

*Memories* and *Nightmares*

*Lottie Davies*

## Introduction

My work is about stories; true stories, made-up stories, oral histories, outlandish characters and the everyday. We each have our own tales and myths which we use to tell our personal histories: memories, life-stories, beliefs. Stories and memories are uniquely human; we have used them for generations to illustrate our lives, record ourselves for the future, and to make sense of the past.

'Memories and Nightmares' began with my own memory at the age of three of visiting my mother and newly-born brother, a peculiarly visual recollection of a specific instant. I remember only a split-second, which happened a few moments before I actually saw my mother. The image I have is of a wooden rocking horse, not my mother or my brother. I find this quite curious; why do I remember the rocking horse, the corridor and the way it looked and felt, but nothing before or after that moment? I wanted to capture the sense of this memory in a photograph. I also wanted to place the sense of the image in the context of other early memories and explore the similarities and differences, to see if there is something about these moments that makes them stay with us for so long. Philosophically, I am attracted to these first memories because they are the primary reference we have of our own existence in the world. They are retold and re-remembered, and very often the way one person describes the event may be different to others' memories of it.

So, at the beginning of 2008 I asked several of my friends to send me written accounts of an early childhood memory, and realized that while some people can remember extremely early events in their lives, others have a blank for many of their youngest years. One friend, Carolyne, sent me an account of a nightmare instead, which eventually inspired 'Quints', and I began to collect memories of nightmares as well; they are such a rich vein of visual and psychological narrative, akin to early memories in their longevity and recollection of specific details and sensations. Nightmares are necessarily personal, and where some people remember a clear narrative, others only recall a particular feeling or location. And of course the surreal or impossible elements of nightmares, which at the time of dreaming seem entirely logical, are often the most intriguing.

I have been moved by many of the stories which have come my way, and wanted to do them justice, to recreate the sensations and emotions described, if not the literal scene in all its details. Each story suggested its own aesthetic, so I have allowed myself to interpret each one individually, with the intention of eliciting an emotional response similar to my own reaction on first hearing the story. I have also allowed myself considerable licence in my interpretation of the stories; to appropriate, adjust and change the subjects, the settings, the time period and even the gender of the characters, depending on how each story suggested an image to me. As a indication of this appropriation, each of the protagonists is a redhead, a small reference to myself. Models represent the 'true' subject of the story, through which device I hope to produce a different insight to the subjects by contrast with a more direct representation.

Some of the nightmares are very dark, and I have tried to suggest that feeling of menace appropriate to the stories, in both an aesthetic and emotional sense. And there are happy stories and delightful memories which make me smile, where I have tried to re-create some of the magic and excitement of childhood memories and first experiences. Memories and nightmares form part of the collection of human stories. By using them as inspiration for these images, I hope to celebrate them and contribute to the continuing tradition of story-telling.

Lottie Davies

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## Lottie Davies - Memories and Nightmares

Lottie Davies' Memories and Nightmares project has been running since January 2008. Having been working as a photographer for nearly ten years now, the project - inviting visitors to her website, and friends, to submit dream narratives or memories for her to interpret - has acted as a powerful catalyst for her emerging visual idiom. The twelve completed images in her Memories and Nightmares series have a number of factors in common. Composed in response to anecdotal accounts of nightmares and early childhood memories, they take very private narratives and use them as a basis for re-interpretation, in meticulously composed, beguilingly atmospheric images. The pictures betray not only Davies' scrupulous attention to detail, but also her interests in fine art, literature, cinema and the theatre, and her keen exploitation of the uncanny.

In *The Day My Brother Was Born*, the one image in the series based on autobiographical experience, the composition heightens the sense of the uneasy; a sense only fully dispelled when one reads the written account of the picture. In two open doors at either end of a brilliantly lit hospital corridor, a female figure giving birth and a statuesque rocking horse function as contrasting still points at either end of our field of vision. Both these details seem rather flat and decorative, thrown into relief against black, and draw the eye inevitably to the running child crossing the picture, a blur of manic energy in the pristine cream-green of the corridor. The composition heightens our understanding of the emotional state of the child; and her bewildered excitement at the arrival of her new sibling.

The image that most clearly relates to Lottie's interest in fine art is entitled *Lou's Story*. A red haired woman in a white dress seems to be restrained by dark, unrecognisable figures in what appears to be the cellar of a wooden framed building. The background is all dun and shadow, throwing the central female figure into sharp relief. The pose of the kneeling woman refers to Paul Delaroche's 1833 painting, *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*, in London's National Gallery. In Delaroche's image, the obvious terror of the blindfolded, condemned aristocrat is rather dispersed by the abundance of narrative and compositional detail. Davies, however, through her use of colour, makes fear and shock the immediate emotions discernible in the image, with the background detail, and the actions of the other figures, only slowly coming into focus, and difficult to fully grasp even after repeated viewings.

