

# Mrs. Tar, Sleepwalking, and Talking

by [Jerry Olivas](#) (January 2024)



Berthe Morisot Wearing a Veil— Edouard Manet, 1872

**It was late and, as usual, my brother and I were lying in our**

beds talking. As we were chatting my brother said to me; quiet! "I hear someone in the hall!" I also heard the squeaking sound of the wood under the hall's thin carpet and someone talking in a very low voice. We cracked open the door and could see the back of Mrs. Tar slowly walking down the hall. It was too late for her to be strolling around and her room was in a different direction from where she was headed. She was definitely sleepwalking.

Mrs. Tar was a retired widow who lived in my grandparents' hotel. We knew that she sleepwalked, and that she talked when she walked, but we never knew where she went or what she said. Jack, the handyman of the hotel, who knew everything, and could do everything, told us that if we ever saw Mrs. Tar sleepwalking to leave her alone because eventually, he said, she would always return to her room.

When we were young boys, my brother and I shared a room in my grandparents' converted third floor hotel apartment. It was the last room of four rooms from an end corner room that overlooked a busy street and alley. All the rooms had been connected to each other with inside doors, but still all had their individual doors to the hotel hall. My grandparents owned and managed the hotel that was built in the late 1920s, located in a small town in the San Joaquin Valley of California.

We often visited my grandparents when we were on school breaks, which included most summers. We loved staying with them because, for us, the hotel was a great big fun house with all kinds of places to explore. And because my grandparents owned and managed it, we could do just about anything we wanted.

My brother and I were constantly up to one shenanigan or another, usually harmless and safe, but not always. We loved the roof, which we got to by way of the exterior fire-escapes from the second or third floors. The basement, although dark

and scary, was a lot of fun because you could work your way all along from store basement to basement for the entire block the hotel was in. After a good deal of riding in and watching, we learned how to ride on the top of the elevator. The problem with that was that you could only get on and off when it was on the top floor. Once my brother mistakenly, I think mistakenly, left me on the second floor. It was kind of strange when I had to ask a guest through the ceiling vent to please take the elevator to the third floor. I think my brother and I may have been responsible for many guests only staying one night and never returning to the hotel.

We were just too curious about what Mrs. Tar was up to when she sleepwalked. We had no idea what sleepwalking was all about. We couldn't figure out why she didn't fall because if she was asleep how could she see where she was going? This was the type of challenge we liked, a little daring with a touch of suspense.

We liked Mrs. Tar a lot, and often ran errands for her, like buying cigarettes from the local Rexall drug store and bringing ice to her room. She was a good tipper. But she was always very quiet, mostly simply nodding, and occasionally saying thank you. Her daily routine was always the same; up about midmorning, walk down the street to a local restaurant for breakfast, back to the hotel to sit in the hotel lobby, always in the same highbacked winged chair. She didn't read and didn't talk at all with other guests, just sat in her chair smoking one cigarette after another.

At about 5:00 pm, Mrs. Tar would head back out for dinner at the same place as breakfast. If Mrs. Tar wasn't eating breakfast, sitting in the lobby smoking, or eating dinner, she would be in her room, often looking out her window onto the main street of the town. Sometimes when I was walking along that street, I would see her staring out the window. I am sure she would see me smoking, probably one of her borrowed L&M cigarettes.

The time finally came when we decided that we would figure out where she was going when she sleepwalked. The idea we had was when we heard her walk by our room, we would quickly jump out of bed and follow her. I volunteered as the person to follow her while my brother would stay at the room door ready to open it if I had to make a quick dash back. She couldn't go too far in the hall which had a long main hall section with two right angle shorter sections at each end. Our room was off the longer section near one of the ends before it turned on to one of the shorter sections.

About a week later we had gone to bed as usual, finished our talk, and the next thing I remember is my brother lightly shaking me and whispering, "it's her". We quickly, and cautiously, peaked out the door, and sure enough we could see, and hear, Mrs. Tar. She was a little way down the hall near the corner of one of the hall's shorter sections where she turned. I quickly ran down the hall and looked around the corner where I saw her continuing to walk. She could not go too far because the hall would end.

She walked all the way to the end, turned around, without stopping, and slowly started back. It was then that I noticed something odd, she was not using her cane, and she was not wearing her black veiled hat. I don't think my brother and I had ever seen Mrs. Tar without her cane or veiled hat. We knew what her face looked like because we had seen her eating breakfast and dinner. But the veil was always down otherwise, even when she smoked. It was one of those dark net veils that covered most of her face.

