
DARKER SHADOWS

Austin Ratner

What if shadows were darker? But only by a little bit—almost the same as themselves, in fact, less one-billionth the brightness of a full moon. Maximilian Mandelbrot, aged thirty-six and a writer of naturalistic short stories, decided to write a story about just that. He wrote:

One day the shadows grew darker by a value equal to one billionth the brightness of a full moon. On that day, Dax Brodhandle, a writer aged thirty-seven, was awakened as usual by his three-year-old son, who quietly pushed open the bedroom door and crawled into bed with his father and mother. Lena Brodhandle pulled a pillow over her head. “Daddy, will you play with me?” his son asked in the darkness. Dax could see the boy, Michael, because the chimneys of Henry Street were just now tilting down into the path of the sun and the blind was resting on the top of the air conditioner, and some of the gray light of early morning shone in. Dax looked into Michael’s face in the half-darkness, which did not appear any darker than usual, and told him, yes, and he would make him an Eggo Blueberry Waffle too. “No,” Michael said, “I don’t want a waffle, I want you to play with me. Come on, play with me.”

“What should we do?”

“Let’s decorate the kitchen for Halloween,” Michael said. “You match the pumpkin.”

When Dax stumbled sleepily into the kitchen, scratching his nuts, and flicked on the light, the room looked exactly as it always did, with no apparent difference in the luminance of any object or the depth of any shadow.

At the end of the day, Dax took Michael and Lena out for pizza at Patsy Grimaldi’s and they got there early to avoid the long lines, so early in fact, the ovens weren’t fired and they had to wait even longer than usual. Michael had a meltdown and whacked another three-year-old with the metal chain hanging from the steel shutters next door. Dax grumpily went to get a slice for Michael down on Front Street, and no one commented on any differences in luminance or temperature.

At the pier nearby, where lines from “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” were stenciled on the railing, all the shadows traveling on the water of New York Harbor looked completely normal and gave no one any cause to notice. Dax

remembered how Whitman had written that he once saw fine centrifugal spokes of light around the shadow of his head when he looked in the water from that pier and how Whitman foresaw that generations after him would do the same in the very same place and in that way would be connected to him. Dax looked at his shadow on the sun-lit water and saw the fine centrifugal spokes of light around the shape of his head and felt deeply linked to Walt Whitman, as if “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” had been written just for him. His shadow in the water was miraculous, crowned with Whitmanic light, and troubled by waves, but in no way darker than he expected.

Meanwhile, scientists all over earth were not beginning to notice anything unexpected concerning the brightness of shadows. The most sensitive eyes in the world—they belonged to a former sharpshooter of the Infantería de Marina who was now a painter in Arkansas and who had been known to weep when flights of clouds recast the cypress shadows on the grass—these eyes registered nothing unusual. And that night, after wrestling Michael into his pajamas, Dax and Lena and Michael went to bed as if all was the same as before. And the painter in Arkansas, and all the scientists of the earth, including those who study light and stars, went to bed as if all was the same as before.

When Max Mandelbrot was done writing the story, which he titled “Darker Shadows,” he read it over a few times and concluded something was missing. So he added a frame story in which a fictional astronomer cum amateur novelist named Matt Axelrod, aged thirty-eight, wrote “Darker Shadows.” In the frame story, Matt Axelrod became obsessed with the scientists in the story proper. Because even if the scientists measured the brightness of the shadows with perfect accuracy, they would not appreciate the fact that the physical laws of the universe had been violated! After all, the brightness of the sun (and character of shadows) was in a state of continual flux due to the earth’s weather and also to

EVERYTHING IN THE PAST IS A PARTICLE

TR Hummer

Having discovered the true name
of the infinite, she utters it and vanishes,
Whereupon she finds herself in a vaguely familiar
hallway lined with numbered doors,
And, opening the one marked 3, she enters a garden,
a birthday party where a small child crushed
With disappointment is crying with that passion
adults can scarcely imagine giving
In to – and *Yes*, she thinks, *this is holiness*,
and she bows and reassumes
Her unassuageable selfhood, to dwell in it
forever, the promise broken, the gift
Refused, three candles flickering but never going out.

changing conditions within the sun itself. The scientists would not know the shadows were a little bit darker than the laws of nature dictated, because no scientist would know the exact luminance nature would have dictated that day according to its own laws.

