

Andrew Barrett

# Shelley Mandrake

Experimental Fiction

By

Andrew Barrett

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When sleep beckons, there is a point at which the mind becomes loose, almost slack; a point at which its tether to both the body and the reality of its surroundings diminishes to a thin spectral smoke. Its grasp upon that reality is weak and it is open to suggestion and corruption. It is open also to a malignant twisting of the day's events as it struggles to re-enact them, to place them into some kind of order and attempts to make sense of them.

The question is, why?

The question is, when a mind becomes so 'thin' that it no longer knows who it is, does it combine with other senses, other reason, other *time*, to become something quite different; *someone* quite different?

So the question should be, can you be someone or somewhere else at the thinning of your mind?

On the bedside cabinet, a Westclox ticked. Shelley Mandrake yawned and turned over, trying to find a cooler part of the bed on which to lie. Her previous position had become warm, and instead of it being comfortably cosy, was proving to be a little claustrophobic. Her eyes watered from the yawn and for an instant they opened just a fraction, and through the rippling tears, she caught sight of the curtains; their inner edges swayed just a little in the almost still air of a hot summer night. Around their edges, she could make out a slice of

silvery blue light as the moon shed a ghostly tear of its own. And that was some comfort to her as her mind thinned still further.

The new coolness of the sheets gently eased away Shelley's mind and her last cohesive thoughts of tomorrow's mundane tasks. And then it thought something quite strange. Shelley Mandrake's mind grew dark for a while. Inside, where it was warm and relaxed, she found herself in a waiting room of sorts. She was still very comfortable, as though the room were familiar to her, as, for example, her own sitting room downstairs was, where a portrait of the Monarch, Edward VII, graced the wall. She was at home in here. It was dark, even though a weak naked bulb glowed against the browning ceiling.

The darkness was at the edges only, like those old photographs her grandfather had shown her. She recalled there had been a potted plant to one side, a painting of dire quality hanging from a picture rail over to the left and a woman standing rigidly to his right, not a glimmer of a smile anywhere on her granite face. They held hands though, both pairs of hands clasped between them as though sharing some secret clamped within twenty fingers. She wondered if perhaps they were a married couple, or just close, like siblings.

And then he noticed that he too was not smiling and wondered why.

Beyond the photographer, through the window, a gentle sunlight glanced off the wet cobbles, but still he felt oddly taut. He couldn't wait to be away from here. These new-fangled things scared him, and her too. But he stood firm, resolute, not letting his fear show itself.

The photographer ducked beneath a black cloth hood and said, "Hold still, if you please." There was a fizzing noise and then a pop accompanied by a dazzling flash, as though man had found a way of caging lightning, releasing it at his will.

William blinked for a long time, and could see nothing other than a bright green rectangle. Millicent tore her hands from his and covered her eyes, mewling like some trapped cat. When he did open his eyes, the smoke from the flash was roiling across the ceiling and Victoria stared at it wondering if her dad knew the chimney was blocked.

But it wasn't smoke from the chimney at all; it was steam from the tin bathtub in front of the fire. Coals spat and Mother cursed the collier for bringing her another bag of slag. She poured the water and swished it around with her hand. Then she wiped dripping fingertips on her pinny and said, "Victoria, get in while it's still hot." She smiled and whispered, "You can use my Camay if you want. Special treat," she winked, "but make sure you take it out of the bath before Father comes home, mind. He can have the coal tar stuff." She chuckled and hurried out of the parlour and back to the scullery, as I undressed quickly.

The bath was too hot, but I didn't want to say anything to Mother; it would have sounded ungrateful, and it would have been a shame to waste the heat! George VI's portrait glared at me. I sipped shallow breaths and slowly lowered my reddening body into the murky water, not breathing again until only my head poked out and the shock had subsided a little. Of course, in order to get my shoulders beneath the water, my knees were bent double, heels right up against my bum! But it was lovely, and it was the first bath I'd had in two weeks. I wasn't about to spoil it. I reached over the side, my exposed arm growing goose pimples almost immediately, and felt around the flagstones for the soap. But I couldn't feel it. And now I was becoming cross because that meant I'd have to sit back up and get all cold again to look over the side.

