

LIVING IN A
DARK HOUSE

A Novel

Renee Verite

Living in a Dark House is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to people and incidents are the workings of the author's active imagination from years of interactions with the public as a student, restaurant professional, journalist, and teacher.

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*This book is dedicated to friends and family, dead and alive,
who helped me to write in the light.*

CHAPTER ONE

The small block building, across the alley from the dark house where I lived, was in full production making body bags for American soldiers returning home from Vietnam. That white powder remnant of the created carriers of corpses, looking akin to, but definitely not baby powder with its indescribably foul smell as it floated through the air, landed on cars and our bicycles, and attempted to cover things like the truth. This gritty white talc, coupled with the black soot from the rubber factories making tires, kept food on our neighbors' tables, so we didn't really mind or complain. We were a working class town; we understood hard work and breathing it in; we sucked it up.

Richard Nixon had announced his resignation as president of the United States on that scorching August day in 1974 when Jim Dandy arrived. Jim Dandy was a demon, and he was my father. He strategically positioned himself and stood in the middle of the painted white wooden bleachers, directly parallel to me in my

pee-wee cheerleading uniform on the fifty-yard line at a football field called Parsons Field in Akron, Ohio. When I saw him, I was ready to perform a half-time cheer on dry and crunchy brown grass. He was a pendulum, swaying back and forth, ready to topple me, a small and fragile heap of dominoes.

Of course, Jim Dandy was immune to the moms who were sporting platinum blonde hairdos and modelling Daisy Duke cut-offs, when he began to move his right pointer finger from his belt to me, belt to me, over and over; this simplistic movement of his one finger continued for about thirty minutes and carried the weight of the world as he focused on the attack. Legs spread like Clint Eastwood in a cowboy movie, even with his well-advertised club foot, he stared intently at his prey, not even aware of the people who wondered, by the looks on their faces, exactly what it was that he was accomplishing.

My best friend Kathie, who stood next to me also in a red and white pleated skirt, first noticed his performance—excitedly for me. “Hey, Del,” she whispered, her voice rising. “Jim Dandy is here! He must have come to watch the half-time cheer!”

After all the cheerleading at pee-wee football games that other parents sat through and endured, it would be the first time that Jim Dandy managed to make an appearance, and that was a good thing. Jim Dandy, with his shaggy beard and his club foot, this life-long obsession, would never be associated with the word “cheer.”

“Yea,” I replied as my heart began pounding loudly in my chest as blood began to pulsate through my ears. My shaky knees began to buckle under my heaving chest. I tried to understand the commands from the coach, but the words were in slow motion. “Kathie, after the game, will you r-r-race me back to my car? Just start running, as fast as you can; I need you to do this for me, okay?”

My mind often wandered to current events. Before Jim Dandy’s arrival, I was thinking how history was being made and that the very next day our country would have a new president. His name, Gerald Rudolph Ford, was whirring through my mind and sounded strange to my ear. President Ford, the word “president”

before his name would soon sound normal and would become a familiar after a while. Just that quickly, however, I had to drop that impractical thinking about a president a world away and become decisive and think, think, strategize, and come up with a plan, because here and now, just a few yards away lurched a demon ready to attack. I needed to redirect the developing scene. Jim Dandy was going to beat me no doubt. I was planning because I wanted some control over the place, so I could avoid the spectacle in front of my classmates, in the middle of a football field.

The other parents were still sipping coffee from Thermos cups in slow motion, nudging each other, and wondering about the unfamiliar man with the cowboy stance. I knew what was about to happen through repetition and conditioning, but nobody else did. If Kathie would run with me, it would appear like we were having an innocent race to our family's Chevy Caprice in the parking lot, and only those who happened to walk nearby would witness my beating, not the whole football team in the middle of the field. "When the ref blows the whistle, will you run with me to my car?" I asked Kathie.

"It's by the concession stand," I whispered sideways to Kathie. She did run beside me, a best friend for the ages. I wished we could have kept running forever, four peaceful yellow ponytails swinging back and forth. I allowed her to win, then I urged her to go back to the coach. I huddled inside the backseat of the unlocked car, waiting for the crunching of gravel under his work boots.

Inside that melting Chevrolet, I could hear other parents talking about football plays with their sons. I could smell hot dogs and popcorn as players squeezed between cars wearing their cleats, holding their sweaty shoulder pads. As time was whirling by in my head, I still remember my father's piercing blue gray eyes and that full head of silver hair on his forehead, as he opened the long car door in slow motion. He removed his belt like a gunslinger. This was one of his many perfected skills that led to utter control and, in turn, the reflected fear for our lives. "Do you know what you did?" he asked.

"No, I don't know! I'm sorry! Don't hit me here! Please!"

“Don’t know, huh?”

“I really don’t know,” I pushed the seat forward with my feet.

“Well, we’ll see if we can learn ya,” he twanged, slinging his weapon like a snake.

“I r-r-really don’t know. T-t-tell me! I’m sorry! All these people, please!”

Parents were walking by, talking by, and gawking by, as the swishing continued mostly across my legs. I could still hear a discussion a few cars away about President Nixon’s resignation, but it soon became a blur as doors were slammed, goodbyes were yelled across the thick and muggy air, and cars chugged away. Soon, hurry up, everyone please be gone. Not one person uttered a word, as people noticed, I am sure.

He continued making a masterpiece of red stripes until he got tired and bored; eventually the proclamation would come: I fed our dog Mickey a piece of bologna before I left for the game, and the rind was still on the kitchen floor—testimony to my sin. Actually, I had only given him the rind which he must have rejected, but there was no way to explain.

This was my life.

My name is Delanie Dane; my days and nights were filled with the terror of uncertainty of when, where, and why the belt would lick my arms and legs, and I would be forced to repeat some inane statement about how I had failed to live up to his standards, and why everything was a waste of money, why women were useless, why education is stupid, and why everyone and everything was wrong except him.

This time, I had to say, “I won’t play Elton John records,” over and over until he got tired of this little game in which he would always win.

One by one, as cars disappeared down the road, the scars multiplied, the bars went up around my heart. He had won again. I was shaking and crying in the backseat, wondering if Kathie and her dad Andy had seen the spectacle. I was wondering if my coach or Jeff Farnsworth had witnessed it; he was the quarterback who sat next to me in my fourth grade classroom.

Living in a Dark House

Meanwhile, on the AM radio, Seals and Crofts were telling the “Hummingbird” not to fly away, but I wanted to fly away with them—or with anyone who would take me. Details about the “peaceful transition of power” of the presidency was described on the radio. These words, about an organized place where people lived decently and comfortably in White Houses, began to soothe me as we wheeled back to our little, safe neighborhood, where polluted and gritty air floated down, where everyone was living life centered around lawnmowers, baby strollers, bicycles, and Big Wheels.

I spent that afternoon in my bedroom, listening to more radio news about President Gerald R. Ford and avoiding music that might upset Jim Dandy, making sure to avoid Kathie, my across-the-street neighbor, my confidant, and my best friend in the whole wide world. The aftermath of these Jim Dandy scenes was the most difficult because explanations were confusing and humiliating. Do I explain or just pretend that nothing happened? If I could avoid her the rest of that day, maybe it didn’t really happen, and the event would pass unspoken; we would have President Gerald Ford, and Kathie and I would just proceed to some fun adventure that we had created in our tiny corner of the world outside.

But when I was inside, I was living in a dark house.