Matt Axelrod was an obsessive man and he felt that the scientists in the story somehow *had to be* made to realize that the laws of nature had been violated. So Matt Axelrod did the only thing to the story he could think of that would make the scientists understand. He wrote himself into “Darker Shadows.” Now “Darker Shadows” ended like this:

. . . And the painter in Arkansas, and all the scientists of the earth, including those who study light and stars, went to bed as if all was the same as before.

But the next day, MATT AXELROD appeared in the sky over New York Harbor in the form of a 2000 Foot Tall Man and said, “FOOLS! THE SHADOWS ARE DARKER THAN THEY ARE SUPPOSED TO BE BY ONE BILLIONTH THE LUMINANCE OF THE FULL MOON!” The scientists of the world would under normal circumstances ignore such a claim, because they fully believed in the constancy of the laws of the universe, but the sudden appearance of a 2000 Foot Tall Man shouting at them in the sky had given them something to think about.

Matt Axelrod disappeared then, leaving a scent of rosemary in the air over New York Harbor and abandoning the scientists to sort the rest out for themselves. A few began to suspect the truth—that they were characters in a story where the laws of nature did not apply and had never applied—but most of the scientists ignored the aberration. A shockingly small number of people had actually witnessed the event in person and the two extant videos were easily discredited. Besides, even if the Rosemary Apparition, as it came to be known, were legitimate, that in no way implied that the Apparition’s words could be trusted. The opposite seemed more likely, in fact. The scientists went back to their work and organized conferences about the eleven-year cycle of the sun.

Dax Brodhandle liked to toy with the idea that he might be a character in a story, for it seemed to promise some measure of immortality. Lena Brodhandle thought the possibility tragic beyond words and felt Dax’s whole attitude reflected a lack of commitment to the marriage. Young Michael

Brodhandle was prevented as much as possible from learning of the so-called Rosemary Apparition, but in any case he wouldn't have been as shocked by it as the adults were. The world according to the laws of nature was just as strange to him as a world where 2000 Foot Tall Men appeared in the sky. And he believed his wishes sometimes made things happen.

Max Mandelbrot was now finished. The revised piece included not only “Darker Shadows,” the story of Dax Brodhandle, but also

but couldn't button them. She had reached that point in the second pregnancy where clothes no longer fit. Max looked at all the clothes on the bed. It was nighttime and the bedroom was very dim, lit only by the light over the bathroom mirror. They had never gotten around to hanging any of the art they'd bought across from St. Germain des Prés so the only wall-hanging was an old Pottery Barn mirror. It occurred to Max that if something was monochromatic, like their bedroom walls, the shading was all that distinguished one surface from another.

the real person in the story, Matt—where's his wife?”

“Who put the ants in your pants?” Max said with extreme gloom. The stink of crushed ginkgo berries was blowing in through the bathroom window. He lifted the blind and looked out onto Henry Street. The Pierrepont streetlight glowed through a drift of near-imperceptible rain. The wet streets shone and a light went out in the apartment over the dry cleaner across the street, where they had shrunk his suede jacket. “Do you like the story?”

“Can you at least look at me?” she said.

“What does that mean?” he said, continuing to look out the window.

She said nothing.

He looked at her. “Well? What does that mean?”

“It means what's been going on with you for the last month,” she said.

Max knew what his wife was getting at but pretended he didn't, and they could both see it was going to be a fight, and so it was a fight. Because Max was feeling particularly squeamish, he steered the argument back to epistemology, though he hadn't wanted to talk about it to begin with. That was fine with Anna Lee, because she had as many old grievances aching in her heart as Max did, and they were just as hard to speak of.

“You wish you didn't exist,” Anna Lee said, “you even said so.”

“You want to have a fight,” he said.

“No, you do,” she said.