When I saw her turn around, I rushed back into our room. We listened through the door as she passed our room mumbling away. My brother wanted to know what I saw and heard. When I told him not much, just the same as what we see and hear when she passes by our room. I did tell him that I think her eyes were open, which got us both wondering how someone could be asleep with their eyes open.

We heard her several times walking and talking in the hall over the next couple of weeks and just tried to ignore it, but we couldn't. We needed to figure out what was going on; how could she walk around asleep, without her cane, not wearing her veiled hat, and what was she saying? Time for another observation, but this time we decided we would slowly walk by Mrs. Tar and say something to her like, "how are you?" or "can I get you anything?". I told my brother it was his turn to follow Mrs. Tar, but he said I knew her better than he did so it would be better if I spoke to her. Even at my early age I could see my brother was going to be good at sales.

A couple of nights later we heard her again walking and talking. We hopped out of bed, and this time we quickly slipped into our street clothes. She was following her same route down the longer section of the hall then turning on to one of the shorter sections. My brother gave me a pat on the back and said, "good luck." I was not sure why he said that. Why did I need to have good luck? Did he think something dangerous might happen?

After she turned down the shorter section of the hall, I rushed over to the corner near one of the fire-escapes and stood there waiting for her to come back. I had a flashlight in my hand and a skeleton room key, with its large key tag, so it would look like I was doing a fire check, which the night clerks did several times.

As she approached me on her return from the end of the hall, I could see her face and hair because she did not have her veiled hat on. I had never seen her entire face or much of her hair. Although the hall was very dimly lit, I could see her face was kind of a chalk white and her hair was white too. Her eyes were wide open staring straight ahead and she had no facial expression, but her lips were moving because she was mumbling something. As she got closer, I just blurted out "can I get something for you Mrs. Tar?" There was no acknowledgement or response. She just kept walking and saying

something. I then followed her to her room, which must have been unlocked, because she just turned the knob and went in, closing the door behind her.

I hurried to tell my brother what had happened. He had been peeking out our room door and listening, so I think he knew what had occurred. I told him she just kept slowly walking and it seemed like she didn't even know I spoke to her or that I was even standing there.

Over the next few days, we saw Mrs. Tar up to her normal daily routine; breakfast, sitting in her chair in the lobby and smoking, then dinner, then off to her room for the night. I suggested we go to Jack, the hotel handyman. But my brother said that if we do that, he will for sure know that we are up to something which might make him mad at us, and if Jack got upset with us, he would then not let us help him with various hotel chores. Jack not only knew how to do everything around the hotel, but he was also a pro at dealing with guests. For example, he taught us how to maximize tips when helping a guest with their luggage and showing them to their room. Providing guests with helpful information of where to eat, drink, and with some selective guest, where to meet people, as well as offering to have the guest's shoes shined and clothes cleaned and pressed always increased the gratuity.

Mrs. Tar's sleepwalking and talking began to totally consume us. How can someone walk around asleep, with their eyes open, and continuously talk? We thought maybe it was a trick Mrs. Tar was playing on us, but that would seem odd because that did not seem to be her nature. She always kept to herself and seemed content with that.

I suggested that we put up some sort of barrier in the hall to stop her and see what would happen. But my brother had the idea of lightly bumping into her when she walked by. I told him he should be the one to do the bumping. But I got the same kind of persuasive sales response as before; "Mrs. Tar likes

you better than me.”

It would be the same drill as before except that when we hear her next time, I would sneak down the hall after she turned onto the side section and stand there right around the corner. When she passed by me I would ‘accidentally’ gently bump into her and say, “excuse me, Mrs. Tar.”

Somehow or another we had the notion that we may be saving Mrs. Tar from some sort of awful injury or worse. Actually, I believe my brother had commented, more than once, I’m sure, that we had a responsibility for the welfare of the guests at my grandparents’ hotel.

Once again, we heard the hall floor squeaking and a low mumbling voice in the hall. We jumped out of bed and peaked down the hall just as Mrs. Tar was turning to go down the side section. As we watched her, we noticed something different, she had her cane and veiled hat on. I quickly ran down the hall to the corner to wait for her to come back by, but when I glanced down the side hall, I didn’t see her.

There were a couple of feeder small halls off the side hall that went to the outside fire-escapes, so I thought she must have turned down one of those. I quickly checked but she was not in either fire escape hall and I knew it would be just about impossible for her to go down the outside fire-escapes. For one thing, my brother and I never got the drop-down ladder to the alley or street to work properly. The ladders would go about halfway and you either had to jump the rest of the way or climb back up. Using the outside fire-escape stationary metal ladder to go up to the roof was pretty easy, but it was doubtful that Mrs. Tar was going to do that.

