matter how far she walked. Maybe there was no 'outside'—no sun or moon or stars or even animals, trees, plants, flowers or people. Maybe this darkness was all! And if she never got hungry or thirsty maybe she would live in it forever, alone. Maybe there was nowhere to go, because the darkness was everywhere and everywhere the same.

Maybe *she* was the darkness.

Mina began to quiver. She crouched to the ground and the quiver turned into the shakes. And for the first time she made a sound: she cried out, not in words but in a kind of roar, which became a howl, as though every bone in her body was being broken and shouting its own pain. Even during the worst of her treatment at home she had never known such fear. She didn't know there could be such fear, a fear of no one, of nowhere, of nothing, not even light. So much worse than being locked in the basement or a closet all night.

Her "pluckiness," as her father called it, had always sustained her: facing what would come next, like when they found that wounded fox and he knew—just *knew*—that she could make it healthy again. "You know, Mina," her father had said, "foxes are very clever. They never stop thinking. And I believe that fox put himself right here where you would find him so you could take care of him." And that's what happened.

But now there was no *next*. Her whole world stopped at her skin. At least she could still feel that when she touched it, or when she stood on the grass. That was all, except for memories, but the good ones, with Poppa, hurt almost as much as the bad ones, because the good ones could never be new ones. Mina did not know how to say it but if she did she would have said, *hopeless*.

She didn't know how long that lasted—the fear and the sadness, with all the crying and howling and the

hollowness down to the basement of her soul, like a bottomless hole that she wanted to fall into head first. But after what seemed like a very long time she dropped to her side panting. That seemed to loosen the darkness, and with that, and very suddenly so that she had no time to think or feel or imagine, came sleep.

And dreams. Not the same spirit-sucking, at-home, all-is-well dream but several very different dreams, all in a row. The first was of Poppa, who took her fishing as well as on walks, and who didn't mind when she woke him up at dawn because she had made breakfast for him and, you know, they had to get going, because there was so much to do and see and learn.

That was one dream, she and her Poppa fishing in the small lake way down the road. The second dream was a nightmare. Her half-brothers were all giants and were stepping on her, pushing her down into the big mud hole at the other end of that road.

That one almost woke her, but right there in the dream she decided to keep dreaming. It was better than the nothing that the waking was.

Even so, the next one was bad. In that one she walked out of the darkness into the meadow, with sunshine pouring down, when all of a sudden she was on top of a tree with a breeze blowing and she felt happy. She could see for miles. She could see the creek and . . . and it looked liked Poppa there—with her!—laughing.

And then she was in the house, with voices coming from the basement. And she thought, maybe my head is haunted, like that house with those ghosts that mother always talks about.

Finally she dreamt that she was walking around in the dark with no discomfort, or hunger, or pain, or anything,

and that's what she woke up doing. She had been sleepwalking.

"Dolly, when you're confused just relax." Poppa always said that. "When you're in a pickle find a place where you can get a good look at things all around you, and think like that fox. Spread out the pieces of the puzzle, look down, see how they might fit together, like we do with riddles. Look close and pay attention. No need to panic, either. That never helps."

So she did all that and thought, "if the darkness is coming from me"—that was her scariest thought—"then whatever I do doesn't matter. But if it's *outside*, then it *has* to end." She decided to run.

She didn't know how long she ran, but she knew she wasn't tired or out of breath, and since it felt so good to *be* running she just kept at it. And then . . . and then . . . were those stars? Was that the moon? Straight ahead, was that her broken down old house? Did all the running do nothing but get her back to where she had started? She turned her back to the house. There was the blackness, still there, like a giant ink blot floating on the ground, blocking out everything.

Here there was no puzzle, just a choice. She could go back into the darkness, or she could turn again and enter that house. But there was something different about the darkness now, as though it did not want her back. She thought, "it's pushing me." Then, "no, not pushing. It's *sending* me."

When she got to the door she found it unlatched, and when she stepped in she . . . walked into darkness, and she became very, very angry. Was the darkness *that* cruel? Like her mother? This was worse than the closet, than the beatings, than being tied down, this—but then she saw that this darkness was not at all the same darkness.

