



John Sedgwick

The Dark House
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A STALKER'S DIARY

by John Sedgwick

ONE

*As Rollins followed along, he knew enough to keep out of the Audi's rearview mirrors, both center and side. He was sensitive that way, almost as if his skin were allergic to another's sight. . . . His slim hands curled lightly on the wheel, Rollins was ready to move when the Audi moved. It was a kind of dance, Rollins supposed. A dance with a shadow. — from *The Dark House**

With those words in the first chapter of my new novel, *The Dark House*, I set my character, Rollins, on a highway north of Boston, following a stranger in an Audi to parts unknown. It is a strange set-up, I'll grant, and, reading that passage now, I am struck by how cold, even diabolical, Rollins must seem. As the book unfolds, the humanizing details are shaded in: he's a well-to-do Bostonian in his late thirties who works at a downtown mutual fund, tormented by the loss of a baby sister who drowned in the bathtub, and of a beloved cousin who's vanished without a trace. But there at the start, Rollins must seem like a ghoul haunting people at random in his car, sometimes tracking them back to their houses, where he spies on them through the windows. Let me quickly say that Rollins is not a stalker, although that word may come to mind. He would rather die than be discovered by the subjects of his fascination. He is not a voyeur, either, at least not in the conventional sense. He has no particular interest in peeping, in seeing sex. His "pursuits," as he calls his nocturnal rambles, are simply his way of trying to understand the world. As he later asks Marj, a young, female colleague who tries to befriend him, "Don't you ever wonder about people, what they . . . do?" He is seeking a connection with the world, no matter how oblique, in a desperate attempt to restore his own humanity. He's an explorer in search of himself. I know this now. I didn't know this when I wrote the first chapter. And part of the reason for Rollins' ice-man quality is that he is ignorant, too. For him then, his pursuits are merely a kind of compulsion, and it takes the understanding that he gains through the course of the novel for that compulsion to subside. Most writers I expect have some plan for their books. Not me. I knew only that Rollins liked to follow people in his car. I didn't know who he was following, or why, or where his pursuits would lead. To find out, I had to do some tailing of my own. In effect, I was the third car out on that highway in the opening scene that night, as invisible to Rollins as Rollins was (or thought he was) to that Audi. Rollins' voyage of discovery was linked to my own in another way. This is my first novel. Since graduating from college, I had made my living writing nonfiction — magazine articles, mostly, for places like *GQ*, *Newsweek* and the *Atlantic*. But in crossing over to the fiction side, I wanted to leave the facts behind. For the three years I was writing *The Dark House*, I never actually went out to tail anyone on my own. I preferred to imagine what Rollins' pursuits were like. And I assured myself that the center of the story was internal, in Rollins' own character, a place I would never find out on any highway. But now that the book is finished, I felt a need to finish the journey, to venture out in my own car to see if I could make a final contact with Rollins before I (reluctantly) bid him adieu forever. And, as fiction turned to fact, this is when things started getting strange. TO FULLY UNDERSTAND THIS, you should know that I have been plagued by near-mystical experiences since I undertook this project. I am not particularly sensitive to the occult, but I was impressed when a psychic named Rosemary Altea whom I interviewed for a magazine story somehow divined the existence of the book project and guessed the secret ingredient that had sprung my fullest imagining of it. And, once the book was finished, a recurring nightmare that I'd had as a child came back to me in a burst. It involved a book from my bedroom bookcase that somehow emerged from the shelf on its own, then swelled up larger and larger to the louder and louder sounds of my parents' arguing. The nightmare had always terrified me as a child, but it had puzzled me, too. For I never did actually hear them argue. But the discovery of the bitter truth about Rollins' parents is central to *The Dark House*. That childhood nightmare of mine is the book's genetic code. But the culmination of all of these unexpected convergences came that first night when I finally screwed up my courage to go driving. I headed out the driveway, and, on a whim, started to pursue the very first car I saw. It was a white Mercedes that led me across town, by the high school, to a slender, tree lined street, one that was not very different from the Elmhurst Drive that the Audi leads Rollins to in my novel's first chapter. Stranger still, the house that the Merc turned in to was exactly like the split-level that the Audi stops beside — the mysterious, unlit dwelling that is the book's Dark House.

