MULTICOLORED DREAMS

by Natalie Emmer

I dream in color. A frivolous bit of trivia, perhaps, but it might also interest you to note that not everyone does; some people dream only in black and white. I sympathize with that unfortunate minority, as they will never experience the vibrant life a midnight rainbow offers the unconscious imagination. The aqua marine of a vast Caribbean sea, the rich plum of a queen’s velvet robe, or the ruby red and golden glow of a make-believe African sun setting over the Sahara. Instead those fateful few experience nothing extra in the ordinary muted tones of a grayscale, epitomized by the 1950’s television era of “Leave it to Beaver” and “I Love Lucy.” I personally can’t, nor would I ever want to, envision our world as amounting to nothing greater than the black-and-white pursuit of Ward and June Cleaver, for that illusory lifestyle is rendered more artificial than any dream, spectral or not.

Now, to make things clear, when I confess of my spectral dreams that is not to say I’ve never been prone to dream in black and white. I have, in a sense, if we make “black” and “white” a race issue. From what I remember, my dream state has twice given way to the binary, first white, and then black thirteen years later. I remember these fraternal dreams distinctly because they mark the only two occasions I awoke from a deep slumber so abruptly, my veins pumped with adrenaline, and my heart ready to beat out of its cage, that my only option was to shrink into submission, and cower into my covers – a polka-dotted pink Minnie-Mouse twinset, or more recently a queen-sized vintage quilt, cream and decorated with flower silhouettes. These vivid dreams, although composed of different characters, settings, plotlines and crises, held one common outcome: in each occurrence I woke in order to escape the barrel of a gun held firmly at my temple. What I find more intriguing, and most definitely thought provoking, is that the hand claiming my life was white in 1996, and the second time around, black.

Naturally, as a young white woman who has never considered herself a racist, my first response to this peculiar technicality – if it may so be called – was to find a plausible explanation for it, and for that, I almost unconsciously turned to circumstantial evidence. First of all, in 1996 my life experience amounted to a mere eight years, the greater part of which had been spent naïve to any conception of “race” in the first place. And the fact that I lived in a small, quasi-isolated Wisconsin farm community forty miles north of Milwaukee did not necessarily contribute to the growth of a multiracial intellect, at least not as lived experience could provide. I attended a school in which every student and teacher shared a similar light peach hue. Together we learned about the slave trade and Jim Crow, watched the growth of Kunta Kinte in “Roots,” and listened to the dreams of Martin Luther King, Jr. – he had some pretty outstanding ones. But rarely, if ever, did race relations translate onto the playground or into the hallways, and on the occasion they did, the translation was defiled by ignorance, and a logic of “white superiority” to which I openly took a personal stance against.

Outside of school presented a similar scenario brought on by sheltered, affluent suburban life. How easy it is to imagine the schema of a provincial town, racially monochromatic nonetheless: church prayer on Sunday, afternoon Girl and Boy Scout meetings, jaunts through a grocery store where patrons greet one another on a first name basis. I learned how to swim the breaststroke, perform a picturesque pirouette and mount the parallel bars with kids ‘just like me,’ and any doubts thereof quickly dissolve in the proof of old coloring books. Considering these details, it seems reasonable, even necessary, that the threatening man in my dream would be the
same color as me – “white” – because white was what I knew. And so, the surreal scene played out:

A little girl, I sit alone watching an animated movie when a stranger enters the room. I stand to greet him. He has returned for something he left behind; his temper elevates, and he grabs me. My back to his chest, his left arm enclosed around my neck, he intrinsically positions the device he holds in his right hand, and the metal glistens in the corner of my eye. As I scream for my life, I finally wake with one last jolting shriek of “Mommmy!”

My mom didn’t answer the cry. I remember briefly surveying the moonlit bedroom before ducking under my Minnie Mouse comforter (a rare form of protection), and praying my mom would come rescue me from a vivid imagination. When I told her about it later, she thought maybe I didn’t scream at all, because she, or my dad, typically woke to even the slightest footfall of one of their children. But I knew it wasn’t imagined; perhaps it just seemed louder in the stillness of a waking nightmare.

I’ve recounted that nightmare to several eager audiences, each time relishing in its uniqueness. Never though, did my account include “in entered a white guy,” it was always just some “man,” his race automatically assumed as my own. In fact, I had never even considered the dream as race related until it became juxtaposed with one other of the waking variety, as in the case of the fall of 2009.

