Personal Essay of Reflection

Night Fades

Joyce Miller

. . . and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds be reproved.

—John 3: 29–30

Lying in my bedroom, I read and reread that passage. And my child's mind was troubled. Why did God say that? It seemed to me that bad things happened in the day, while the darkness was a time of mystery and delight: magical diamond stars in the velvet sky, little scurrying creatures, hectic bats, soft and silent owls.

That was the night to me, as I grew up in rural southern Ontario in the 1960s. The darkness gave night its purity and mystery. The darkness was essential for the safety of those who dwelt in it. Nightmares were only imaginary. Day ones were real. Was there something wrong with me for thinking that way?

Night was when the tooth fairy came, when mysterious gifts appeared after my dad had been to a convention or a bowling tournament. Night was when my mom would wake us up to have hoagies my dad had bought on his way home when his shift ended at 10 p.m. If you had asked me then, I would have said it was 2 a.m. In our family, we got our Christmas stockings in the blackness of Christmas Eve night. I was probably four or five the first year my brother shone a flashlight in my eyes to wake me up for my initiation

into this rite. We had to be absolutely silent so as not to wake Mom and Dad, and we put on dressing gowns (the only night of the year we wore them) in order to sneak downstairs and open the candy and little gifts in our stockings. A year came when my little sister and I waited and waited for our older sister to get back from her date and come to wake us up. Finally the sky began to lighten and we went down on our own. She and her boyfriend were asleep on the couch. She roused a little as we got our stockings and went back up to our room.

One Halloween night real magic happened. I slept through most of it, although I got to see the incarnation. My mom was awakened in the night by the sound of rustling and banging in my older sister's room. She assumed it was Margaret getting in from another late date and went back to sleep. In the morning she followed a trail of ashes and soot (a sure sign of magic, if you know the Christmas poem) up the stairs, down the hall, and into my sister's room. Her bed was still empty, but the room was occupied. A great horned owl stared from the headboard. It was perfectly calm (though probably muddled) as Marilyn and I were called in to see it before Dad scooped it up with a fishing net and released it. The huge wings spread, it drifted up to a tree and perched blinking before heading off in the brightness. Following the trail of clues like a family of Sherlock Holmeses, we deduced that the owl had fallen down the chimney. I have since discovered that owls often perch on chimneys for warmth. Often, they are lulled asleep by the heat and fall in. The real magic was that the grate was open and the coals were dead when our owl fell.

Like most country kids, when I got older I became a 4H'er. In the winter, it was dark by the time I got home from school, ate supper, and got out to feed my rabbits. The glow of the heat bulb made the winter rabbit house nearly as magical as the crystalline night. It felt warm and cozy even though it was only marginally warmer than outdoors. Steam rose from the warm water I poured out for the rabbits, who drank thirstily before it froze. A carrot apiece provided the rest of their fluid for the day.

One night, a tiny visitor was waiting. A little Disney-Bambi creature with a fawn-beige back, white belly, and huge eyes. Unlike mice I had seen in the rabbit house before, it did

not flash away. It stood up on its little haunches and regarded me thoughtfully. My 12-year-old heart melted and the deermouse was a friend for the rest of the winter. When spring came it was light at rabbit-feeding time, and I never saw it again.

Each year the night was a little less black. Each year the night horizon glowed an orange grey. Each year the city moved a little closer to my home and each year I grew a little more afraid. In school I learned that southern Ontario would one day be called a "polyglot megalopolis," where the small towns chained city to city with no country in between, and the entire Great Lakes basin would be urban. On the horizon, fluorescent street lights, store lights, sign lights faded the magic velvet and the stars grew dimmer.

Our road, the "Seven Hills Road," was widened and the valleys filled in. Too many accidents had occurred as a result of joyriders in the hills. Mature oak trees were cut down from one side of the road to accommodate the widening. A born tree-hugger, I guess, I hugged each one, thanked it, and said goodbye before the crews moved in.

I began to have a recurring nightmare that the woods and fields around my house would be filled with houses. All my secret places would be filled with bulldozers, the "elephant trees" (beeches) whose elastic branches we rode like horses would be cut down, the swamp where the foxes hid would be filled in.

When I was 13, we moved into a little village. I staged a months-long protest against the move, but was also secretly glad, because I wouldn't have to watch the changes. When I grew up and moved into Toronto, I was happy again to be insulated from what was going on. I could grumble about Mississauga (which, by the way, was a little village when my best friend's father was born there) without needing to watch its expansion. The city had a different kind of night, a new kind of magic, and I only had to think about the "megalopolis" when I rode the Greyhound home. So I took the train instead, which still passes through picturesque farmland, though the signs of construction are becoming more obvious.

Now I live in Edmonton, and only get back once or twice a year for a few days' visit. Recently I drove past my childhood home. In the horse field was a house. In the woods,

another house. In the field where deer grazed at dusk, a house. Across the road, where my Dad had rescued a newborn calf from the swamp, another. In neighbour Ernie's field, where I'd tasted green wheat, two more. I had awakened. It was light. I could see.

Yet I realize I am hypocritical. My family didn't farm (although my grandpa and uncles did). We had no reason to live in the country other than the love of it. As with these people. They are there because they want to escape the city, they love the country, they want the peace of it. And so we are destroying it.

And so I love the night. The bulldozers don't work then. The peace returns. And there's no more need for my nightmare.

For Further Thinking

1. How is Miller's opening quotation (the epigraph) a signal of the tone and purpose that follow?

2. What is the ratio of narration and description to reflection in this essay?

3. What is the thesis? Is it explicit or implicit?

Looking Back and Ahead

Compare "The Tree" and "Where Are You my Little Village?" (website, Chapter 10) to each other and then to Joyce Miller's "Night Fades" (website, Chapter 8). All three seem to reflect upon the "progress myth," the idea that humanity has evolved from primitive states to advanced ones, that we are better practically, intellectually, artistically and morally, than previous generations. Is life "getting better"? Also of relevance to this question are the two essays that complete the Reader (pages 504 - 513) and the discussion surrounding them.

Practice

See Chapter 12 on how to prepare an essay that compares two pieces of writing. Use the "Differences and Similarities Test" to develop an essay comparing "Where Have You

Gone My Little Village" (website, Chapter 10) and "Night Fades" (website, Chapter 5). See pages 176 – 185 in Chapter 12 for further ideas of how to narrow your discussion and find your controlling idea.