

## THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR

Everyone in town has heard of Mr. Spaulding. People say his house is haunted, and that my family is crazy for living next door to him for the last ten years. It doesn't bother me though—all I see is a lonely old widower with a penchant for growing roses.

Every day in the springtime, Mr. Spaulding leaves his house at 5:00 a.m. I know this because the exhaust of his rusty old pickup truck lets out a series of loud popping noises every time he backs it out of the driveway.

Although no one ever publicly complains, the annoyance of it is written on the faces who peek through curtains, scowling at the smoking clunker meandering down our suburban street.

Mr. Spaulding always returns home exactly thirty minutes later and does the same routine: He kills the truck's engine, gets out, walks to the trunk, opens it, picks something up, puts it down, closes the trunk, picks up the unknown item again, then goes around back to his rose garden.

"It's weird, Sarah. Don't you ever wonder what the hell he's doing up that early in the morning? I mean, it's still dark at 5:30 for Pete's sake.

How can he even see the roses?" my friend, Jessica, said earlier.

We were sitting in Math class, bored out of our brains while Miss Sinclair wrote a series of Algebra questions on the whiteboard.

"He probably has a flashlight," I said with a shrug, despite never actually seeing Mr. Spaulding with one.

"Well, whatever his story is, the guy gives me the creeps. You're too nice, you know that? It'll be the death of you, Sarah!" Jessica grinned.

I rolled my eyes. She always had a flair for the dramatics.

"Whatever, Jess. But Mr. Spaulding is just a harmless old man. And I'll prove it."

"Oh yeah? How?"

"After school, I'm going to take him one of those delicious blueberry pies from 'Pastry Brothers & Co.' It's the neighborly thing to do—after all, his wife did die a few months ago. Poor guy probably only lives on cans of beans and Spam."

Jessica waved me off. "Good luck to you, girl, that's all I'm saying."

Five hours later, I'm standing on Mr. Spaulding's porch and taking a deep breath.

Why am I so nervous? He's just a lonely widower, remember?

Stealing back my resolve, I knock on the weathered green door that is in dire need of a repaint. The whole house needs renovating really—from its paint-peeling white weatherboard frame to its splintered windowsills, to this creaky, rickety wooden porch with the heads of nails sticking out at all angles.

A little while passes, and Mr. Spaulding hasn't come to the door.

Maybe he's asleep? Or in the rose garden?

I knock again, and this time, there's the clear sound of footsteps coming down a hallway. When the doorknob turns, I put on a genuine smile, holding the pie tightly in my hands.

The door opens.

Mr. Spaulding looks down at me with a frown.

Oh boy, he is not happy to see me.

Nevertheless, I keep my smile on and hold out the pie.

"Hi, Mr. Spaulding. I don't know if you remember me, but I'm Sarah, Brandon and Jenny Turner's daughter from next door. I brought you a pie," I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

But his face is deadpan.

Maybe he doesn't have a sweet tooth?

Eventually, he huffs and gestures for me to follow him inside.

"I hope you like blueberries," I add, a slight pitch in my voice.

"Blueberries, blackberries, strawberries—they're all the same to me," he mutters.

He's still grieving over his wife, Sarah. Don't take it personally. It's only natural for him to be a little grumpy.

We move further into the house. It is almost a carbon copy of mine—other than the raised wallpaper, 1970s-era furniture, and dusty floorboards.

"You can put the pie on the counter in there," he snaps, pointing to what must be the kitchen.

I do as he says, then take a look around. There are about twenty dishes piled up in the big farmhouse-style sink. Some plates even have scraps of food still on them.

This dude seriously needs a cleaner.

Not wanting him to think that I'm snooping, I leave the kitchen and make my way down the hall, assuming that is where he has gone. I note the rooms as I go, peering into each one to look for Mr. Spaulding.

One: kitchen.

Two: living room.

Three: bathroom.

Four: main bedroom.

Five: second bedroom.

I stop at the sixth door, which is closed. On reflex, I hesitate because I know what is behind it. My house has one in the same place...

Beyond it are the stairs that lead down to the basement.

Surely, he hasn't gone down there?

"Mr. Spaulding?" I call out.

No answer.

Just as I turn to head towards the back door, thinking he must be out in the rose garden, I hear it. A faint moaning sound.

I hold my breath and listen harder, hoping that my ears are just messing with me. But then the moaning sounds again, and what's weirder... it's coming from behind the basement door.

Don't tell me he's fallen down the stairs... I mean, what are the odds of that happening right when I come over? God, please, let him be okay.

After a twist of the door handle, the basement door opens easily with a longer-than-comfortable squeak. From the faint natural light that spills in from the hallway, I can just make out the stairs.

"Mr. Spaulding, sir, are you down there? Are you hurt?" I shout into the gloom.

"H-help m-me," comes a reply.

Shit. He is hurt!

Without hesitating, I pull my phone out of my denim shorts pocket and activate the flashlight accessory. After what feels like too damn long rushing down the stairs, I finally step down onto solid flooring and wave my phone around. I expect to find the figure of Mr. Spaulding and prepare for what could be a nasty gash on his head or a broken leg, but I can't see anyone in the basement. Just a workbench, a few cardboard boxes, and random piles of junk.

