

Liminal: The Little Man

by Lydia Davis

(~~BEAK~~ IT DOWN, 1986)

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Lying there trying to sleep, a little light coming through the curtain from the street, she planned things and remembered things and sometimes just listened to sounds and looked at the light and the dark. She thought about the opening and closing of her eyes: that the lids lifted to reveal a scene in all its depth and light and dark that had been there all along unseen by her, nothing to her since she did not see it, and then dropped again and made all that scene unseen again, and could anytime lift and show it and anytime close and hide it, though often, lying sleepless, her eyes shut, she was so alert, so racing ahead with what she was thinking, that her eyes seemed to her to be wide open behind the closed lids, bugged, glassy, staring, though staring out only into the dark back of the closed lids.

Her son came and laid out three large gray shells on her thigh, and the visitor, sitting close to her on another hard chair, reached over to take up the middle one and look at it—an oval cowrie, with white lips.

The moment when a limit is reached, when there is nothing ahead but darkness: something comes in to help that is

not real. Another way all this is like madness: a mad person not helped out of his trouble by anything real begins to trust what is not real because it helps him and he needs it because real things continue not to help him.

Her son out on the terrace is dropping a brick over and over again on a plastic gun, breaking it into sharp pieces. The television is on in a room behind a closed door. Another woman comes out with her hair wet and a towel wrapped around her saying suddenly and loudly to him, That's bad, stop it. Her son stands holding the brick, with fear on his face. She says, I was beginning to meditate and I thought the house was falling down. The pieces of red plastic shine on the painted clay around his feet.

How it works: Sometimes there is a thought that becomes a dream (she is laying out a long sentence and then she is out on Fourteenth Street laying out a long piece of black curb) and the mind says, But wait, this isn't true, you're beginning to dream, and she wakes up to think about thinking and dreaming. Sometimes she has lain awake a long time and the stroke of sleep comes down finally and softens every part of her body at once; then her mind notices and wakes because it is interested in how sleep comes so suddenly. Sometimes her mind won't stop working in the first place and won't stop for hours and she gets up to make a warm drink and then it is not the warm drink that helps but the fact that action has been taken. Sometimes sleep comes easily, but almost right away (she has been sleeping ten minutes or so) a loud noise or a soft but offensive noise wakes her and her heart races. First there is only inarticulate anger, then her mind begins working again.

Coughing, her head up on three pillows, warm tea beside her; or on another night a limp, melting rag of wet kleenex across her forehead.

She slept by her son on the beach; they lay parallel to the line of water. The water lapped up in sheets over the sand and drained off. People moved, took positions nearby, walked past, and the sound of the ocean was enough of a silence so that the two slept peacefully, the lowering sun on the boy's face, grains of sand on his neck, an ant running over his cheek (he shuddered, his hand unclenched and then clenched again), her cheek in the soft grayish sand, her glasses and her hat on the sand.

Then there was the slow uphill walk home, and later they went into a dark bar to have dinner (her son nearly asleep bowing over the polished wood) and because of the dark, the crush, the noise, the violent noise, so that they seemed to be swallowing some of all the noise and darkness with their food, she was dizzy and confused when they walked out into the light and the silence of the street.

She is lying in the dark going through some complex turns to get to the point where she can sleep. It is always hard to sleep. Even on nights when it will turn out not to have been hard she expects it to be hard and is ready for it, so that maybe it might as well have been hard.

That night long ago there was nothing more to be done. She lay in a room crying. She lay on her left side with her eyes on the dark window. She was eight or nine, or so. Her left cheek on a soft old pillowcase covering a small old pillow with the smell in it still of old people. Near her, perhaps over against her, under her right arm, her stuffed ele-

phant, nap worn off, trunk creased this way and that. Or more probably tonight, pillow tossed aside, elephant tossed aside, perhaps she has been lying on her right cheek staring at the light that runs under the door and shines on her floorboards, putting a hand down into the draft flowing across the floor; it has been a night of hoping the door will open again, there will be a relenting somewhere, the light will flood in from the hall, white, and against the white light a black figure come in. When the mother is gone at night she is gone very far away, though on the other side of the door, and when she opens the door and comes in, she comes directly to the child and stands at a great height above the child, light on half her face. But tonight the child has not been watching the door, she has her face to the dark window and she has begun crying hopelessly. Someone is angry; she has done some final thing for which there is no forgiveness tonight. No one will come in, and she can't go out. The finality of it terrifies her. It is a feeling close to a feeling she will die of it. Then he comes in, almost of his own accord, though he is not real, she has invented him, he comes in for the first time standing there above her right shoulder, small, soft, self-effacing, something come to tell her she will be all right, come into being at the limit, at the moment when there was nothing ahead but darkness.

She was thinking how it was the unfinished business. This was why she could not sleep. She could not say the day was over. She had no sense that any day was ever over. Everything was still going on. The business not only not finished but maybe not done well enough.

Outside, a mockingbird sang, changing the song often, every quarter minute or so, as though trying parts of it.

She heard him every night, but was not reminded every night but only now and then of a nightingale, which also sings in the dark.

The mockingbird sang, and behind it was the sound of the ocean, sometimes a steady hum, sometimes a sharp clap when a larger wave collapsed on the sand, not every night but when the tide was high at the time when she lay awake in the dark. She thought that if there was a way she could force a kind of peace into herself, then she would sleep, and she tried drawing up this peace into herself, as though it were a kind of fluid, and this worked, though not for long. The peace, when it began to fill her, seemed to come from her spine, the lower part of her spine. But it would not stay in her unless she kept it drawn in there and she could not go on with that for long.

Then she says to herself, Where is there some help in this? And the figure returns, to her surprise, standing above her right shoulder; he is not so small, not so plump, not so modest anymore (years have gone by) but full of a gloomy confidence; he could tell her, though he does not, but his presence tells her, that all is well and she is good, and she has done her best though others may not think so—and these others too are somewhere in the house, in a room somewhere down the hall, standing in a close line, or two lines, with proud, white, and angry faces.

Break It Down

He's sitting there staring at a piece of paper in front of him. He's trying to break it down. He says:

I'm breaking it all down. The ticket was \$600 and then after that there was more for the hotel and food and so on, for just ten days. Say \$80 a day, no, more like \$100 a day. And we made love, say, once a day on the average. That's \$100 a shot. And each time it lasted maybe two or three hours so that would be anywhere from \$33 to \$50 an hour, which is expensive.

Though of course that wasn't all that went on, because we were together almost all day long. She would keep looking at me and every time she looked at me it was worth something, and she smiled at me and didn't stop talking and singing, something I said, she would sail into it, a snatch, for me, she would be gone from me a little ways but smiling too, and tell me jokes, and I loved it but didn't exactly know what to do about it and just smiled back at her and felt slow next to her, just not quick enough. So she talked and touched me on the shoulder and the arm, she kept touching and stayed close to me. You're with each other all day long and it keeps happening, the touches and smiles, and it adds up, it builds up, and you know where