

Mr. Crouch

Mary's hands were sticky-caked as she scrubbed them raw. It was important she kept them clean. Antiseptic. She couldn't risk blood poisoning. Her ears were still ringing but she knew she had to get back downstairs. Her work was, like everything one had to do but didn't want to, of the utmost importance and no one else could do it for her. She turned away from the kitchen sink, her shoulders slumped with the weight of the ugly task ahead, and began walking back towards her basement door when her doorbell rang.

This was strange for two reasons. First: She'd moved to Beryll just nine months ago and though she waved to her neighbors, as one was expected to do, Mary had never allowed herself anything close to the level of intimacy that would inspire the social perversity that was the unannounced visit. The second reason, far more concerning than the first: Mary didn't have a doorbell.

And yet there it was again: The distinct ringing of what could only be termed as a doorbell since the sound came from directly behind her front door. Mary's eyes flicked over to her basement but the phantom doorbell would not be ignored. It rang once more. And then again, imploring her, almost against her will, inexorably forward.

She edged her slight frame into the crease of the front door, pressing her face hard into the wood as if she could inspire a peephole into existence simply by wanting one hard enough. Then she jumped, jerking away from the door as yet another inexplicable chime burst forth. Unable to bear it any longer, Mary yanked the door open.

"You *are* home."

It took Mary a moment to place the man on the other side. Her eyes scanned over thinning hair slicked flat across a high forehead, greedy eyes and the sheen of sweat congealing across a thin upper lip. It was the sweat that did it: Her next-door neighbor.

He liked to time his most impressive acts of physical exertion (roof-shingling, car-wrangling and if he were feeling particularly amorous: garage-door-replacing) for the moments he knew she'd be coming from or going to her job at the bank. So much so that every time she saw him, and she couldn't for the life of her remember his name though she knew he'd told her more than once, he was covered in a layer of sweat and holding a wrench or a hammer or some other metal object that said: Here is a man, o ye faithful, stare at his hard, steel manliness and rejoice!

Today, however, was different for he was not staring at her from his front lawn but from her very own front door and *today*: He was holding a doorbell.

“I got it for ya!” He said, pressing the heavy metal doorbell into her unwilling hands.

Mary looked at the leaden weight and then at him with the same nonplussed expression. He pressed on undaunted.

“I can install it if y’like.” Before Mary could respond, he pushed past her and into her house.

“Excuse me!” Mary was shocked in spite of her many years dealing with overconfident men bent on proving to her how much she *would* want them even though she just as yet did not.

“I’m busy, I’m not up to receiving guests.”

He smiled, “Mary, it’s Alan! I’m not a guest. I’m your neighbor.”

Mary felt herself getting angry as she thought of all the work she still had left to do, “I’m not feeling very neighborly at the moment so if you could just—”

Alan shut the door behind him. There was a slack casualness to the way he closed it. An easy, nothing to see here, fluidity and it gave Mary pause.

“I saw you get in last night at 6, 6:04? Thought I’d give you a bit to settle in and all and only made my way on over at a quarter past. I knocked on your door...”

He demonstrated with a jaunty *TAPPITTY-TAP-TAP*.

It was similar to the knock Mary had heard with a corner of her mind last night (when she’d been seeing to Alice and Mr. Crouch too) and summarily dismissed.

“But I guess you couldn’t hear me and it made me think what a pity it was for a young beautiful woman to be locked up tight alone with no way at all of being reached by anyone on the outside.”

“I wasn’t alone.”

The admission was a reflex, a mistake borne out of her preoccupation with her basement and all the work still left to be done therein and Mary kicked herself the minute the words slipped out. For of course Alan thought she *was* alone. All her neighbors did. Not a one of them knew about Alice. And that was the way it had to be. At least until Mary figured out what to do about Mr. Crouch.

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She's talking to someone. Is the person at the door or in the house? They have to be in the house. But why? Mama never lets anyone in the house but this person is inside. I can make out murmurs, something low and deep like a boy's voice. Except, no. Not like a boy. Like a man. Like Papa used to sound before he died and left me alone with her.

Should I scream? I can't scream. She took that away from me. She took even *that* away from me and if I try, if I gurgle, which is the best I can do, and I'm wrong and there isn't a person inside the house to hear me, to *help* me, if I'm wrong and I make a sound then Mama will say that *I* didn't make the sound. That it wasn't *me* gurgling for help. That it was Mr. Crouch.

Everything got so mixed up after Papa died. I was seven years old. I remember because Mama took to bed for seven months after his funeral. For seven months I scrounged for my own food and tried to wash myself. For seven months I missed school while she floated around the apartment, her eyes empty and unseeing, her hands flitting about, nervous, unable to hold onto any one thing, least of all me.

Then the woman from "State Services" came and gave Mama a "stiff talking to." That's what she said to me as she left: "Don't worry, girly, I gave your Mama a stiff talking to. She'll not be letting things go as she has. She'll put it to rights." And Mama had.

For a while it seemed things would go back to normal. There'd be no deep voice at the other end of the table, sure, no laughing squabbles about my Papa putting his socks up and the toilet seat down but Mama would brush my hair every morning again. And she'd stop having that empty look in her eyes like someone had scooped everything that mattered right out of her. I thought things would go to rights.

But then one morning Mama was brushing my hair when she stopped. She stopped, put the hairbrush down and then she said:

"Don't be scared, Alice. Don't be scared but I think there's somebody inside of there."