*The Blue Bedroom*, whilst not deriving from any one precedent, nonetheless seems familiar through its filmic quality. The image is based on a childhood memory of parents dressing, but here Davies transforms childlike curiosity at the habits of one's parents into something perhaps more sinister and ambiguous. The colours in the picture are very tightly controlled, with the white of the bedroom walls and the sand coloured carpet providing a muted backdrop to the striking pale blue of the woman's dress, and the sea green curtains blotting out the natural light. The man's back is reflected in the circular mirror by the door - perhaps an acknowledgement of Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage* (1431). Whereas that painting was a wedding portrait, with the indication of family to come, the isolation of the man here points to an understated tension in the relations between the two adults.

Their relationship is awkward. We are not sure if the couple are getting ready to go out, or returning home; there is a tension in the woman's angular pose and the stiff, splay-footed posture of the man. Both are looking at one another whilst pretending not to look at one another; the man seems to be staring over the woman's head while looking at her, whilst she, seemingly absorbed in her make up, is stealing a glance in the mirror at the figure behind her. There is a Lynchian quality to this picture, in that, in the studied affluence of middle class domesticity, all may not be as it seems.

The polished finish of these images masks the many weeks of hard, practical work necessary to create them. On first glance, *The Frozen Lake*, based on

a memory from the period 1944-45, appears as a momentary glimpse of dramatic stasis. Two men push a child along the ice on a chair mounted on skis, framed in the foreground by the stark bare branches of trees, and in the background by a cleft in the forest behind, softened by a lowering mist. This is a composite image, resulting from two separate shoots on location; firstly, in Finland, where the photographer spent three days taking pictures of different frozen lakes on the Finno-Russian border, work which had to be crammed into the three available hours of daylight available in the Northern Finnish winter. Secondly, the figure group was shot separately at a London ice rink, in little over an hour, and then superimposed on the original image. The quality of the light at the ice-rink had to be carefully matched with the light of the original landscape. Once these initial phases were complete, painstaking work still lay ahead superimposing the figures onto the landscape, digitally.

Davies is an artist who takes great care over every aspect of the final image. Initially, she worked with a film production company to choose the location of this picture, eventually settling for a lake at Joensuu, and a picture taken in late morning with a Wista field camera. The next stage was to work with two London model agencies to source her figures, and then a theatre costume suppliers, to source outfits reflecting period skating fashions. The details of the costumes - the little girl's striped tights and pink woolly hat - derived from the photographer's own childhood memories of the adventures of Rupert the Bear, and an episode involving Rupert creating a sledge, whilst the flat caps and jerseys of the men convey a sense of the 1940s. Lottie's assistant was charged with physically making the skis and mounting the chair on them, so that it could move effectively across the ice.

It is easy to separate this practical project management from the final picture, but Davies' pragmatism in dealing with the challenges thrown at her by particular images is integral to their success. The finished image conveys the excitement of the figures as they skate to their unknown destination, contrasting with the solitude and silence of the forest in winter. There are some unintentional connections with both film and fine art; it is easy to imagine this picture being a still from Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), and it parallels Akseli Gallen-Kallela's *Aino Triptych* of 1891 (Ateneumin Taidemuseo, Helsinki).

The premise of the *Memories & Nightmares* project appears, initially, to be modishly user-driven, where correspondents provide the content that Davies then represents. It is clear, however, that the many interesting personal anecdotes and stories which make up the material for the project are a mere starting point, to be built upon imaginatively rather than literally rendered. The project is rather like passing a general plotline and character summary to a film-maker, and inviting a response. The sequence of images Lottie has produced can be read as individual melodramas or, as suggested at the beginning of this essay, taken as a dramatic whole.

Taken together, these are pictures that invite, and reward, repeated looking. Lottie intends to continue with the *Memories & Nightmares* series, and also turn her formidably developing talent to entirely new projects. There seems little doubt that we can look forward to further subtly composed, beautifully unsettling photographs that will reward careful scrutiny, in the future.

Dr. Jon Blackwood  
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## The Day My Brother Was Born

One of my earliest memories is from the day my brother was born, 14th December 1973. I am running down a corridor in a hospital, and to my right I can see a playroom with a dapple-grey rocking horse in the far corner. Usually I'd have gone straight in because the rocking horse was my dream toy, but I carried on running, thinking "I'll go back and play later". My mother remembers hearing me shout at the top of my voice as I was running; "I'm going to see my mummy!"