What the hell... Where is he?

Confused, I hunt around for a light switch—which should have been on the left since this basement's layout is the same as mine—but there isn't one.

Okay, Sarah, what are your options here?

I decide to call out to Mr. Spaulding one more time.

"Hello? Mr. Spaulding?"

Still nothing.

Just in case the old man has fallen over somewhere else down here, I start to wander aimlessly around the basement like a lost kitten searching for its mother. It turns out that this basement is much larger than my parents' one, with these really big rocks spread out in a weird pattern.

I think it's time to call it. He's not down here. Clearly, you're going crazy.

It's only as I decide to head back upstairs when it hits me. A thick, musty, and very unpleasant smell. If I didn't know any better, I would think a raccoon got in here and died. And with every inhale, it just seems to get stronger, almost to the point of me gagging. It's followed by a whooshing sound, like air being let out of a tire, or expulsion of gas from a cylinder.

Within seconds, I start to feel lightheaded.

"Right, I'm outta here," I tell myself and begin to retrace my route to the basement steps.

Only... I can't find them. And the natural glow of light from the hallway is gone, too. My mind has gone all foggy, and my vision is blurred.

What the hell is happening to me?

"Hey!" I call out, hoping that Mr. Spaulding, wherever he is, will hear me.

But like when I knocked on the front door the first time, I get nothing back.

"Hey! Help! I'm lost down here!" I shout.

I wait again to hear a response, and I get one. But not the one I anticipated.

Rustle, rustle, rustle.

It sounds to the right of me, and immediately, I point my phone towards it. But all I see are blurred patches of gray.

"Hello? Is someone down here?" I ask, hating the tremble to my voice.

Keep it together, Sarah. You're okay. It's just dehydration or something...

I began to move again, praying that suddenly I'll see the light from upstairs in the middle of the gloom.

Rustle, rustle, rustle.

The sound is right off to the left of me now, and so close. Again, I point my phone in the direction of it. But there's nothing there.

My next steps are feeble, my breaths coming out in short and sharp gasps like I'm being forced to breathe through a funnel. Goosebumps break out on my skin.

Rustle, rustle, rustle.

Then nothing.

All I hear are my own heartbeats. All I feel is the dank cold air of this godforsaken basement.

I blink in confusion, then let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. For a moment, I feel utterly alone again, but the prickle on the back of my neck warns me otherwise.

You're not alone, Sarah. Don't kid yourself.

"Papa says no visitors," a voice says behind me.

I jump and let out a scream.

"W-who said that?" I stammer.

"Papa says no visitors... You shouldn't be down here." The voice is small and calm like a child's.

A child? Down here?

Suddenly, I hear Jessica's words in my head.

"Don't you ever wonder what the hell he's doing up that early in the morning... The guy gives me the creeps. You're too nice, you know that? It'll be the death of you, Sarah!"

I swallow what feels like a lump in my throat and try to keep level headed. Rational. Because there has to be a logical explanation for all of this... right?

"What's your name?" I ask.

Silence.

Then, a quiet chuckling. But it's deep and throaty, not a high-pitched little girl laugh.

A deeper fear takes hold of me. Paralyzes me.

"Papa brought Henrietta a new toy!" the voice says, with a clap and another chuckle.

My heart feels as if it's going to thump right out of my chest as I try to back away into a corner, any corner, but I don't touch anything.

I feel like an open target, prey ripe for the picking, my white T-shirt drenched with sweat.

"A toy, a toy, a toy, a toy, oh what a joy!"

The chant continues, every word like a knife in my ears.

Too loud. It's just TOO loud!

Suddenly, my forehead is burning up, and I'm choking, suffocating, my tongue taking up all the extra space in my mouth.

I start to run.

CRASH!

I yelp as I trip on one of the rocks, my phone flying out of my hand and smashing somewhere nearby. The flashlight goes off, plunging me into total darkness.

Shit, shit, shit!

“You’re hallucinating. Or dreaming. Yeah, that’s it—a dream. Time to wake up, Sarah,” I tell myself.

I have to keep my cool. I have to rationalize. Because if I don’t, I’ll go insane.

“This is just a dream. Just a dream,” I continue to reassure myself, squeezing my eyes shut.

But then it laughs again.

“Oh, silly, it’s not a dream,” the voice says.

I jump again, then my instincts kick in.

The stairs. You have to find them, Sarah!

Taking deep breaths as I go, I reach out my hands as I blindly navigate the darkness, taking care to lift my feet higher than usual, so I’m less likely to trip on the rocks.

And bingo! I hit something solid. A wall of some kind. I follow the contours of it, and eventually, it makes a perfect square.

But that’s not possible... Where are the stairs?

“Aww, isn’t toy having fun?” the voice asks, this time, from not far behind me. “Henrietta wants to make this fun. Henrietta wants to play hide and seek... Wanna play?”

It sounds amused. Too amused.