“YOU KNOW THE FRENCH SAY A WOMAN IN HER THIRTIES HAS TO CHOOSE BETWEEN HER FACE AND HER ASS. AND THANKS FOR GETTING ME PREGNANT AGAIN, SO MY ASS WILL NEVER LOOK THE SAME!”

the frame story of Matt Axelrod. Max would not permit Matt Axelrod to rewrite the portion of “Darker Shadows” that described Dax's silhouette on the waves, even though Matt would not have wanted to let it stand; for in reality Dax would not have been able to observe his shadow on the water from the Old Fulton Street pier at dinner time, as described, because by then the sun was falling over Jersey City on the other side of the Harbor. But Matt did not have the final say, because he, like Dax, was only a character. Max said it was done and it was done. Max titled the new piece “The Laws of Nature.”

He had mixed feelings about the story, but the themes, anyway, were clear enough: the laws of nature may only be altered in fiction; the universe is a place of constant flux; the laws of nature, while known with confidence, elude direct observation; etc. When he showed “The Laws of Nature” to his wife, Anna Lee, however, she had many surprising things to say.

“Lena Brodhandle?” she said. “She sounds like a cow.”

“She's not you,” Max said. “Besides, I didn't even mention her weight.”

“Excuse me for suffering through nine months of pregnancy for you,” Anna Lee said. She had been trying on clothes and they were heaped on the bed.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Max said, and became instantly gloomy.

Anna Lee pulled on another pair of pants

“You know the French say a woman in her thirties has to choose between her face and her ass. And thanks for getting me pregnant again, so my ass will never look the same!” Anna Lee picked up a pair of maternity stretch pants and flung them back onto the bed. She looked at him and he looked at her. “Jeez,” she said, “I'm just joking around.”

The really surprising thing was that Anna Lee interpreted the story completely differently from the way Max did. She felt it was an argument for absolute skepticism. “Because how do you and I know we're not just dreamed up by some Matt Axelrod somewhere?”

THEY ARGUED MUCH TOO LONG, PAST MIDNIGHT, TRYING DISINGENUOUSLY TO SORT OUT THE TRUTH LIKE A PAIR OF LAWYERS, AND UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES THEY PROBABLY WOULD HAVE RECONCILED THROUGH SEX. BUT THEY HAD WORK AND THE BOY WOULD GET THEM UP AT THREE AND AGAIN AT SIX AND ANNA LEE WAS PREGNANT.

Max just wanted to know whether she enjoyed the story, and felt cross with her for misunderstanding him, but he nonetheless began to expound for her his detailed views on the Cartesian arguments for skepticism. They were both extremely tired because their son Ike had been waking them up in the middle of the night every night for two years now. “I have a question,” Anna Lee said. “Dax had a wife. But

“I'm responding to you.”

“No, I'm responding to you.”

They argued much too long, past midnight, trying disingenuously to sort out the truth like a pair of lawyers, and under normal circumstances they probably would have reconciled through sex. But they had work and the boy would get them up at three and again at six and Anna Lee was pregnant. So instead they let the argument

EVERYTHING IN THE FUTURE IS A WAVE

TR Hummer

That hurtling into nothing, that familiar, sickening
 throwtness, that falling-down-the-elevator-shaft
Vacuity in the belly—the image of the crushed child etched
 on a retina and walking through the walls
Of the skull: or simply my death contained
 in the shadow of a hawk launched on a stiff wind,
The distraction of that black motion, the car that skids,
 the retaining wall, the fountaining of blood
As the blown bird flies, oblivious of the wreckage
 or even of the unconscious shadow that rushes on to nowhere.

fade away, like a thunderstorm moving on to another county, and they fell asleep on top of the covers in the damp and too hot air.

In the morning, Max said he'd try to do better. He couldn't know precisely what was wrong because, as far as his relationship went, he was haunted by depressive distortions. Anna Lee told him she did like the story. They put *Mary Poppins* on for Ike, who was wearing orange plastic construction worker goggles, a black knight's helmet, and silver duct tape on his arms and chest to look like the "football robot" on TV. Ike screamed and told the sitter he didn't love her when Max and Anna Lee said goodbye, but they left anyway and, wondering if they had failed as parents, went out to the little college in the Bronx. Max had a few more boxes to clear out of the lab and this day was as good as any. Anna Lee fell asleep in the car and so Max tried not to curse the traffic on the BQE.