## Quints

Bizarre nightmare: Had so many so I'll give the one I had two nights ago... I was pregnant with quintuplets, and this was scary as I didn't want any more kids (having a 10 and 13 year old already and I am 42 so too old, and not physically strong enough either), and I had to convince my midwife (who has retired) to be with me throughout the pregnancy and birth, as she had been with my other kids. Then when the quintuplets were born I was worried about the size of vehicle we now needed, as most people carriers are for 7 and we needed room for 8. How was I going to park that in London as easily as the small car we had already?! I wasn't able to pursue my career, and my husband had to give up his music career to help care for the babies. So, would our relationship suffer? How would our 10 and 13 year old cope? Where would the finance come from? Would they have to become show babies like the French-Canadians in the 1950's (I think) who had the state looking after their septuplets), and the mother had restricted access to her babies? I then woke up, rather bemused!





## The Girl and the Tower

My most memorable nightmare is an old one. I think I was 10-11 or something. My parents were divorced, and I missed my dad a lot. I was told that I had to kill a girl, whom I didn't know, or they (someone) would kill my dad. I took a big knife and started to climb the stairs of a very high, round, old tower. It had stonewalls and it was dark and a bit wet inside. It took a long time to climb, every step was so hard. On the top was a wooden door, which I opened and went inside a room. There was a bed there and the girl was sleeping in it. I sitting or standing over her and raised the knife over my head. Just when I moved the knife towards her chest with great force, I realised that the girl was me. I couldn't stop the movement. I woke up just when the knife touched my chest. My mum came running, because I had screamed very loud... I cried for hours, because the feeling was really awful. And I can still feel it, so when I now write about it, I almost start crying again.



Sophie in Florida

My first memory is when friends of my parents gave me and Katherine nighties which said 'I Don't Want To Go To Bed' in punky 'cool' graffiti writing on the front. Mine was pale pink. This being the 80s, they were 100% polyester and the memory I have is discovering that if you rubbed the fabric against itself under the duvet, it made sparks which you could see in the dark. Another memory of this nightie I have is walking around the neighbourhood in Florida where we were on holiday on Christmas Eve in the dark, with my parents, looking at all the Christmas trees and the lights. This was a huge treat - both being outside in the dark and wearing your night-clothes!



## The Frozen Lake

About 1944/45. Being taken skating on ice, sitting in a chair on ice skates, whizzing round a frozen lake. In Simla, northern India. Hearing about a man whose face had been torn off by a bear. About same date and place. Sewing my embroidery onto a sofa arm. In Jhelum, a bit later.



What is the future?

I had recently separated from my husband and had become involved with a very possessive lover who when I ended the relationship continued to interfere with my life causing issues which affected me and by default my son (aged ten) very badly, to the point at which we were in severe financial straits.

I dreamed that my son was a baby again just beginning to crawl and he was playing round the gaping mouth of a vast fireplace which contained no fire only a sharp ugly grate covered in ash. As I watched the shadow of the ex-lover appeared in the fireplace and began slowly and gently to cascade soot over my child. My son's face became blackened and I sensed he was beginning to suffocate. The soot was so heavy on his eyes they began to close and I knew that if he couldn't open them again he would die. I knew that if I rubbed the soot away it would enter his eyes and damage them further and so I began frantically but gently to blow the soot away. The fear and distress I felt was overpowering and when I recall the dream I experience a sensation of grey shadowy bleakness which drains me...





## The Red Devil

I'll borrow Scarlett's red devil. She said she could see it in the corner of the room, it was scary but never harmed her. The Indian dreamcatcher nets were essential for safe sleeping.



## Lou's Story

My friend Dani and I were staying in a little guest-house in Portugal, run by a very sweet old woman.

As I fell asleep it felt like I was falling from sitting up to lying down, and my left shoulder was sliding down a wall. It was a very strong sensation. I thought, 'oh, I must have fallen out of bed somehow and turned myself completely around, and I'm stuck in the gap between the bed and the wall'. Then I felt as if my arms were over my head and I was being dragged along the floor to the door. At that point I kind of became aware that I could see. The whole room was covered in people, the floor was covered like a carpet with bodies lying face down - people, and they were perched on the furniture as well, very still as if they were waiting. I couldn't see any of their faces, and I really noticed that there was lots of very white flesh; it was as if they were all naked. I think they were both sexes but they had quite slim asexual bodies and you couldn't really tell. They all had long dark hair, kind of unkempt, but not dirty; one was perched on the end of the bed facing the pillow end, with his knees up and his head hanging forward so the hair hung over his face. They were very still and eerie.