As I sat up, I looked into the fire.

It spat at him, a great glowing ember that nearly landed in his lap. The crack brought him round quickly and he saw the ember rolling to a halt on the rug. "Bloody thing!" He stood and brought a grazed old hobnail boot down on it, twisting to make sure it was out. And while he was standing, swaying actually because of the two bottles of stout he'd drunk, he put the guard across the hearth and then turned up the wick in lamp.

It smelled of paraffin, waxy, oily. And that's when he knew things were going to change. He stared up at the ceiling and decided it was time. And at once, the feeling of hopelessness, of a constant dread floated away like fallen leaves on a swollen autumnal river. Leonard shook his boots off on the scullery floor, marvelled at his toes poking out from socks that had been darned a thousand times already.

Softly he trod the stairs, the lamp guiding him, though in truth he'd walked them a million times and the lamp was there for comfort only, and she saw the wavering light, and then heard him come into the room and I closed my eyes because I was afraid of him.

When Leonard took to one of his moods, it was wise to stay quiet. But I was resolute and had not shrunk away from him earlier this evening. I'd had a talk with him. And we exchanged fair and frank arguments. We agreed to disagree and I had been in tears at the end, running up the stairs and not even washing before climbing under the blanket, letting it soak up my tears. Aside from the paraffin, I could smell tobacco on him, and stout too. Not too poor for Leonard to have stout, were we?

And the lamp light flickered against the bare plaster walls as another wave of bombers sent shivers up their backs. Father was adamant that he would not leave their house so some thief could plunder it as they sheltered with everyone else. "They can ruddy well bomb me sittin' 'ere," he shouted. "I'm not leavin' my cutlery and my cheese and my butter and my

eggs for some robbing bastard!” And I had been right! It was my castle, that house. I’d rather die with it than return to an empty pantry. I had mouths to feed.

From the wall, William and Millicent stared impassively down at the table, their hands joined together, and Father knew that William would have approved of the decision. “It’s an Englishman’s right!” Mother hitched a breath and then sat upright as though realising she had been hunched over. I looked into his hard, staring eyes, and then they seemed to soften slightly as he considered something important. He got up from the table and took the lamp away. I said nothing; it wasn’t my place to ask. But within minutes I’d come back in ‘ere and I sat back in front of her. The relief on her face was evident, but I’d needed the lamp, see.

“Mother,” I said. “I want you to take Victoria to the shelter. But before you do...”

Victoria watched them both sitting on the settee together in front of the hearth, the fire’s light picking out father’s stubborn face and mother’s tears. Father wore a black arm band in memory of George VI. “I have something to say,” she said, standing up and approaching them, trying to look older than her years yet humble before her parents. I swallowed a lump of fear the size of a fist as father turned to look at me. Mother didn’t look of course, not at me anyhow; she already knew my news. She watched Father instead. “Father, I want to marry Leonard.” And they had shaken hands more like colleagues than father and new son-in-law. But that was fine; it was Father’s way and suddenly Leonard broke the handshake and embraced him. Slowly, as though fearing pain or ridicule, Father had embraced him in return, and Mother looked at me and smiled the most glorious of smiles. Elizabeth was her name. She was the new Queen, with luscious dark hair, regal in the parlour.

I watched Mother die the following winter, and it broke my heart. Yet it was a blessin’, not only for her, but for the rest of us too. I’d been married to her for nigh on forty years, and Leonard reached over and shook her gently by the shoulder. “Victoria,” I said, feeling dry-mouthed and sheepish. She mumbled in her sleep. I tutted, because I wasn’t very good at this sort of thing. I lit the bedside candle from the lamp, set the lamp on the dresser and tried again. “Victoria.”