It was a normal darkness, with enough light from outside to see where she was, in her room, in her bed.

“She’ll wake up soon.” “Let’s wake her up and we’ll drag her to the basement.” “Yeah yeah! Like a birthday present!” Then her mother’s voice. “She’s becoming a woman, boys. And I don’t want another woman in my house.” “Well, she sure isn’t Poppa’s little doll no more, that’s for sure.” And then again the mother. “Forget the closet. Take her to the meadow and be done with her.”

Mina bolted upright. So today *would be* her birthday! Had the whole thing been a dream? There were no gifts. No riddle book, no doll. Had she dreamt those too? In a bigger dream with a bunch of dreams in it? Poppa had never mentioned those. But the darkness was no dream. Not hers, anyway. someone else’s? If so, it was for a reason.

“Thank you, Poppa,” she said out loud. Then she remembered something else her Poppa had said. “Sometimes there such a thing as *over-thinking*, Dolly. When you’ve done all the thinking there is to do, *that’s* when action enters the riddle.”

They would be *done* with her?

Not ever. She rose very quietly, and very quickly put on her jeans, t-shirt, and sneakers. She opened her window as much as she could, which wasn’t even halfway because it was broken, and squeezed through. She could hear her bedroom door opening as she shimmied down the drain pipe.

Now, though, she didn’t go for the road. Instead she crept to the front door, went in, and picked up the can of gasoline her half-brothers kept by the stove, along with matches. The can was heavy. Plenty of gasoline in there. She poured it all around the living room and the windows and the doors and after closing those from the outside poured all she had left on the front of the house and set it on fire. Then she walked to the road – the darkness was still there – all the while listening to the crackle of the blaze and the

screams.

Then she crossed the road, stepped into the meadow, and walked into the darkness. This time she knew she could stay as long as she pleased and leave anytime she wanted. She decided she would visit awhile. After all, it would be nighttime soon enough and she should sleep. Maybe she would dream some more. Or not. Awake or not. The difference no longer mattered. Some borders never matter. "Thanks, Poppa," she said again, "and thank you, Darkness." So much for riddles and dolls.

A friend of Poppa's, a younger man who came suddenly and would leave quickly, soon found Mina working in a grocery where she also slept and helped her get on her feet, "too thank your Poppa for having helped my parents." She would never see him again.

Fifteen years later she had a visionary dream. Married for four years with a new name and two children of her own, she knew she was blessed beyond words, but the dream made her angry enough to tremble. She had been told that her father had died in a plane crash, his body never recovered. But in the dream she saw her mother and half-brothers pushing him face-down into the mud hole. And somehow she was certain (though not from the dream but like an electric bolt right into her brain—remember, dreams aren't exact) that her Poppa was not in there but in the meadow, exactly where they had wanted to bury her.

She also knew that her two oldest half-brothers had escaped the blaze, having broken through a window and run, not looking back either for their other brother or for their mother. But they *were* looking for her, so she made a decision.

They would find her.

For several consecutive days she put an ad in all the regional papers saying that she would return to the

original plot for the purposes of assessment and purchase. She knew the half-brothers, who owned the land, would be there, and that when they saw her they would try to kill her.

She arrived at dawn and sat at the fringe of the meadow across from where the house had been and, after a long while, fell asleep. When the half-brothers came at dusk they saw her. At first they could only stare. Then, slowly, they began to cross towards her, still staring. They did not notice how quickly the day had darkened. Mina rose from the grass, turned, and walked into the darkness that was suddenly creeping over the meadow. Naturally they followed. They were never found.

One year later to the day, while in night school and studying for her G.E.D. English exam, Mina came upon these lines from a Longfellow poem: "oftentimes celestial benedictions / Assume this dark disguise." Her breath caught. A dazzling ray of starlight seemed to run into her eyes and blind her for an instant. So, the next year, again pregnant, this time with a girl whom she would name Mina, she was unsurprised when she read, "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God / That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way." She became exuberantly hopeful, and that night she dreamt that her little Mina would be special, like Poppa.