

Darkness in my mouth

I am happy. We walk in silence, shrouded in darkness, as if headed to the abysmal end. I am gripped by a sudden fear. What if darkness decides not to leave us? What if it keeps an eye on us?

I want to run away. Darkness can see us. It won't leave us alone. It can blind our eyes and make us stumble on every step. I see darkness as the shadow of an enormous invisible beast. The vast dark shadow shrouds the world and drowns us in it. And just where the shadow ends is the beast. But will this shadow end at all? How long will it keep tormenting us? Yes, we will never see the end of the shadow. We will never see the beast.

The beast reigns like the Lord of Death. It makes us fumble around and keeps an eye on us. It sends its spies to stalk us. It encourages the evil. It lets all bad elements loose. It often swallows us. I become extremely aware of its presence. The darkness touches me. It is everywhere. It is beneath my trousers, my shirt, my socks, my underwear. It is inside my shoes. It is inside the creases and recesses of my body, between my thighs, in my hair, my ears, my nose, in the air I breathe, so in my body, in my heart, in my soul. I am darkness.

I feel feverish as if I am going to suffer a fit. I feel my forehead with my free hand. It is warm. I feel my nose. It is warm, too. I feel my earlobes. They are warm as well. I know this is my hand. I can feel myself falling down, breathing darkness, frothing darkness from my mouth, my hands and my feet beating darkness and the woman beside me... No there was no woman beside me. I was walking alone. The woman must have been a dream, may be a trick of the darkness. After all, darkness gives unearthly power to all things. Darkness makes everything go mad and berserk. Dogs whine in darkness, not bark. Men whisper in darkness, not talk. Forests shriek, wind raves, monkeys weep, doors creak, windows crack, rain whips, and witches laugh. And if you act bold, even at the cost of wetting your pants, you often find yourself picked up by the darkness and dashed at the wall.

I must have groaned in pain, limped, so that I had suddenly become heavy on her arms or she must have sensed my feverish thoughts because she draws closer to me and asks softly:

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, yes. I was just lost,” I say.

We keep walking, her right arm and my left interlocked. Some warmth has materialized exactly where our arms touch and is fast spreading up our torsos. I like this warm feeling and it reassures me that I am still guided by a woman.

She is looking straight ahead, right through the darkness.

“Where shall we go?” she asks.

“Anywhere, anywhere,” I say, tired.

We have walked past the old town and are entering its outskirts. Houses thin. Dogs lessen. The night hangs on. We enter a little dirt track, then walk on a graveled path. Little pieces of stones crunch under our feet. We halt in front of a large house.

“This is where I live,” she says. “I inherited it after my grandfather’s death.”

I feign no condolences. And before I ask her how her grandfather died she volunteers the answer.

“He was eighty-nine, mellow with old age. He died a painful death from an invisible disease doctors failed to diagnose. But he died a true Buddhist, feigning peace in the jaws of death. It wasn’t a complete surrender, though. I could see that. He even feigned a smile. Well, all that was to come anyway. He had prepared for it. He saw death lurking around the corners of his room and he consciously prepared facing it. The last thing he told me was, ‘You are grown up now’.”

“Please, don’t talk to me of death,” I say.

“Don’t you want to listen to my side of story?” she chides.

“Later,” I say. “Not now.”

The Lord of Darkness, that Beast, reigns over the house, too. She drags me upstairs. We stumble on the steps. We reach her bedroom door. She stops in front of the door.

“Let’s talk,” she says.

“Can we have something to eat before we talk?”

“Oh! Yes, I’ll get you some bread and some cheese. Do you like wine?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

She leads me to a room opposite her bedroom. She opens the door. It creaks. There is a low light, a candle burning at the far end of the room. A musty smell greets me. There are books everywhere.

“This used to be my grandfather’s library. His lifetime’s collection,” she says.

There are two wooden chairs beside the lamp. I throw myself on one and the other waits for her when she goes to fetch the dinner. I rub my eyes and let them adjust to the dim candlelight around. I slowly see everything. There are shelves and shelves of books, most hardbound and old. There are thick volumes and there are thin ones too. They are all neatly arranged in different categories. I am not much of a reader so I don’t bother go through them. But one volume in **FICTION** stands clear of them all. It is thick and leather-bound. On the spine is written in gold: *With a Stone in My Heart*. The writer’s name is absent, though. There is just an initial – **LNA** - in bold.