She turned over and opened her eyes, and I could see she’d not slept but a wink. But her eyes were puffy, and I could feel them smart a little as I blinked. I looked at him, and his face was saddened in the candle light, his stubble needed shaving, and then he whispered to me, “I’ve been athinking. You are right. We shall have a child.” I couldn’t take a deep enough breath. Such was my joy that I almost fainted and Leonard had to sit me upright and

prop the bolster behind my head. I was crying and laughing all at the same, and I said to him, "I love you, Leonard. You'll be a wonderful father."

She sat on the back step in the heat, the sunlight making her squint as she watched the dray going by pulled by Sam the old Shire horse. In her hand was a small white paper bag with a sprinkling of Demerara inside. Shelley dipped a stalk of rhubarb into the sugar and munched happily. The grinding man had been along too. He was a funny old man wearing a flat cap, and he rode a bike that had a stand and he sharpened all Mummy's knives on a sparky wheel and then he left with a sixpence, and Mummy is cooking chips for Daddy's tea.

Shelley heard him long before she saw him. His hobnailed boots clattering on the flags, and she could see him with his rollup wedged behind one ear and he'd be smiling and she'd run to him and they'd hug each other like they'd been apart all summer and Granddad sat her on his lap and opened the album. In it were old photographs of his Mam and Dad – Millicent and William he said they were called – taken with a big old wooden camera not like the new cameras with the posh flashcubes on top and Leonard and Victoria watched them both, feeling proud and scared too, holding their hands tightly together.

A week later Granddad died and the old house was bigger somehow. Queen Elizabeth had some grey hair now and she, alongside Millicent and William, and Mother and Father, watched aghast as the coal fire was pulled out and a new gas fire went in. Soot plumed out onto the dust sheets like steam billowing around the kitchen from the stove-top kettle that Shelley had burnt her hand on. This time she was more careful; this time, "I decided to use the electric one. I couldn't risk it anymore with the old metal one. The new plastic things are much better." I sipped tea from a china cup that rattled against the saucer when I put it down. The young lass looked at me and I could see she felt some kind of sorrow, but I didn't know why; she'd had a good life, it was easy to see.

There were pictures of a white-haired Queen Elizabeth on the wall, next to family portraits – one of them really old, genuine sepia tones, not like the artificial stuff, and then there were her grandparents, and then, "That's my Mum and Dad," I said very proudly. "Leonard and Victoria. Now *they* had it hard, not like we have it today. Life's easy today," and she pulled the shawl a little tighter around her shoulders as though the quilt had been pulled back slightly allowing a breeze from the window to nip in and catch her.

On the bedside cabinet, a digital clock said it was time, and they all stood there smiling as I hid beneath the quilt too shy to show myself. I could see them though, all gathered around in the darkness that really wasn't so dark thanks to the moonlight coming in through the window.

“You ready, Shelley?”

She opened her eyes, and they were damp but still beautiful, the wrinkled skin surrounding them was full of laughter lines, crow’s feet from a lifetime of smiling, and I nodded to them, like a greeting. I pulled the quilt aside and dragged my legs over the edge of the bed, feeling for my slippers with my toes. And then I held it up to show them. I’d kept it all these years. And I’d seen glimpses of it for the last hundred years or so, in the photograph of William and Millicent holding hands, and then again, as Granddad gave it to Grandma when the bombers came over, and then as my Mum and Dad, Leonard and Victoria, stood watching Granddad talking to me about cameras, and it seemed like only yesterday when I was dipping rhubarb in sugar.

I opened my hands and they all took a step forward to see it again a little more closely. The little wooden heart that, “I carved out of cherry wood for your Great Grandmother,” William said.

It had worn smooth over the years. None of us had ever boxed it in glass and displayed in the parlour or the sitting room, or hidden it away in a drawer too scared to lose it, or too embarrassed to show it. Each of us had handled it, shared it with our loved ones and it was our essence and Shelley Mandrake held it to her chest and closed her eyes for the last time in the empty old house.