When Anna Lee finished teaching she came into the lab and found him tearing lecture notes out of a big black binder from grad school. He said he was saving his doodles. He wanted to show them to her, but she wasn't interested.

She said he wasn't happy with her and the story proved it, and tears began to leak from her eyes. He was trying to tell her something, she said, and if she was being paranoid, he'd given her ample reason to be so. He said his depression wasn't anything to do with her, and he didn't know what it was to do with. He rubbed the fume hood fiercely with his thumbnail, scratching at the gummy residue of a sticker someone else had peeled away. She started to weep earnestly, loudly, and, perhaps because the smell of toluene wormed inexorably at his brain, he shouted, "What did I do?" and slammed the binder on the laboratory bench, upsetting a bottle of sodium hydroxide pellets. The bottle rolled across the Formica and into the sink and, with disgust at another of his tantrums, Anna Lee reached into the sink to retrieve the bottle, then recoiled. The bottle hissed in the wet sink like an animal. And though Max drenched her sleeve under the safety shower for a full ten minutes, Anna Lee continued to wince and shake her hand.

Anna Lee was not seriously injured, it turned out, but on the back of her hand, in the soft skin between the first and second metacarpals, a small whitish crater in the shape of a half-moon

remained. A rumor circulated for a time in the corridors of the small college in the Bronx. For Max and Anna Lee, it was another old callus of guilt and pain for them to grow around, and so they did, like tree roots insinuating themselves through the links of a fence.

white scar. She pulled the hand underneath her chest. Max then got up and went to the office and rewrote "The Laws of Nature" so that Matt Axelrod acquired a wife named Daniela. The new ending read:

encountered a troop of girl scouts playing tag and, without knowing why, he introduced himself to their den mother and proposed that they be married right there on the lawn with oak blossoms twisted on their fingers, and they were married there with the girl scouts as bridesmaids.

That night, Matt returned to the observatory completely confused. He didn't see the mysterious note on the desk, because it was sandwiched between some book offers from Scientific American. The note was from MAX MANDELBROT and it said: "Let me tell you about your new bride, Daniela. She's divorced and has a daughter named Madison. You're going to visit the monkeys in the zoo at Vail Mills with them, and then you'll screw it all up even though you love her. You love her, Matt, you love her, you love her, you love her. Which further goes to prove that a what if come true may be less influential to reality than the same what if when merely supposed." Matt never saw the note and later swept it off the desk into a trash can unread, along with the junk mail from Scientific American. He was busy wheeling the old Clark telescope around to the Markarian Chain, for it was late enough to see it in the southern sky. ❀

THERE HE ENCOUNTERED A TROOP OF GIRL SCOUTS PLAYING TAG AND, WITHOUT KNOWING WHY, HE INTRODUCED HIMSELF TO THEIR DEN MOTHER AND PROPOSED THAT THEY BE MARRIED RIGHT THERE ON THE LAWN WITH OAK BLOSSOMS TWISTED ON THEIR FINGERS, AND THEY WERE MARRIED THERE WITH THE GIRL SCOUTS AS BRIDESMAIDS.

Over a year later, when Max was in another of his fogs, he woke in the middle of the night and looked at his wife sleeping. Her hand was tucked under her chin as it often was—not like the night of the lab incident, when she'd had to sleep on her back with her bandaged hand aloft in the dark air. He leaned down now next to Anna Lee's face, which was pressed to the mattress, and kissed Anna Lee's hand on the small

. . . And he believed his wishes sometimes made things happen.

THE END

As usual, Matt had set out to do one thing, but some supervening force of conscience had caused him to do quite another. Matt laid his pen down and walked out of the old observatory, stepped over the low brick wall, and onto the front lawn, where a brilliant sun was shining inveterately. There he

