

Sarah

a short story

by

By Sean-Paul Thomas Cairns.

1.

As far as first impressions went, thirty-two-year-old Sarah always came across as a very strange breed of girl. She was not a people person in the slightest, and pretty much loathed any creature on earth who could string a sentence of constructive thoughts and words together while spending the majority of their lives on two legs. So, chimps, monkeys and gorillas, she could just about tolerate. Although, she wouldn't want one as her flat mate anytime soon.

Unlike the majority of people who lived in her apartment building, Sarah wasn't a very sociable person to say the least. She didn't like to be seen coming and going from her small cozy one bedroom flat at any time of the day or night. Nor did she wish for any of her neighbors to know anything about her life or what she got up to in her free time whatsoever, which wasn't particularly very much, to be honest. And was most likely why she always preferred to leave home as early as she possibly could most mornings and arrive back home as late as possible.

When Sarah left for her work each morning, she preferred to dress more smart than casual even though her working establishment didn't require such a dress code. And it wasn't the over-dressed, stand-out, extrovert-smart that most city girls enjoyed to indulge themselves in as far as their fashion stakes were concerned. Hell no. More of a boring and bland wall flower smart where she could blend into any kind of background or situation without ever being noticed.

Her favorite outfit of all was a matching dull grey skirt and suit jacket with a plain white blouse underneath. Then a matching small handbag that she would always wear over her left shoulder.

To anyone that did notice Sarah and accidentally averted their gaze in her direction, she just seemed like your average, every day secretary or work office clerk, but the truth of the matter was she was just a simple librarian who loved books more than she'd ever loved people and had been absolutely lucky enough in life to have found her perfect dream job.

She also had no qualms about working every single hour of her waking day at the library and then some rather than having any spare time to devote to herself at her lonely, bland apartment. And when such a time did occur, and very rarely at that, she would always just spend her free time at home reading more books. A passion that she performed every single day at the library anyway, mainly because it wasn't a particularly busy library. In fact, one time she even remembered working for four days straight before someone wandered in to loan a book out.

So, if Sarah wanted to finish off a good book that she just happened to be reading near closing time, then she would do just that. She would stay at work and finish reading. After all, what was the difference between locking up for the

evening and continuing to read for the rest of the night at her library desk, surrounded by all those beautiful gorgeous comforting books or being alone in her dull and uneventful one-bedroom flat? What better way to spend her spare time doing something she completely and utterly adored and getting paid for it too?

Of course, she eagerly volunteered to her council bosses to work every single god forsaken hour that they needed her to work rather than bringing in any extra staff to cover for her. Even on her vacation time she preferred to work and get paid for the inconvenience of it. Where else should a passionate book lover spend their precious holidays while indulging in the one thing that they loved to do most of all in the world?

And if Sarah could have built a small single bedroom somewhere in the dark corners of the library then she'd be one step closer to creating her dream world and perfect life. Although, she wasn't too confident that her council bosses would follow through with that particular request.

On her way home to her lonely old flat, usually during the later end of the evenings, Sarah preferred to stick to the dark shadows like some blood-craving old vampire of the night, lest anyone should see or hear her approaching the apartment block.

Winter was her favorite time of year, more so for its short, grey, dark days and even longer, darker, miserable nights than for the beautiful frosty snowy weather it brought. In the winter there was a better chance of her not being seen by her fellow sociable neighbors and therefore no chance of entering a dreaded conversation with one of them about who she was, what she did, and why they'd never seen her around the building in all the years they'd dwelled there.

As far back as Sarah could remember she had always been terribly shy and anti-social. She'd been home-schooled throughout her entire childhood by her over strict, overbearing, and very over-religious parents, so had lived a very sheltered life indeed. Making friends with the other kids in her neighborhood had been strongly frowned upon and strictly forbidden, especially by her father.

Mingling and mixing with children her own age brought with it too much grievances and too many distractions away from the more important things in life. Like attaining a good bloody education, along with learning manners and respect for your elders—as her father would quite often mildly put it.

And by the time Sarah ended up in university to study English literature, just a year after her parents had perished in a tragic church fire caused by a ferocious and vicious lightning storm, the damage to her personality had already been well and truly done. (Sarah had to study for an exam the very next day so she couldn't attend the late evening church service that ended her parent's existence due to the unfortunate act of nature, or God, as her parents would have casually

stated had they been lucky enough to survive the lightning strike)

So, sticking to the murky shadows of a nearby brick wall, Sarah cautiously stalked towards her 15-story apartment building like she was breaking into Fort Knox. At this particular point, she always felt like her very next footstep could trigger a whole series of search lights and alarms that would reveal her location instantly before being gunned down on sight, if caught.