I was twenty-one years old, living alone in a single bedroom apartment, located on the Marquette University campus – on the skirt of one of Milwaukee’s more sketchy neighborhoods, where some recommend you not walk alone after dusk. Since moving to the area, I’d taken the verbal warnings into consideration, but never felt particularly threatened, and typically addressed the neighborhood folk – even the scatter bunch – in a genial manner, hoping for a like response. I never wanted to appear as the timid or condescending “white” girl, but as the colorful girl who looked past invisible boundaries of class, wealth or skin color, accepting any and every one in her path. After all, I thought, that’s who I am, who I’ve always been, and the behavior I’ve advocated my entire life. I began to question the truth to that mindset after reflecting on a midnight moment of unconscious thought, and a dream’s almost uncanny realness:

I see myself, feel myself, lying asleep in my bed, experiencing a moment parallel to the night’s reality. Suddenly, I hear a noise. Someone is breaking into the locked first floor patio door that separates the darkness of my warm, secure bedroom from the night’s vulnerable street life. I sneak a glimpse at the shadowed figures – there are two – as they walk towards my bedside. A voice speaks to me, asking me to remain calm, and I feel the weapon’s cold silver shaft at my hairline. As I slowly turn towards the dark threatening hand, my heart racing, I wake to realize it’s only a dream, yet the intensified thump in my chest does not subside.

Not long after having the dream, I shared a dramatic rendition of it with a few family members at a birthday party. While leading up to the moment of climax I recounted, “two black men entered my apartment,” and, immediately embarrassed with my unconscious use of “black,” I rectified myself: “well, not like their skin color matters…” The next day I was still mulling over the scene, upset with my “racist” remark, and wondering what my audience, all white, had
thought. Would they have even noticed had I not made it such a blatant ordeal? Either way, it bothered me then, and continues to bother me now. And now, perhaps the more important question becomes, Why?

Dreams and their meaning long have been a fascination of mine, enough so that I invested in a dream dictionary a few years ago thinking I might be able to learn something from my REM-sleep inspired thoughts. It’s no wonder then, that in trying to discover why, exactly, my “black” and “white” distinction bothered me I kept defaulting to the fact it came about in a state of dreaming. Sigmund Freud, perhaps the most renowned dream theorist, wrote in his 1899 manifesto on dream interpretation that our dreams route the “royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious.” As such, by creating an understanding for dreams one can discover her innermost beliefs, thoughts and desires.

While I am not going to attempt to interpret my dreams, or claim dreams prove de facto what one honestly believes, I do think Freud’s claim worthy of consideration. And I also think because I find it valuable – that dreams can unlock a part of the unconscious –I am slightly ashamed of my self, and my identification of the black men in my dream. Suddenly I begin to question why I dreamt that way and not another: was it simply the product of a changing environment, and a greater presence of black culture in my day-to-day routine? Or, since moving to the city, have I actually realized a fear of one man more than another based on the color of his skin? Could I subconsciously be… prejudice? The answers, I find, are not so black and white.

And isn’t it true that, in actuality, neither are dreams? – Even if you do fall into that minority group of non-color dreamers. Look it up in the Oxford American Dictionary, and you’ll find the first noted definition of “black and white” cites “black, white and shades of gray.” Last time I checked “gray” qualified as a color; it’s just the character of our culture to categorize and to simplify, simplify, simplify. While Lucy and Ricky appear in various tints and shades of a gray color scheme, their show gets labeled in the binary “black and white,” because it rolls nicely off the tongue. The implications of an “I Love Lucy” generalization are menial and hardly of notice, especially when the audience has even the slightest knowledge of black and white art forms. The same cannot be said of generalizations concerning real people with real histories, thoughts and beliefs; real dreams. Yet, despite the distinction between the imaginary and actuality, society has been programmed to make classifications of and for both, and sometimes, if not most times, at an irreplaceable expense of the truth – in all its colored variety.

So here it is, my own moment of truth: prejudice or not? Can I answer gray? As in not a black and white “yes” or “no,” nor the dreamt of white then black, but the colored real life experience in between?

As I see it, the culture within which I live, and have grown to understand breeds prejudice. It’s an inevitable fact. But that fact does not necessarily mean that I am, as a product of that culture, prejudice. It does however create an awareness – a unique, individual lens – for the existence of prejudicial thought, and how one feels she must go about to combat it; both as her own prejudices, and the prejudices of those that surround her. In the case of moving from a small town to a big city, one must first get acquainted with a new environment, and then adjust the lens that puts the environment into focus.

I consider my dream a product of that adjustment: a new awareness, and an adjusted focus – a better focus – for the multicolored multicultural world that I live in, have always lived in, and will never stop dreaming in.