I was still feeling the sensation of being dragged and tried to move my hands over my head - my fists were clenched - and as I did, my wrists passed through each other and I realised with relief that I must be dreaming. That somehow made me more desperate though and I struggled harder but couldn't seem to break free or wake up. I was really frightened and calling for Dani at this point, shouting really loudly trying to wake myself up. I asked them 'where's Dani?' - by now I had been dragged beyond the end of the bed nearer the door. A couple of them lifted up a bloodied white bed sheet that was hanging over the end of the bed. It was all dark and bloody underneath it, under the bed, I couldn't see what was there, and they said 'she's under here' and at that point I just started screaming.

It was about 4am in the morning and I have never been that frightened before by a dream. I was far too frightened to go back to sleep and just sat up in bed watching the dawn through the window until it was light.



## Viola As Twins

It's a very sunny, positive atmosphere. Viola (my three year old) runs up to me with her arms open wide, calling "mummy, mummy", a big smile across her face. As she gets closer another Viola coming from behind her does exactly the same thing. The whole atmosphere shifts, turning the dream into a nightmare. I'm left speechless, wondering who the second girl is and, by the same token, if the first one is really my little girl at all.

Another, very brief dream; Viola's there again, happy and smiling. She's blonde with blue eyes (in real life and in the dream). Then suddenly another little girl appears. In the dream I know her to be Viola too, but this second girl is dark, with green eyes, also very pretty. They both behave like I'm their mummy but don't seem to notice one another. I feel like something's wrong, then I realize I can't remember having had twins. I don't know who my daughter is.



## The Blue Bedroom

I remember my bedroom when I was about - who knows, 3 or 4 - and early in the morning when it was still half light I could see my dad getting his ties out of the closet in the hall. I would watch him in silence through the crack in the door as he got ready for work.





## The River

England is still pagan, but the priests and their armies are arriving from overseas to forcibly convert the population to Christianity. I'm a priestess and, whereas everyone else submits to conversion to protect themselves - while secretly holding to the old beliefs - I can't. The priests crucify me.

Later in the dream, I'm being taken in a boat by the chief priest down a river, sleepy, medium flowing, smooth water, with overhanging trees. It's not raining or sunny, a greyish day. My daughter is with me - she's about 9. (It's the first time I ever have a child in a dream). The priest, now away from public gaze, is groping me and I submit (the narratorial sense of the dream enjoys the irony of the celibate, church militant, man of god groping a woman as soon as he gets a chance).

Before I was killed, my daughter was left with her secret, real, non-Christian name which she mustn't use any more but mustn't forget. As she floats down the river near the bank, trailing her hand in the water, she reaches up under an overhanging bit of vegetation. There's an old brick wall or stony bank and she finds the hidden carving of her mother crucified - she looks at it, tracing the marking with her hand - it's one of our religion's secret places. People have submitted to Christianity, but won't forget their true beliefs. I die in this dream and later I'm both alive and have already died.



## The Man Who Ran Away

“I was a girl of seven in 1957, living with my Mum, a single parent, on a new council estate that had been built on farmland on the outskirts of Bristol. Mum had to leave for work in the factory early in the morning and she didn't get back until the early evening. I was used to amusing myself by drawing, painting, making dolls' clothes/models etc. before school. After school I often played alone or with a friend in the fields.

It was late afternoon at the end of summer and I was playing with another small girl in a meadow a fair distance from the edge of the estate. The seeded grass was long and rather dry. A path which bordered the field to my left led into dense woodland straight ahead. A line of tall trees, at regular intervals, separated the field I was in from the next, running all along the side of the path and merging with the wood. The trees might have been poplars. The low sun was GOLDEN - streaming through the trees, casting long shadows over the path and the field.

A man came along, pushing a bicycle. He was an ordinary man of ordinary build, wearing a dun grey gabardine raincoat, belted at the waist. His trousers were caught in by bicycle clips. His hair was swept back in that late 40's style - short back and sides. (not a quiff - nothing so stylish) I remember nothing of his face - he stood still with hands on the handle bars, looking across the field at us. He was lit from behind by the sun, but his form was in shadow and the light was in my eyes. We were close enough to see that the man beckoned to us.

My little friend said 'he wants us to go over and speak to him' - I replied with the classic line that had been drummed into me - ' My Mum says I must never speak to strange men' - then I turned and ran all the way home.

That's all, except that in a strange way, this memory has combined in my imagination with the image I have of my 'missing' father (- 'the man who ran away' according to my mother). I'd seen a couple of black and white snapshots of him and over time I've gradually merged these images into the memory of the 'mystery man' with the bicycle. The encounter has managed to remain, at the same time, a visually very beautiful memory, yet is also remembered as mysterious and rather sinister. I'm left with the memory of this shadowy male who has become the archetype of a father figure.”