I hurried back to tell my brother that Mrs. Tar had disappeared. He told me to look again and that maybe she went into one of the hotel rooms. I took another look and didn’t see her and was pretty sure that all the rooms in that shorter



hall section were occupied by overnight guests.

Where was she? Then we both remembered there was always an unlocked door to stairs that was inside the building fire-exit that went to the back entrance of the hotel that then led to an alley. But how could Mrs. Tar get down the stairs? She wasn't very agile, and she did use a cane to walk. Although we had seen her without a cane when she was sleepwalking.

Then we deduced that she must have gone down the back stairs and must be headed outside, that's why she had her cane and veiled hat on.

Quietly, because we didn't want to wake up my grandparents in the next room, and quickly we put our clothes on over our pajamas and went looking for her. As we exited the hotel through the back entrance, we needed to be careful not to let the night clerk see or hear us because he would definitely call our grandparents.

There was no sign of her on the back fire-exit stairs or in the back entrance way to the alley. When we got outside the door to the alley, we looked both ways but saw no sign of Mrs. Tar. Next, we went out to the sidewalk and street but, again, no Mrs. Tar.

It had been about 10 minutes since we saw her in the third-floor hall so we couldn't be too far behind her. My brother suggested we split up, with me searching the alley more thoroughly and he would take the sidewalk. Although he was older and bigger than me, once again I got the dicey assignment. He said something like, "you know the alley better than me". Anyway, the plan was to kind of circle the block by way of the alley and sidewalk and meet on the corner which was at the opposite corner from the hotel.

I ran through the dark alley and got to the corner before my brother. As far as the sidewalk and street went there were plenty of streetlights and many of the bars stayed open all

night.

Mostly Mrs. Tar sleepwalked around 12:00 midnight but this time it was about 4:00 AM. I could see my brother walking towards me with his arms raised as if to say, I don't know where she is. When he reached me, we talked for a while trying to figure out why she would go outside and where she could have gone.

We knew where Jack lived and talked about maybe going over to his house and waking him up because he might have some ideas about where Mrs. Tar might sleepwalk. But if we did that it would surely put us in a bad place with Jack. Just the previous day he let us help him with some wallpapering, which we messed up pretty badly, but it was a lot of fun. I recall that folding the sheets of wallpaper after we had wiped it with wet glue was a bit of a challenge as was correctly lining up the floral designs of the wallpaper when putting it on the wall. Also, somehow or another we managed to get glue all over the place including on the bottom of our shoes which meant we left footprints all over the hotel including on the lobby tile. I have to admit a couple of times I intentionally put glue on the bottom of my brother's shoes when he was kneeling down. It was pretty funny when the tarp we were standing on to protect the carpet was sticking to his shoes when he tried to walk.

Maybe she just went out the back entrance of the hotel, into the alley, then walked out to the street where the main entrance to the hotel was and went back up to her room. We started back down the sidewalk towards the hotel where we would check to see if she was in her room, or perhaps sitting in the lobby.

As we headed back onto the sidewalk, we passed by the restaurant where Mrs. Tar ate breakfast and dinner. It had a small entrance way that was a V-shaped walkway in from the sidewalk. As we hurried by, we both glanced in the little

entrance way and there she was, standing there looking through the glass door with her back to the sidewalk. We could hear her talking too. It scared the heck out of us. We both took off running down the sidewalk, turned into the alley, went through the back entrance to the hotel, up the back stairs, and right to our room.

Why was Mrs. Tar at the restaurant so early and why did she use the hotel's back fire-exit stairs, especially because she walked with a cane, which would have been rather difficult to get down the stairs. My brother said that she probably didn't go down the back fire-exit stairs but that I didn't see her at the end of the dimly lit hall. She must have walked right by our room and used the elevator, but in our rushing around to get dressed we did not hear her.

But why was she so early at the restaurant? It didn't open till 7:00 AM. Maybe she was hungry and just wanted to get to the restaurant early. We figured that if she could walk and talk when she was asleep, she most likely could eat, drink, and smoke too.

We never found out about eating, drinking, and smoking while Mrs. Tar was asleep, but we did hear her walking and mumbling by our room many more times. My brother would always chuckle a little and say, "she is probably hungry." That got me thinking we should put a chair and table in the hall with a little treat and ashtray for Mrs. Tar. We did have a responsibility for the welfare of the guests at the hotel.

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**Jerry Olivas** writes creative non-fiction stories and travel articles that focus on "do-it-yourself" adventures worldwide. Some of his work can be found online at [Short Édition](#) and

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