I take out the volume from the shelf and keep it on the table. Candlelight falls on its front cover. To my surprise both front and back cover have nothing on them. I turn the cover. A blank page greets me. I turn another - blank page. Then I turn another - blank page. I ruffle the volume. All blank pages. Are my eyes again playing trick on me? This time I start from the back. A blank page. Another blank page. I ruffle again, like gamblers ruffle a deck of cards. All blank pages. Do all the books in this room have blank pages, I wonder. Is this all fraud, this house, this woman, this library,

these books, this candle? But before I can check on the other books she enters carrying a tray on which are pieces of hard brown bread with cheese spread on them. Two glasses of red wine stand on the tray. Are they real?

I touch them, pick up a piece of bread, and put it in my mouth. It is real, of course. She is looking at me with a quizzical pair of eyes. I quickly finish the bread and gulp half the wine.

“I like the way you eat,” she says. “A simple eater you seem like.”

Assured my stomach is full, assured I have eaten real bread and cheese, assured this is a real woman, but uncertain if all this is real, I continue sitting on the chair and nibble at my lips.

“Tell me about it all,” she says.

“Tell me about yourself first,” I say.

“No, you begin,” she insists.

“Where shall I begin?”

“From the beginning.”

“Where is the beginning?”

“In the beginning.”

“In the beginning?”

“In the beginning!”

“So, it all began in the beginning,” I begin.

“What all?” she interjects.

“Whatever happened in the beginning.”

“Please, begin at the beginning,” she pleads.

I am dumbstruck. Why am I playing this stupid game with this woman? I wonder. And I am beginning to feel dizzy.

“I am beginning to feel dizzy,” I tell her.

“Begin from there,” she says.

“But how am I to know what will happen next?”

“Just make things happen, like storytellers do,” she says.

“But that won’t be in time and space,” I say.

“It doesn’t matter. Are you not tired of being in time and space, anyway?”

“There can be no escape,” I say lamely.

“There can be, of course.”

“How?”

“When you die,” she says.

Oh! Death again!

“Can we talk of something else? I can’t stand the idea of death.”

“There, you are trying to escape, trying to run away,” she says.

I am trapped. I am trapped like a little rabbit. I am trapped in her gaze. I am trapped in her words. I am trapped on her mind. She is looking at me, wearing a slight grin. She knows she has trapped me in this moment, this moment of timelessness and spacelessness. She has suspended me, like women suspend clothes on clothesline. She has stripped me on her gaze. She can see the helplessness in my eyes. I feel completely naked. Please, release me, my eyes are beginning to plead. But this moment

doesn't end. It doesn't seem to end. I can see myself hanging in space, hooked to nothing, just suspended. The moment gets bigger, fatter, longer. It borrows seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, decades, centuries, millenniums...The moment is here to stay. And only she can release me from this moment. The moment is getting unfriendly. It's growing hands, legs, hair. It's extending its lengthening hands toward me. Its long slim fingers are elongating and curling, preparing to go round my neck. Strength flows on those fingers from the primal source and the fingers tighten. I shake, shiver, shudder, and am still. But that last gasp of air I took in – where did it go? I realize now. That last gasp of gushing breath had looked for an outlet everywhere inside my body and finding none it had pushed the eyes out the sockets and lodged itself there.

She has been reading me all this time, page by page, as this grim vision was playing in my mind's darkness.

“Are you ready?” she asks.

“What for?”

“To begin.”

“To begin what?”

“The beginning.”

“The beginning of what?”

“The beginning of the beginning.”

“Are you playing some sort of game with me?” I ask.

“No,” she says.

“Are you trying to scare me? Are you trying to take me in you?”

“No.”

“Then what is this all?”

“Words. Communication.”

I refuse to talk. I protest the darkness of words, the snares of communication.

“I release you,” she says, sensing my protest. “But I tell you, you got to begin somewhere. Let me make it easier for you. You start with either your mother or your father.”

“They are both dead.”

“So are mine.”

“So, why talk about the dead?”

“Relive them.”

“It brings pain.”

“Fight it.”

“How?”

“Forget that your parents are dead.”

“I can’t.”

“You can.”

“How?”

“Get trapped in some moment from where you can’t get out of it and finish your story.”

“What if I get stuck in that moment?”

“No, you won’t.”

“What guarantee?”

“I will rescue you.”

“How?”

“I will tell you my story.”

“And get trapped yourself in that moment?”

“Yes.”

“What if you get stuck and can't get out of it?”

“Then you rescue me.”

So, this is the game plan, I think. This is the escape. This is the way to etherize my memory, change my consciousness into a slab of ice. Yes, I shall tell her the story. But I will not begin from the beginning. I will tell her of that night when my mother went mad.