Only a couple of lights were shining from some of the windows high up above, which meant that most of her neighbors were already fast asleep or out for the night doing whatever the hell late-night activities they did.

Sarah was just about to step out of the shadows of the nearby bin shelter wall and skulk towards the quiet but brightly-lit entrance to her building - the most challenging part of her return home - when her heart skipped a beat. Out of nowhere she saw one of her jolly neighbors coming out of the main entrance foyer and whistling away to some god-awful tune. Christ, she hated whistlers. Disrespectful folk that always tried to spread their pretentious joyful mood onto others by invading their peace and quiet and ear space with their annoying tunes.

Sarah swiftly turned back and hurried deep inside the dark and murky but close-at-hand waste bin shelter, a place where all the apartment block bins were stored and color-coded for their particular recyclability options.

Sarah hid behind the nearest steel waste bin just inside the smelly shelter and waited patiently for her sickeningly happy whistling neighbor to pass her by. The neighbor seemed to be heading out and over towards his car in the car park. Perhaps he'd forgotten something inside his vehicle and would soon return to the block once he'd reclaimed it. Hopefully not though, Sarah wickedly prayed, as she patiently bided her time, waiting a little bit longer just to be sure. Just to be safe.

Apart from randomly bumping into one of her neighbors and striking up some kind of awkward and dreaded conversation, an even worse fear of hers was to be discovered hiding from them in amongst the shadows. But no. Sarah could relax. Her neighbor wasn't coming back to the building at all or anytime soon. Instead, her jolly neighbor rapidly started his car engine and swiftly drove off into the night.

The coast was clear again for Sarah to make her way inside.

Sarah approached the brightly lit entrance with the utmost caution. It was wholly impossible to tell who might come bursting out through the elevator doors and at any given moment for that matter. She'd grown to both sense and expect such an irritating occurrence over the years.

Or for someone to unlock one of the ground floor apartment flats in the main foyer and come charging out like an angry rhinoceros to confront her. She also

had the feeling too that some of those neighbors in their little ground floor dwellings could be eagerly watching her through their own little peep holes at the slightest bit of noise out there in the main entrance hallway.

Her imagination was always running wild with crazy notions like that.

But then again, was it really so crazy? For wasn't that what she usually did herself when she was at home all alone and heard some random, strange sounds or footsteps right outside her own front door? She too would always rush over to her peep hole just to take a closer inspection.

In fact, the impulse for doing such an act had gotten so bad recently that she had to wear foam ear plugs for most of the time spent in her apartment just so she could relax and ignore all the annoying little sounds from the corridor outside and from the street below.

Sarah entered the main entrance foyer as quietly as she possibly could. She even made the painstaking effort to ease the main front door gently shut. Always holding it firm until it clicked softly back into its sealed place. She never ever wore high heels, either. Or any kind of noisy, clacking or squeaky shoes for that matter. Always trainers or plimsolls, which were just about perfect for walking silently across a tiled flooring such as the one lying paved out in front of her.

With great caution and care, Sarah began walking past the ground floor apartments, two on either side, which were mostly covered in graffiti and hideous stains which smelt of such disgusting, crude and ungodly scents that she couldn't even possibly bare to imagine how the smells had even come about to be there in the first place.

She couldn't even begin to fathom either what type of person might be living in such a rundown, dirt invested dwelling that they never even washed their own bloody front doors or the surrounding outside walls, or sweep the dust, filth, and fleas right off their manky doormats. It would at least make the gateway to their kingdom abodes appear somewhat welcoming and presentable to the world outside, she couldn't help but think every time she passed.

Like a swift-prowling cat up upon a high alley wall, Sarah made her way past the elevator door and then beyond the final set of ground floor apartments. She was heading straight towards the well-hidden emergency stairwell at the very backside of the building. If someone were indeed watching her from behind one of those dirty, stained doorways as she crept effortlessly across the hallway like some crazy eccentric cat burglar, then her efforts would all be in vain.

What a funny but odd-looking sight she must have looked though, Sarah thought, as she almost chuckled out loud, creeping across the main hallway like that. Like some eccentric weirdo. But in all seriousness, it was actually who she was now; her endless daily habits, rituals and obsessive-compulsive routines that had consumed her body and soul entirely from the inside out since childhood.

In fact, she could pin point the exact moment that it had all began – the very first time she noticed her obsessive-compulsive mother touching and tapping away, always exactly three times, at basic and simple house hold objects, every time, before picking them up, or touching and tapping door handles three times before opening them up. And now she could never undo all those years of internal programming even if she had the time, patience, and cash to at least give it a bloody damn good try.