TWO

*The car halted in front of a split-level ranch that had some ersatz grillwork over the windows and faux medieval paneling on the front door . . . — from *The Dark House**

The house I was looking at had no grillwork or paneling, but it was a split-level ranch all the same. And staring at it, I had the twingey feeling that I had, for a moment, become the character I had created. For, like my Rollins, I was confronted with a strange house to make sense of — to try to grasp the lives that animated it from within. And, like Rollins, I had the unsettling feeling that the driver who'd led me here was, in some dim way, aware of me. The car was a Mercedes. As I followed, I hadn't been able to tell much about the identity of the driver at first. When a car is viewed directly from behind, the head-rest conceals the driver's outline. It wasn't until the car took a sudden left turn, exposing the driver's left profile, that I could see that the driver was female — a blonde, in fact. In my novel, Rollins makes a lot out of small details like that. It's his way of trying to connect. I'd brought along my tape recorder to record my observations as I went along, just as Rollins does, and I dubbed the woman "Ms. Mercedes." Considering the fancy car and some unadventurous driving, I imagined her locked in a loveless marriage to an overbearing husband. I decided she was happiest at Bloomingdale's. Ms. Mercedes raised the automatic garage door, drove inside and parked. I slowed and pulled over diagonally across the street. I'd thought I was invisible — just a writer imagining this scene — as I watched her step out of the car and go around to the back to take some shopping bags out of the popped trunk. She was prettier than I'd thought, with a nicer figure, but had a put-upon quality all the same. Then I caught her glancing back at me. We must have been a full thirty yards apart, but, just then, it might have been just inches, or less. My heart pulsed — a big plunge that I could feel out to my fingertips. The contact was nearly physical, a first touch that doesn't need to be a kiss to have impact. It could be a handshake, a pat on a back, a slight brushing of a forearm. It changes a

relationship, takes it to the next level. I'd made contact with a stranger. Two strangers, actually: the very real Ms. Mercedes, and the fictional Rollins. For everything I was experiencing so acutely was what he would have felt. Startled, I quickly started moving again. I didn't want to scare her — or myself. But I did not drive away. Her road, Sage Hill, was circular. I made the full turn, and drove slowly by the house once more. Rollins would have understood. By then, the garage door was down once more. It was as if the house had swallowed her up. There were lights on over the front door, but no other light was visible from the street. It was a Dark House, after all.

THREE

Number 29 . . . was an unprepossessing house, but it was, at least temporarily, a fixed point in [Rollins'] universe. — from The Dark House

