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Opening extract from
My Name is Mina

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**MOONLIGHT,
WONDER, FLIES
& NONSENSE**

My name is Mina and I love the night. Anything seems possible at night when the rest of the world has gone to sleep. It's dark and silent in the house, but if I listen close, I hear the beat beat beat of my heart. I hear the creak and crack of the house. I hear my mum breathing gently in her sleep in the room next door.

I slip out of bed and sit at the table by the window. I tug the curtain open. There's a full moon in the middle of the sky. It bathes the world in its silvery light. It shines on Falconer Road and on the houses and the streets beyond, and on the city roofs and spires and on the distant mountains and moors. It shines into ase room and on to me.

Some say that you should turn your face from the light of the moon. They say it makes you mad.

I turn my face towards it and I laugh.

Make me mad, I whisper. Go on, make Mina mad.

I laugh again.

Some people think that she's already mad, I think.

I look into the night. I see owls and bats that fly and flicker across the moon. Somewhere out there, whisper the cat is slipping through the shadows. I close my eyes and it's like those creatures are moving inside me, almost like I'm a kind of weird creature myself, a girl whose name is Mina but more than just a girl whose name is Mina.

There's an empty notebook lying on the table in the moonlight. It's been there for an age. I keep on saying that I'll write a journal. So I'll start right here, right now. I open the book and write the very first words:

**MY NAME IS MINA
AND I LOVE THE NIGHT.**

Then what shall I write? I can't just write that this happened then this happened then this happened to boring infinitum. I'll let my journal grow just like the mind does, just like a tree or a beast does, just like life does. Why should a book tell a tale in a dull straight line?

Words should wander and meander. They should fly like owls and flicker like bats and slip like cats. They should murmur and scream and dance and sing.

Sometimes there should be no words at all.

Just silence.

Just clean white space.

Some pages will be like a sky with a single bird in it. Some will be like a sky with a swirling swarm of starlings in it. My sentences will be a clutch, a collection, a pattern, a swarm, a shoal, a mosaic. They will be a circus, a menagerie, a tree, a nest. Because my mind is not in order. My mind is not straight lines. My mind is a clutter and a mess. It is my mind, but it is also very like other minds. And like all minds, like every mind that there

has ever been and every mind that there ever will ever, it is a place of wonder.

!THE MIND IS A PLACE OF WONDER!
THE MIND IS
!THE MIND IS A PLACE OF WONDER!
A PLACE OF
!THE MIND IS A PLACE OF WONDER!
WONDER
!THE MIND IS A PLACE OF WONDER!

When I was at school - at St Bede's Middle - I was told by my teacher Mrs Scullery that I should not write *anything* until I had planned what I would write. What nonsense!

Do I plan a sentence before I speak it?

OF COURSE I DO NOT!

Does a bird plan its song before it sings?

OF COURSE IT DOES NOT!

It opens its beak and It
SINGS so I will SING!

I did want to be what they called a good girl, so I did try. There was one fine morning when the sun was shining through the classroom window. There was a cloud of flies shimmering and dancing in the air outside. I heard Mrs Scullery telling us that she wanted us to write a story. Of course we'd need to write a plan first, she said.

She asked us whether we understood.

We told her that we did.

So I stopped staring at the flies (which I had been enjoying very much!), and I wrote my plan. My story would have such and such a title, and would begin in such and such a way, then such and such would happen in the middle, then such and such would be the outcome at the end.

I wrote it all down very neatly.

I showed my plan to Mrs Scullery, and she was very pleased. She even smiled at me and said, "Well done, Mina. That is very good, dear. Now you may write the story."

But of course when I started to write, the story wouldn't keep still, wouldn't obey. The words danced like flies. They flew off in strange and beautiful directions and took my story on a very unexpected course. I was very pleased with it, but when I showed it to Mrs Scullery, she held the plan just got cross. She in one hand and the story in the other.

"They do not match!" she said in her screechy voice.

"I don't know what you mean, Miss," I said.

She leaned down towards me.

"The story," she said, in a slow stupid voice like she was talking to somebody slow and stupid, "does not fit the plan!"

"But it didn't want to, Miss," I answered.

"Didn't want to? What on earth do you mean, it didn't want to."

"I mean it wanted to do other things, Miss."

