

Above the Treetops Transcript

Pola: When I heard the word Dark Forest, honestly what really came into my mind was ice cream. The Black Forest flavoured ice cream. It's funny but then, reflecting on those two words, I realized, yeah it kinda makes sense relating it to the ice cream, because if I would contrast my life into an ice cream flavour, Black Forest would do justice in it. It's just how a Dark Forest is. My life has had its rays of sunshine and shadows of darkness. Sometimes I feel like it's eating me whole. The most recent moment where I felt that my life is a Dark Forest, is.... it's...it's actually everyday, it's between 2:00 to 4:00 am in the morning, because it's when everything comes to me. The feeling of not being good enough, the people I've lost, the people I've been chasing, and I don't know the people that comes and go. It's when everything comes to me, especially my father's passing, my grandmother, and my childhood best friends, they all passed away consecutively. 2017 almost ate me alive. With those three people that I consecutively lost, I came to the point of cursing the universe, how cruel the universe was toward me, but then, my people saved me. I was drowning, but they saved me. And there I realized, life would not always come with rays of sunshine, or always full of rainbows. There will be darkness, and that's when hope is needed most. Keeping the hopes alive, that everything will be okay.

Athena: The Dark Forest is a term that we came across in Jessica Abel's *Out on the Wire*. It refers to the experience of anxiety, uncertainty, and feeling overwhelmed, when going through the creative process. You feel as if you are the only one in this struggle- and perhaps you are. Shadows seem longer, and darkness looms. As life is a process of self-creation, this feeling can be experienced in day-to-day life. It also occurs when one is attempting to create something more concrete, such as art or literature.

Athena: In one way or another, we all experience the Dark Forest. Our next interviewee, depicts her Dark Forest as the experience of an unintentional romantic view of her reality; being overly optimistic and always seeing the best in people. She had to come to terms with the fact that her view of reality didn't quite match up with how the world is.

Ari: My Dark Forest was probably... I use to romanticize a lot of things, back in, high school. It didn't occur to me, that, that was what I was doing. I would see so much in other people and like, the world, it was like, this enhanced excessive sense of infatuation, if I met someone, I would just assume the best about them, and in a sense, it kind of provoked more feelings towards people? Like empathy? Like, enhanced empathy. And I guess, to be a writer, you need to have that sense of infatuation.

Ari: It all started with this boy I liked, for like, the longest time. It was easy, to do that. It like made me realize how hyper infatuated I get, towards things and people, and that I kind of, like, after this whole disillusionment... where my dad got diagnosed... where its like, oh. Reality hits

me. I'm not in this fantasy dreamscape world, in my head, always in my head, like, I was constantly, constantly, in my head, and everything, and everyone, like I always assumed the best of people. Even if it was like, somebody I hadn't talk to in the longest while. I used to be in my head thinking about that, thinking about how much I miss them, or like how much they meant to me, even though they don't know that. God, they don't know how much I love them, they don't know that I care about them this much. I just so mushy and soft back then. I think it was a defensive mechanism in a sense because, I kind of guarded myself with excess amounts of affection, excess amount of love, like, benefit of the doubt towards other people. Even though like, it was rather clear that this person disliked me.

Ari: I guess it's like, I haven't changed, too too much? It's just that, I'm more realistic about things, I'm more prudent, I'm less careless about who I let in, and how they assume, they think of me as. We all have different forms of escapism, and I think that's what it was for me, was seeing things through rose coloured glasses.

Athena: Ari found that her over romanticized view of the world was her Dark Forest. This view hindered her, rather than helped her, and upon realizing this, she escaped, with the boon of a clearer perception of herself.

Athena: The Dark Forest can also be experienced when people are trying to make life decisions. The next interviewee describes her Dark Forest experience when she was trying to decide on a career path.

Katelyn: I was very involved in the theatre sphere when I entered High School, not only did I take drama classes, I joined youth theatre, took part in different productions, and competed in theatre festivals. I decided to pursue film acting over theatre acting. I looked into film schools and ultimately decided to go to Vancouver Film School or VFS. I talked to my advisor at VFS and although he said my chances were low, I didn't want to back down. So I spent the next three months preparing my audition and interview with my best friend Sophie who I had done everything relating to acting with. Almost all of my performances and productions were done with her and we were going to go to film school together. Two weeks after we finished filling out the application processes and submitted our auditions, I received a call from my advisor telling me that I was accepted into the full year program. The first question that came out of my mouth was, "Did Sophie get a call?" Turns out she was called right after I hung up and then we celebrated and started planning our move out to Vancouver. Next step we signed the contract and sent in the deposit. But as much I thought I wanted this, as soon as I sent in that contract, I started having doubts. I started wondering if I really wanted this and Sophie had told me no matter how successful she was in her career, as long as she was acting, she was happy. I didn't know if I felt the same way. I had always been an ambitious person and although I knew that I was good in high school, the real world has stronger competition and less odds. Success in film

