

Letting the Darkness Out

by Rhet Lickliter

This is what I do.

I watch him. I watch everyone. Through their windows and doors, at night, I watch them, when the lights are on inside their houses. They can't see out, they can't see that I'm there looking in, getting to know them and their habits, learning about their relationships, from outside their dwellings, their shelters, their homes, I stand in yards behind trees or a car spending hours at a window, watching them.

There is the old man who lives alone with his dog. He lives in a small, brick ranch-model. At night he sits. He sits and watches T.V. from a brown, vinyl lazy boy in his den. The room has a large three paneled window which I look through from behind a row of shrubbery. He is a very old man. He has lost most of his hair and all of his teeth. He keeps his denture plates on a small endtable next to his lazy boy while he watches T.V. He is losing his hearing. He wears hearing aids in both ears and has a little, round speaker mounted to the headrest with a wire running down the side of the chair, across the floor and up into the back of the T.V. Every night he watches the television from that chair. He watches the access channels, either the one running a scroll of news headlines and weather or the one running a scroll of the local high school activities. His dog lies in the corner on an old hook rug sleeping. He's a fat little dog, white with black spots. Occasionally, the dog will get up and walk around the room. The old man points his finger and talks to him. After an hour or so the old man and the dog are asleep. The dog on the rug. The old man in the chair, while more high school activities roll across the television screen. I have arrived at the window to find the man and the dog already sleeping, reclined back in his brown chair. I've watched the different news items and weather information from the screen throw coloured light on his aged face. His nearly bald head tilts back and his mouth hangs open. I've watched that scene for hours and I can sometimes hear the faint music coming out of the little round speaker on his headrest not fully deadened by the glass pane.

There is a middle aged couple living in a two story on the corner. I know them because I watch them. It's like a study in perspective, a live, moving study through a grid. She is a small woman with poor, almost arthritic posture. She does needlepoint and drinks. He is average height, firm build. He drinks. She carefully studies the patterns she has made within a little oval frame. He gets up and makes another drink. She speaks without looking away from her work. He says very little. Yet, at times, they seem to carry a conversation. As he sits on a worn sofa and sips his clear liquid, she sits in an overstuffed armchair looking into her lap. I hear nothing but the sounds around me, outside in the darkness, the wind, a neighbor's door, a passing car. And it's odd. I watch their mouths move and become familiar with their gestures, their mannerisms. She rearranges her needlepoint over and over, her threads, her cloth, her frame, as she moves her head from side to side, back and forth as if posing many possibilities. He shrugs his shoulders more than he speaks. He drinks more than he shrugs his shoulders. Around nine thirty, she puts down her craft, turns off the floor lamp next to her chair and

leaves the room. In ten to fifteen minutes, he gets up, turns out the overhead light and follows her path. For an instant, I see myself as a reflection in the glass. And then, slowly, I disappear. The forms of furniture, dark and empty sit alone for the night.



On a small dead end street a block away, is a grassy hill, not a very big hill, but big enough for a house where a young woman lives. Before I reach her street, I step off the asphalt, cross a ditch and move through a small area of brush ending on the slope where her house rests. The window I watch from looks into a hall. A hall with three doors opening on to it. Her son's room is near the window. He is young and I can see his bed from where I stand. I see him in pajamas walking in and out of his room. He is small. His hair is white and thin, eyes large and dark. He carries things in and out of his room, down the hall, out one of the doors, shuffling his cotton covered feet across the wooden floor. The young woman is slender, nearly thin, with the same eyes and hair as the boy. She appears from the same opening as the boy. She

reads to him in his room while he lies in bed with only his head exposed from beneath the cover. Only one light is on. It hangs above the headboard. The young woman sits on the edge of the mattress, one leg up, resting, the other reaches to the floor. She reads from the book showing him the words and pictures, yet he never looks. He stares with blank amazement into her face, until his eyes close themselves and he is asleep. She leaves the light on above his head. She leaves the room, walks down to the end of the hall. The light filters out into the long narrow space and I can see her pick up the telephone and sit down on the almost glowing floor. I watch her talk. I watch her change positions, bringing her knees up to her chest, lying down on her back and looking up at the ceiling. She hangs up the phone in a shadow, walks back down the hall and into the boy's room and turns out the light.

I do watch them. I watch them all, but it's him, he is the one, the one I didn't know about, the one I couldn't distinguish. He wasn't man or woman. He was a form, a shape. And I'm still uncertain. But he is the one that makes me forget, the others. The people I watch and know so well. I passed his house many times, at night, never noticing, always believing no one was home, maybe turned in early, abandoned the house. I never noticed movement within the dark quarters. But since that night, a bright and clear night, when the moon lit the earth and shadows were my disguise, I noticed something new, something inside, something darker still than the unlit room beyond the window moved and led me to a subtle discovery. He uses no lights, at all, at night, inside. He moves about in darkness. It takes time to make out shapes, to see the forms. It takes several minutes for my eyes to adjust and my mind to forget. But soon, he appears within the dark, sparsely furnished house. And I watch him, without knowing. Is he a blindman without the need of light to move about, living his life in Braille. Is he a ghost, lingering here inside these walls unsatisfied with a life once lived. Is he afraid, afraid of what others find security in. Is he a madman, and this his self-dressed straightjacket. Every night is the same. He plays music. He selects a record and plays it on his phonograph. He sits, in a wooden folding chair, and listens, turning over the record when it is finished or replacing it with another. Sometimes when the music plays he moves about the unlit house, slowly, carefully but with full perception of where he is and what is around him, being considerate of his surroundings, respecting the mood, surrendering to it. He disappears into lightless corners. Each night, he runs a bath. He replaces the record, undresses, and steps over the edge into the water. He sits nearly motionless, submerged in liquid and in darkness, what is now an acutely dim visibility. The bathroom breathes steam and the metals softly shine, a dull shine, the faucets, soap dishes, the legs of the sink. Do I hear music. I don't know what I'm hearing. Something waiting, something patiently waiting. He dries. Once again he moves about the house, his frail and darkened house. It is him, he is the one. He plays another record, sits in his chair and looks out of a window. He stares, black into black. And he is the one, so hard to see. I look in through the glass seeing shadow on shadow, admitting its beauty to myself. The delicate veils curve and bend, masking form and thought. It is my mask. I hear the music. It is my music. And now I've stopped wondering, I've stopped making judgments. He is the movie my memory sees. All my pictures are of him. The illuminated doors and windows that border the lives of the others are there only to remind me . . .

The lights are there, but he never turns them on.