Ms. Mercedes's house at 112 Sage Hill became a fixed point in my universe, too. As Rollins does with his dark house, I returned to mine several times in the next few days, hoping to get a better sense of the place. Chatting into my tape recorder, I casually referred to it as "my house," and driving there became as natural as going home. I got to know the neighborhood. I watched a couple of middle-aged men drive home in a station wagon to the house next door — and then, later, I felt an odd jolt when I saw one of them return shirtless from a jog. I got used to seeing the lady staring at a computer screen in a house a few doors down, her head barely visible over the window sill. I became accustomed to the thickset man who liked to water his lawn in the evening, the elderly woman who walked her Pekinese, his eyes glowing a spooky green in my headlights. BUT STILL I WONDERED, who was Ms. Mercedes? As a magazine writer, I would often look at the house of someone I was writing about. It seemed to fix them. When I wrote for *Esquire* about Charles Stuart, the Massachusetts man who killed his pregnant wife before jumping to his death off the Tobin Bridge, I found it particularly revealing to see his house in North Reading. It was a modest place on the bad side of town, and seemed to me to be the home of a frustrated social aspirant, as I knew Stuart to be. I walked all around the place, trying to see it from all angles, just as Rollins would. That was one reason why I placed *The Dark House* of the book in that town on Massachusetts' North Shore. But now, surveying Ms. Mercedes's house at 112 Sage Hill, I found it difficult to draw a bead on her. The neighborhood was certainly flush, but was she? Did she work — or live off a husband? Was she happy? Did she feel loved? I went back several times, always at night, so that I wouldn't be too conspicuous, to try to find out the answers. The light was always on over the front door, but the only thing that changed was that, once, a brown sedan appeared in the driveway. Was it her husband's? If so, why wasn't it in the garage next to her Mercedes? The first night I returned, I parked across the street and, after a few moments to screw up my courage, I climbed out of the car. It was a hot, moist summer night, and the crickets were throbbing as they do occasionally in my book, but more quietly than I'd imagined. As I looked around, the whole scene seemed fraught — the few nocturnal colors more saturated, the shadows deeper, and the silence emanating from inside 115 more profound. As I walked by the hedge in front of her house, I imagined that I was actually pressing against something, even though it was only air. I was pushing a boundary there, going where I should not go, probing where I should not probe. I walked up and down the sidewalk a few times, my heart racing, but saw nothing of any significance. I retreated to my car, buried in the shadows of a maple tree across from 112. A pair of mosquitoes were trapped in the car with me, buzzing faintly, as I watched. The front of the house was ablaze from a light over the door, but there was only darkness within.

FOUR

Rollins was desperate to lose himself in a pursuit again. On the road, he was nothing and nobody. Just a pair of eyes and a pair of lips to record what he was. He longed to empty himself out again. — from The Dark House

After a few days at my Dark House, I, too, am eager to rove. In order to maintain a certain objectivity in his pursuits, Rollins selects the cars he will follow by a preset code. If, for example, he'd had a nice '42 Cotes du Rhone the night before, he might tail the 42nd car passing a particular intersection. But I don't have the patience for that. I curl once around Sage Hill road and simply follow the next car I see. It's an aging Oldsmobile, a junk car, really, angling down the slope on Garden Street. The window is down on the driver's side, and a slimly feminine elbow protrudes. I follow. It's easy to tail a car. Just stay close, and don't worry. At night, your headlights look like all the others. I can tell that the girl I'm following has no clue I'm on her as we buzz along together down Garden Street, then cut right onto Vine. I notice an elderly couple strolling on the sidewalk, a boy climbing out of a car in a dusty baseball uniform. But, as the pursuit lengthens, my mind focuses on the girl ahead of me. I notice how steady she is, how dutifully she stops for yellow lights, how she signals well before each turn. She turns out onto Route 9, the slender highway that cuts through town, and I stay on her. I see the ends of her hair flapping out the window. There are two lanes on our side of the highway, and I pull up beside her, and peer across. Jesus — she's young enough to be my daughter, just sixteen. She has a tiny stud earring in her left ear, and she's wearing a light T-shirt, which flaps in the breeze. But she herself is motionless, staring straight ahead. I imagine she's just gotten her license, is trying to do her best. Daringly, I lower my side window, to hear if she's listening to music. No. No sounds emanate from her car. I ease back behind her again. For the first time, this whole exercise feels wrong. I try to tell myself I'm not doing anything to her. We're just two people out on the highway, headed the same way. Can't I look? Still, I fall back, worrying. But then she turns off on the other side of town, passes by a cluster of shops, hangs a left. I hesitate a moment, guiltily, but then follow. She turns in the driveway a few doors down, and I take a right onto the road directly across from the house. I pull over under some trees half a block down and stare back through my rear-view. I see her slowly back out of the drive again. What? Is she trying to shake me? No. She parks in front of the house, gets out of the Olds, shuts the door behind her. Her long hair trailing behind her, she goes up the walkway in her platform heels. The door is unlocked; she lets herself in. She's greeted by a woman closer to my age, her mother, I suspect. A few moments pass, and then a dark form passes across the upper left window, below the half-pulled shade. It's her bedroom, I guess. She might be heading for bed. ROLLINS WOULD HAVE STAYED, would have watched. Not because he's evil, but because he can't see life from another person's point of view, can't imagine the horror of being watched. Plus, he assumes he's nothing, so what could his presence matter? But I can imagine this girl's feelings only too well. She could be my daughter, for God's sake. I think about what this makes me, being here, gazing up. Even a short trip can take you somewhere you aren't prepared to go, I think. And, with a shudder, I quickly drive on.