especially over theatre was more dependant on luck than it was on talent and I knew if I wasn't the lucky ones and I wasn't successful, I wasn't going to be happy. I was torn between doing what I love or having a secure future. I knew I was smart and if I chose to go to university for a bachelor's degree I would have a very successful career. But it wouldn't be in film and it wouldn't be in acting. I made VFS to hold my spot for 5 months before my self doubt won over. I asked them to defer my acceptance for a year and I applied for what I thought would be just one year at the university of Calgary to think things over. I got into the business program pretty easily and so I went off to university while my best friend moved out to Vancouver to pursue our dream without me. I'm happy with where I am which is why I never contacted VFS and went back there but it was definitely hard to watch Sophie go through the program that we were suppose to do together. I still sometimes think about what would happen if I had moved out there and done what I was planning to do for so long but I don't think I would call that regret.

Athena: We also see the Dark Forest in the creative process. Our next interviewee became lost in the thick brush of the Dark Forest while directing a high school play.

Rio: I tend to think my entire, post-secondary experience has been like the Dark Forest. So I guess I'll, kinda, back-pedal a little bit and go into high school. Just cause that's when I really started to feel it. I don't know. You know how kids are, like they feel invincible and like well nothing can stop me especially when I had so much like, creative energy around me, up to a certain point.

Rio: So in my final year of high school, I volunteered to direct this play because the credits would go towards my french class and my theatre class and it was a win-win for everyone cause the french teacher wanted to do a play and somebody needed to do one for their project, so I volunteered.

Rio: I guess I realized I took on a little too much and this was maybe 2 months into the process. That's when I really started to experience self- doubt and feelings of inadequacy. Cause I was like, Oh my God, I don't even, like, at this point French is something I've forgotten quite a bit, so the language barrier here, which was kind of downplayed but at the same time it made me feel like I didn't have what it took to really do this, like to direct this play. For then on, that's when I kind of, kind of started feeling very disenchanted from the experience, like I didn't want to do it anymore. But there were so many people involved and I had taken up their time, like so much of their time at that point, I think that's really what made me keep going.

Rio: The only memory I have of the day-to-day coping, I guess was, making props, so like using my hands. I have this, the most vivid memory I have actually, is skipping class not even theatre class, skipping English class, going to our school library and kinda just, winding wire around itself a bunch of times to make a tiara for a completely different play that wasn't a part of my

biggest, of this play. It was just, something else and that's how I, I guess I coped. I just had to distance myself from it and do something physically because all this mental confusion was just something I didn't know how to get away from.

Rio: Like it, it still kind of burns a hole, in me. Cause, even now when I take, when I take part in creative ventures even if it doesn't evolve an audience, even if it's just for my personal gain, like if I wanna paint a picture to hang on my own wall that nobody's ever gonna see. Even then, I still feel, a sense of hesitation that I didn't have before. And, just to, oh God, to back-pedal a lot, like, from the moment that I realized, "Oh I took on too much, from this project", it was also because my teacher was the one to say, "Hey you took on too much". Even now I'm still, I guess, kind of looking for a mentor figure, like an authority figure to be like, "Okay hey are you sure you can handle this?". And it's very self-handicapping cause usually I'm the one to tell myself, "Hey, make sure this is something you can finish". And there is a lot of pressure on me, even now 5 years later, to make sure I take things that I can handle. But it's a self-handicapping thing cause I don't challenge myself as much creatively and that's something I've noticed a lot of. So yeah, there is a lot of residual self-doubt and even personal ones that don't require an audience. So it's kind of taxing because I feel like I'm bottling things up again.

Rio: My self-doubt only gets worse as I'm compared to others but at the same time, I really need other people or another person to be responsible for or that's affected by the consequences or that will share the consequences with me if I don't get a project done. That way, that sense of obligation is kind of what tows me along and like tows me through that Dark Forest.

Rio: Am I still in this Dark Forest? Creatively I think I'm heading out of it because I'm taking on more things, I have more hobbies and I'm not as nervous about it. So I think i'm on my way out but there's still that little niggling voice in the back of my head and it's not anyone in particular it's just like a, "make sure you're going to finish this because it's gonna feel bad if you don't."

Athena: We can see that in most Dark Forest experiences, there is an escape. The "hero" descends into the forest, struggles, gets lost, but inevitably escapes with the boon of accomplishment. Our next interviewee finds himself lost in the Forest while writing his first novel.

Devon: Hi my name is Devon, I'm currently, going through the final editing process on a book called "King of Brazil" that I've been working on for the last three years, I guess, and, pretty much since I've started that book I've also been running a website called readintoit.com where I write reviews.