She put her hands on her hips and shook her head. "It is a story," she said. "It is your story. It will do what you tell it to."

"But it won't," I said. She kept on glaring at me.

"And Miss," I said, like I was pleading with her to understand. "I don't want it to, Miss."

I should have saved my breath. She flung the papers on to my table.

"This is typical of you," she said. "Absolutely typical!"

And she turned to a girl called Samantha and asked her to read her tale, which was something about a girl with curly hair and her cuddly cat, a perfectly-planned idiotic thing in which nothing interesting happened at all! And of course all the other kids were giggling through it all, and it led to one of the nicknames I had back then. Typical. Absolutely Typical McKee.

Huh! Huh! Typical!

My stories were like me. They couldn't be controlled and they couldn't fit in. Trying to be a good girl sometimes made me very sad. The end of it all was

the day I became nonsensical. Fantastically nonsensical. I'll tell the story of that day when the time seems right, when the words seem right. And I suppose I'll tell the other tales that matter, like the tale of my day at Corinthian Avenue and my vision, or the story of my journey to the underworld in Heaton Park, or the story of my grandfather's house and the owls. And I'll put in poems and scribblings and nonsense. Sometimes writing nonsense can make a lot of sense! That sounds nonsensical itself, of course, but it isn't. **NON-SENS-I-CAL!**

WHAT A GREAT WORD! WOW!

NONSENSICAL!

Now I've started, it's lovely to see the empty pages that stretch before me. Writing will be like a journey, every word a footstep that takes me further into an undiscovered land.

Look at the way the words move across the page and fill the empty spaces. Did God feel like this when he started to fill the emptiness? Is there a God? Was there ever emptiness? I don't know, but it doesn't stop me wondering and wondering.*

*Wandering and wondering are almost the same word. And wandering through space is very like wondering inside the head. I am a wonderer and a wanderer!

Sometimes I look at the world and I'm amazed that there's anything at all.

**WHY IS THERE ANYTHING?
WHY IS THERE SOMETHING,
RATHER THAN NOTHING?
WHY? WHY? WHY? WHY?
AND BEFORE THERE WAS
S O M E T H I N G ,
WAS THERE JUST NOTHING?
AND DID THAT NOTHING
TURN INTO SOMETHING?
AND IF THAT NOTHING
TURNED INTO SOMETHING
HOW DID IT DO IT, AND
WHY? WHY? WHY? WHY?**

My motto's written on paper and pinned
above my bed:

**How can a bird
that is born for joy
Sit in a cage
and sing?**

It's by William Blake. Blake the Misfit, Blake the Outsider. Just like me. He was a painter and a poet and some people said he was mad - just like they say about me. Maybe he was out too much in the moon. Sometimes he wore no clothes. Sometimes he saw angels in his garden. He saw spirits all around him. I think he was very sane. So does my Mum, so did my Dad. I will write with William Blake in mind. I will write about the sad things, of course, because there is no way not to write about the sad

things. And there are sad things in my life. Well, **ONE BIG SAD AND HORRIBLE THING.** Weirdly enough, the sad things in my life make the happy things seem more intense. I wonder if other people feel like that, if they feel that sadness, in a weird way, can help to make you more intensely happy. That's what's known as a paradox, I suppose.

PARADOX!

What a word! It sounds good, looks good, and the meaning's good! And if something is a paradox, it is PARADOXICAL. Which is an even better word!

PARADOXICAL!

That's the kind of nickname I'd like to have. Not Typical McKee, but Paradoxical McKee!

Or Nonsensical McKee, of course.

Anyway, I'll try to make my words break out of the cages of sadness, and make them sing for joy.

Suddenly, thinking about the **ONE BIG SAD**

AND HORRIBLE THING, I know that I'm writing all this for Dad. I imagine him watching me and reading my words as I write. He'll be everywhere in this journal, of course, in my mind and in my words and moving among the spaces between the words and behind the words. Sometimes I tell people that he died before I was born, but that isn't true, and I do have some memories of him. I'll write of those. I think of him watching from somewhere far away beyond the moon. Hello, Dad. Yes, I think I'm happy now. Yes, I think Mum is, too. Good night.

I slip back into bed. The maddening moon shines down on me. I've started the journal at last. Tomorrow I'll write some more. Now I'll try to dream of bats and cats and owls.