“N-not really,” I reply as tears burn the backs of my eyes. “I just want to go home... Please show me the way out.”

Silence descends... before I’m blinded by the brightest light that I’ve ever seen. It takes a while for my eyes to adjust, and when I do, I see that I’m standing in the middle of a large room made up of four concrete walls, a ceiling, and not a rock, stair, or door insight.

Where the hell am I? How did I get in here? How is it possible?!

It’s then I notice something sitting in the middle of the floor. With extreme hesitation, I edge forward to see two items...

A flashlight and a pocketknife?

For a moment, I don’t react, unsure of what to make of them. Like I’m on autopilot, I pick up the knife. It looks old and rusty and has an engraving:

I SEE YOU.

The flashlight, on the other hand, appears to be new, and when I turn it on, I’m relieved that it works.

“Okay, let’s play... I’m it!” the voice says, startling me again.

The room goes black. Like somebody has deliberately turned off the lights.

That's when it truly hits me:

This is no dream, Sarah; it's a nightmare. A real-life one.

Down here, wherever in God's name this place is, no one can hear me. No one can save me. I'm caught in a cruel, sick game, orchestrated by who could only be Mr. Spaulding.

"Three... Two... One! Ready or not, here I come!"

The voice sounds far away, but if I'm still in the square room, I know she's close.

I began to cautiously move around, holding the pocketknife out in front of me in the pitch-black space, waiting for an attack. I don't want to use the flashlight because the odds are not in my favor. I can't risk her seeing me that clearly.

One step, two steps, three steps, then I pause, listening out for her.

One step, two steps, three steps, pause. Listen.

One step, two steps, three steps, and then:

The voice giggles. "This toy is smart, Papa. I like it, Papa. Can we keep it, Papa?"

I stay silent, moving in the opposite direction of it.

"Why don't you turn on your flashlight, Sarah? It's part of the game. If you do, you'll see the stairs. Pinky swear..."

The offer is tempting, thrilling even, as my fingers fumble with the flashlight. I know I have a choice here: keep playing this game of wandering around in the dark, or risk seeing if the little girl is telling the truth.

Throwing all caution to the wind, I choose the latter and brace myself.

When the beam of light hits the basement stairs, I actually laugh. They are only a few strides away. I can reach them so easily. I will be home free...

"There you are, toy. Now Papa will be pleased!"

A figure steps in front of the stairs, and I gasp. It's a little girl in a white dress, with pale skin, glowing orange eyes, and long black hair that's matted with knots. She's smiling at me, and I watch as the corners of her mouth curved upwards into an inhuman length, reaching past her ears to the edges of her eyes.

She seems pleased, and like an animal, she inches forward, using her hands as guides, crawling towards me.

"Papa will be pleased. Papa will be glad. Papa hates snoops."

She inches closer and closer.

Move, Sarah. Get out of here!

But I can't move. It's like I'm frozen in place.

"Soon, you'll be nothing. Just bones. Papa will bury you in the garden like all the others..."

She stops right in front of me and pushes herself up, meeting me halfway. A warm trickle runs down my leg, and I know it's urine. I just want my parents.

"That's why his roses are so red. Papa says they thrive on the blood!"

Even when she lunges at me, those orange-fire eyes right in front of mine, I don't move.

And then—

"It's been six weeks since the disappearance of Sarah Turner, and three months since Bailey Adelson, who lived on Fortune Avenue, also went missing. This is the thirteenth case opened by state police, spanning over a decade, that relates to teenage girl abduction. Even in collaboration with the F.B.I., detectives continually exhaust leads and fall short on evidence. Of course, law enforcement says that they are doing everything they can to find Sarah and Bailey, but they admit that, due to the eleven other kidnapping cases, it's clear that a serial killer is at work here. More on that later..."

I sigh when the news clip finishes and toss my phone on the pillow. I don't know how many times I have stayed up late and scoured the Internet for stories like this one. They're all the same though. No new leads. No strong evidence. Zilch.

Well, enough is enough.

As I lay in bed, moonlight spilling through the gap in the curtains over the window, finally, I hear it. The all too familiar sound that makes my heartbeats quicken in my chest.

Pop, pop, pop.

It's the exhaust of Mr. Spaulding's rusty old pickup truck coming back down the street. I look at the alarm clock on my bedside table.

5:30 am. Right on schedule.

I don't know how many times I have told my story now. My parents honestly think that the detectives are doing the best they can to find Sarah. But they aren't.

After I told them about her taking the blueberry pie to Mr. Spaulding's house after school, on the day she disappeared, the police took the old man down to the station for questioning. He claimed that she did drop by and that the pie was delicious. However, she left his house only a few minutes after arriving, telling Mr. Spaulding that she was going to meet her boyfriend at the mall. They searched his house as a precaution but found nothing. Heard nothing.

I don't know what sick game the widower's playing, but Sarah doesn't have a boyfriend

She doesn't even have a crush—I'm her BFF; she would've told me.

I know Sarah's in that house.

I feel it.

One way or another, I will find out what happened to my friend.

To be continued...