Devon: So basically, I think most people, if you've ever been in an creative endeavour, when you first start you're just fucking supercharged, for some reason, it's like, oh yeah, this is my purpose, this is my everything, I need to get this out on the page. For me luckily, that burn, that, didn't burn out for about a year. So for a full year, I was just none stop just hammering out pages, and it felt great cause, I wrote in university, but after I finished university I gave, I just stopped. I don't know why, it just kind of, it died off.

Devon: Then basically after about a year come around to the next period, uh, I had all this, all these chapters. No real uh, rhyme or reason to them, no real sense to them, and I had these themes and epic ideas that I really wanted to get onto the page and that point it just didn't feel like they were translating. I was glad that I was getting the work in, that I was, you know, uh, crunching the hours, but I just wasn't actually getting, uh, getting uhm, what I had in my head onto the paper, which was - and it was fucking frustrating.

Devon: And I just started to get into a slump, and I was writing, but then I'd rewrite, and rewrite, and rewrite, and I think that was the only way I could get through it, and I don't know if that was the best way or not. But, it's how I managed to get through it, was just, I just kept rewriting these chapters, and then I would look at the 6 different versions that I had, and I would highlight the things that I liked and then I would try to in a discombobulated way, try to bring them together, which it kind of turned into this fucking terrible flesh golem frankenstein uh, formula, and it didn't really work but then I would go, okay, I gotta kill my babies, I gotta, you know, kill my darlings, and and, the things that I did like maybe I can take those, set them aside, save them for later and just find the root core, of these chapters and start bringing them together.

Devon: So, and I would say that that second year was, was, basically yeah, was like a Dark Forest, uhm. It wasn't until the third year that it started to come together. You know, I had no idea what to do with all this writing, and I was trying to put it together and then in some cases I would, go down this whole, like avenue thinking that it was the right way to do it, and then, I would just throw it all out, and go with the original one that I had done like a year ago.

Devon: Yeah, it's frustrating when that happens but you're making progress in keeping that in mind, I think is the most important thing, pro- like, I wasn't expecting the Dark Forest if that makes sense, but I found my way through it, every creator goes through it, so, it's good. This third year has been, has been, good. I've just been putting in the work and moving forward with it. Emotionally the Dark Forest just fucking sucks, cause you just think you're the worst.

Devon: That nothing you do is worthwhile, and I was very lucky to just have the idea to go "I have no idea whether if any of this shit is good, why don't I just find out?", and I got some friends together. And we brought together our, our creative writing projects and we worked on them. And that, did help me through it, having a second voice that goes "Oh that's what you're

trying to do, well it didn't come through here (laughs), you need to work on that" or "Oh, that did come through" and kind of that, that uhm, you know metaphorical pat on the back.

Devon: It's just one foot in front of the other essentially, just keep going through your, your moving forward even if it doesn't feel like it, so, like for now, anyhow, I found my voice, I think voice no matter what they grow and change, so I think that's an absolute reflection in life. You're you, you are in your life finding your voice, for a lack of a better word, in whatever endeavour you decide to go into so, you kind of find your high ground again.

Devon: It's almost like when you go into the Dark Forest, you're kind of like going through that little valley, and you start, it's a tough uphill climb, but then you kind of find your eyeline about the trees, and you go "Okay I got through there, that fucking sucked" and you're at the top of the hill, and normally, I dunno for me, and it's not like an immediate like, "Okay, it was good, and then it's bad, and then it's good." I feel like the Dark Forest is kind of, like, there's even times in the second year were I would rise above it, and then dip back down into and, an it's a diving bell butterfly feeling.

Devon: And, you kind of get more use to it as you go, that, that idea you rise up above the hill, and you see the Dark Forest behind you, and normally, for me, I see a Dark Forest ahead of me too, and so, I sucked it up, and, uhm I started marching back down into the Dark Forest essentially. Near the end of the creative process, just keep going, don't stop, don't get, don't rest on your laurels, because there's this idea of like, Odysseus right when he was just about to get home, he's got that big bag of hot air and he just opens it up, and gets fucking pushed all the way back to where he started. Yeah so don't, don't be a fucking bag of hot air, just keep, keep working don't pat yourself on the back.

Athena: When entangled in the darkness of the Forest, often, one feels like they are lost. But, lost in this darkness, one can find something of great importance: hope. Hope of escape. Upon escape, that hope can be brought forward with you, into the world. The Dark Forest can be a powerful tool when applied correctly. As stated in Jessica Abel's book, "It's the place you have to go to hear the next version of yourself." This is the place where you find yourself and grow as an individual. And once you find yourself, you'll see the light above the treetops.