FIVE.

He looked . . . out the window at 29 Elmhurst, then at Marj again. She had lured him back here. Not for the second time either, but a third. This violated a precept almost as inviolable as his Garbo rule: no repeats. — from The Dark House

There is no Marj to lure me back to my dark house. I do it on my own. I feel the need to go back one last time, to reach some final understanding of that house, and its occupants, before I bid it adieu forever. To achieve some closure, as the psychologists say. As it happens, I go the evening before my novel's publication date — the last night that I will have my man Rollins to myself before the book is launched to the world. And I feel nostalgic as I set out, it has been such a long road for Rollins and me since he first sprang into my mind four years ago. I'm sorry to come to the end. This is a pivotal day in another respect, too. I've turned forty-six this spring: almost surely, the second half of my life has now begun. And with the publication of this first novel, I will cease to think of myself as primarily a magazine journalist, as I have since graduating from college. It's an end and a beginning; I'm both mournful and jazzed. It's seven o'clock when I turn onto Sage Hill Road. A light rain is falling in the thickening twilight. I pull up beside the house at number 112 to which I tailed Ms. Mercury several weeks before. The same light is on over the front door, but, once again, there is no sign of life in any of the front windows. The house might be a tomb. Eerily, as I look around, I see that all the houses might be tombs. There is no sign of life anywhere, except for a man staring into his computer up on the second floor four houses down. Here at number 112, though, there is a car in the driveway — a Nissan this time. Strangely enough, it's the very make that Rollins drives in my book. And another thing. As I look more carefully, I see a light on in the window around the side of the house. That's new. I sit there in my car for a while, speculating into

my tape recorder: Is Ms. Mercury having dinner? Or luxuriating with her man in a Jacuzzi, a CD on the stereo? A soft rain is falling, blurring the view out of the windshield. With each trickle of water, I think I see movement, and I glance up with a start, a keening. But nothing changes. In frustration, I drive down the hill, to see if I can see into the back of the house from the lower road at the foot of the hill. Rollins does something similar in spying on his dark house. As I go, I actually think, how clever of him, before I realize that, of course, I was the one who'd thought of that. I drive down, park, and peer back up towards the house from the sidewalk. I can see clearly into adjoining houses, but I can see nothing of *The Dark House* through the trees. I return to *The Dark House*, and damn! I see a second car has entered the driveway in my absence. A Toyota Camry, not the Grand Marquis that Ms. Mercury drives. I'm furious to have missed it, and I feel like an idiot to have left my post. I imagine that the car belongs to a friend who has come for dinner — or something else. But, of course, I haven't a clue. I sit there in the rain for nearly an hour as night descends. I flip on the radio, and let Tony Bennett and Louis Armstrong try to console me. Around me, the security lights blink on, illuminating the exterior of one house or another, and the light over the front door at 112 grows more brilliant. But whatever life there is remains inside. I think of my own wife and children back at my own house, waiting for me while I sit here, ruminating alone on this quiet street before these blank windows, and I think, this is crazy. Unlike my protagonist, I have a life. I should be living it, not prying into anyone else's, weaving elaborate fantasies about them. That's the job of fiction, not fact. I start up the car and flip on my machine one last time. "Bye, dark house," I say as I drive off. "You can keep your secrets." The next part comes harder. "Bye, Rollins. Be well."