I wasn't scared. She was my Mama and if she told me not to be scared then there was nothing to be scared of. Also, I thought she meant that there was someone inside the

room. But what Mama *actually* meant was that there was someone inside of *me*. And not just anyone. A demon, she said. She called him Mr. Crouch.

First Mama said Mr. Crouch was hiding behind my hair, his face pressing out and through the back of my skull. So Mama told the neighbors that I was sick, pulled me out of school and shaved my head. When she didn't find Mr. Crouch lurking there, his face pushing out on the opposite side of mine, everything was all right for a couple years. Well, not all right. Not anywhere near close. But everything was better. My hair grew back and she moved on. Or so I thought.

Then one day, I was sitting in the kitchen eating a sandwich when Mama told me she saw Mr. Crouch smiling inside my mouth. So she sewed my mouth shut. She sewed my mouth shut and then in the dead of night, she brought me here. To *this* town, wherever we are, where nobody knows about me, no one knows that I exist, which works well for Mama because now she says Mr. Crouch is living inside my blood. So she's been "letting it". That's what she calls it when she slices into me again and again and again in the hopes that Mr. Crouch will bleed out like a stain coming out in the wash. *I* have no such hopes. Mama runs upstairs to wash her hands every hour. To protect me from blood poisoning she says. But *she's* the poison and there's no one to protect me from *her*.

She's kept me shackled down here for...I don't know how long. Everyday I try to remind myself. I say deep inside my mind, deep down, where Mama says Mr. Crouch is waiting, I say to myself: My name is Alice Minder. I am 14 or 15 years old and if I don't find a way to get out of this basement: I will die here.

That's why I risk it. For those deep murmurs. For the heavy footfalls shuffling across the floorboards above me. For the hope that maybe, maybe, *please*...

I have no mouth. She's taken even that away from me. And yet, still, in a manner of sorts: I can scream.

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A harsh yet muffled gurgle rushed up, exploding from the slightly ajar door on the other side of the room. Alan wouldn't have paid it any mind if not for the way that Mary snapped to attention. Her eyes locked into his, her spine went stiff and still as if it was taking everything within her not to turn around, run towards the basement door and slam

it shut. And Alan found that very interesting. After all, she'd just admitted it, hadn't she? She said that last night: She hadn't been alone.

"What was that?" He asked, his head cocked to the side.

Oh and wouldn't it be delicious if it turned out that little Miss Perfect, little Miss Stuck Up, little Miss I'm so frigid, I can't even be bothered to remember your fucking name had some dirty little screw down there. Some sleaze who snuck in under cover of darkness and stuck it to her good so that by morning she could go back to pretending she was hard all over and made out of plastic. But he knew better.

"Nothing." She said, just as yet another yelp came shooting up from down below.

Alan smiled, "Doesn't sound like nothing."

And boy was he enjoying this. He thought he'd have to talk her round. Have to work his moves in and lay em down smooth just to get her to act like a normal fucking woman. But he didn't have to bother with all that. Not anymore. Not now that it was becoming clearer and clearer to him just what kind of lady she was, which was no kinda lady at all.

"Listen," She said, backing away towards the basement door, "You should go." Then she flinched as a harsh, drawn out groan oozed in from downstairs.

"And miss out on what Mr. Nothing is getting down there? Not a chance. You been holding out on me, Mary. That stops now."

Alan grabbed her and planted a giant kiss smack on her stuck-up little mouth. Mary shoved him away from her hard and that was quite nice. It wouldn't be any fun if she didn't put up a fight. He slapped her. Her head jerked back with the force of it, sending her cowering to her knees.

He crouched down to her level. "I didn't wanna have to do that." He said, "But I've had it just about up to here with your snooty my shit don't stink straight bullshit attitude. I mean is that any way to treat a neighbor?"

Mary shook her head, one hand clutching her cheek, the other clinging uselessly to the doorbell he gave her as if for comfort.

"I'm sorry." She said, staring straight up into his eyes, which he realized: She'd never done before.

“See now was that so hard? Being nice? The way you been acting, you’d think a kind word would set your mouth on fire.”

“You’re right. I’ve been awful. Let me make it up to you. We can go to your place and we can—”

Alan pulled her up to her feet, gentle, since she was being so sweet and all.

“Look,” He said, his voice soft and understanding, “I clearly muscled in on something here. I’m not a bad guy. That’s why you and I’s gonna go downstairs and tell Mr. Nothing, real nice mind you, that you are no longer in need of his services. Then when he’s packed up and gone, you and I are gonna get to know one another a little better.”

He began marching her towards the basement door. Mary reared back, her face ashen, “No. I don’t, I told you, we should just—”

He yanked her arm, “Now you just behave yourself! I don’t wanna hafta hit ya again but I will if you make me.”

Then Mary *really* started to struggle, fighting and shoving him like some demon outta hell. So be it, Alan thought.

He bodily picked her up and forced her through the door, down the stairs and around the corner where he promptly let go of her in shock.

An emaciated little girl was chained down to a dirty bed in the corner. A feeding tube wound up and out of her belly, a catheter was strapped to her side and she was bleeding, covered in a thousand angry red cuts.

On seeing him, the little girl started jerking around, her eyes wide and boring into his as she gurgled and moaned and yelped because...because...he realized with horror:

Her mouth was sewn shut.

He started to turn towards Mary, terrified—

A sharp singular CHIME as Mary brought the heavy metal doorbell down hard on Alan’s head. As he faded into unconsciousness, he felt Mary press her face up close to his, her mouth right by his ear, her breath hot on his cheek as she whispered soft and excited:

“Is that you, Mr. Crouch?”