

Following

The first time Sunny noticed the man was a Friday in late September as she walked her little dog along Winding Lane. She caught sight of him when the dog stopped to sniff a mailbox post and she happened to glance back. He was standing about a hundred feet away staring at her. Black jeans, black tennis shoes, and one of those black hoodies young people liked to wear that hid his face from view.

As she and the dog moved on, so did he, staying always the same distance behind. He sauntered, swaggering like the thugs she saw on TV. Whatever was he doing in this neighborhood, she wondered. Every time she and the dog stopped, he stopped also. When they turned left onto Old Farmers Road, she lost sight of him, but later, as they made the loop onto Side Hill, he was there again.

Yanking on the leash, Sunny headed home. She had no money with her, no key, no phone, but his persistent presence had her heart pounding. Every time she glanced back, he was there, following.

By the time she reached her driveway, she was nearly running, popping the leash to keep the dog in tow. She looked back once more, and there he was, loping along. Then he stopped as she reached her front door. Once inside she thought about calling the police, but what was the dark man doing, really? He was merely walking. The dog hadn't even barked at him.

The next day he was there again. And the next. He always appeared from nowhere and followed. He never approached her or spoke, but he was ever present, wearing the same black outfit, ambling along behind her. And so it continued every day as she walked her dog and breathed in the crisp fall air.

One blustery day Sunny chose not to walk the dog. She looked out the drippy windows, and while she did not see him, she could feel the man's presence, like an invisible ghost hanging on the windowpane, looking in, and waiting.

Sunny decided, after much thought on the subject, that her life was too busy to worry about who this stranger was—her days were too full of books and music, friends and activities. Old age had its privileges, and she wasn't going to miss a one. Why should she care if he followed her? He seemed harmless enough.

And so it went for weeks—the Dark Man (since he seemed to need one, she gave him the name “the Dark Man”) following her and the dog on their daily jaunt. She wondered if this could be considered stalking. But why would a man stalk a woman her age? What did he want? He always stayed the same distance behind. Though, as the days wore on into October and early November, she did notice he followed a few paces closer each day.

Eventually, he became company for her. She realized he'd become a part of her daily routine, an almost essential element. She thought about trying to speak to him, to get to know him, but she held back. She was curious, but cautious. Best to keep things as they were, she thought. And so she and the dog and their unlikely friend walked along together day after day.

One afternoon Sunny was feeling reckless. She couldn't stand it; she had to ask him. After one of their frequent stops along Winding Lane, instead of walking left onto Old Farmers, she turned on her heel, tugging at the dog's leash, and headed directly back toward the Dark Man. She walked up to him and looked him straight in the eyes, eyes that were deeply hooded.

“Hey, why are you following me? Who are you, anyway?” she said. He was silent and stood his ground. And then she knew.

“Oh, no!” she cried, her hand flying to her mouth, “Oh, no! You? Hah!” And she began to laugh. Right in his face. She laughed so hard, the dog gave her a quizzical look.

“Am I supposed to be afraid of you?” she asked the Dark Man. “Is that it? Hah! No way!” And she laughed and laughed some more, wiping tears from her cheeks. “That'd be silly to be afraid of *you*. Hey, you can follow me around all you like, but don't expect me to be afraid!”

The Dark Man, of course, said nothing. But neither did he turn away.