Sarah finally made it into her personal little back end stairwell. Her ultimate safe haven: the dark, steep emergency steps that nobody else in the building ever used or even knew existed for that matter—she felt absolutely, positively sure of that.

People were so damn lazy these days and would rather die than use stairs when there were other effortless options available. That was the terrible truth of it. So, of course, everyone just used the elevator instead. Always. People were so bloody predictable. Even if they only lived on the next floor up. People would rather wait ten minutes on a rickety, old, smelly, claustrophobic lift than take a thirty-second exercise detour to the other side of the building.

Sarah made her way up the steep, dark stairwell steps that didn't even look like they had been used since the block was first erected some thirty odd years ago. She took her time walking all the way up to the twelfth floor and felt grateful, as she always did, for the exercising benefits and effects that the mounting had on her forever-growing stronger thigh muscles.

Sarah quietly exited the stairwell and stuck her head carefully out into the dimly lit corridor just to make sure that nobody else was around to see her. She glanced left then right, three or four times, just to make sure that the coast was absolutely clear. You could never be too cautious, was her favored repetitive mantra. The entire floor was deathly quiet. Every apartment door appeared firmly shut too as a beautiful soothing silent aura filled the air. It was music to her ears. Just the way she liked her surroundings and place of living to feel and sound.

Easing the heavy stairwell door to gently shut behind her, Sarah made swift but creeping strides down her long and narrow twelfth-floor corridor straight towards her apartment, two doors down from the very end. After unlocking the two sperate key locks on the left-hand side of her front door, and with the stealth of a city mouse, she entered her apartment before quickly closing the door firmly over.

Beads of sweat trickled down her forehead as she leaned her back against the firm oak wood door. She took a couple of deep and relaxing breaths, grateful and relieved that she'd finally made it home once again and all without encountering a single soul or one of her annoying neighbors during the entire traumatic journey.

It had been almost a year since she'd had the uncomfortable displeasure of that particular confrontation.

2.

The next morning, Sarah's alarm clock chirped and tweeted out from the far dark corner of her bedroom. It was around 5:30 in the morning and the sun was yet to rise. Sarah awoke as she always did, bright, alert, and excited to get to her library paradise as quickly as she possibly could.

Sarah never did beat around the bush in the mornings when it came to getting up and ready for her work. She would always swiftly rise from her bed, like Dracula from his coffin, ready and eager for her new day to start.

Sarah knew, of course, that the longer she remained tucked up in the warmth of her comforting covers and waited for the right moment to get up then the more chance there would be of her bumping into one of her early rising neighbors. Most of whom, she gathered, worked from nine till five, like the majority of the working-class population and just like the famous country and western song suggested.

As for the ones who didn't work, well, they wouldn't be caught dead out of their bedroom pits any time before midday. In fact, right at that very moment, they'd most likely be about ready to climb into their bedroom slumber pits at exactly the same time as Sarah would be climbing out of hers.

For the next ten minutes, Sarah performed a home-made yoga routine. Just to keep herself flexible and energized in the mornings, which would go a long way in keeping her in good stead for the rest of the working day.

Once upon a time she used to perform the short but vigorous yoga workouts at her quiet place of work, for she knew by heart when the busier and quieter periods would come around. But ever since her council bosses had installed new CCTV cameras right over her desk in the main foyer of the library earlier last year, well, it wasn't the most appropriate thing in the world to do anymore during the working week.

After the invigorating yoga session, Sarah showered then swiftly dressed for work. Breakfast she'd see to later. She always enjoyed grabbing something on the go at a handy little Tesco Express just around the corner from the library. It had those handy little self-checkout machines where you didn't even have to interact with human beings anymore. She loved them to bits and always took great care in using them just so she wouldn't do something stupid and wrong that would attract the attention of the annoying, nosy sales assistant who would barge their way across and see what the hell was going on with her machine before

scanning and zapping it back to normality again.

As for her daily coffees, she did enjoy two black americanos. One in the morning and one after lunch. There was a delightful little coffee machine that she used at her workplace. The machine was free for all staff to use. Which meant only her, since she was the only person who actually ever worked there. It cost a pound for any library customers to use, which they usually begrudged paying since the library was supposed to be a free public place after all. So, most of the time it was only her good self that got to use the coffee machine. Nobody else seemed to notice that it was even there. But Sarah never forgot. And she adored it. Although, not as much as she adored her books.

So, within twenty minutes of waking up in the mornings, and without making any time for breakfast or coffee, Sarah was fully fit and ready to set off for her work. A feat which most women will tell you was like a miraculous act of impossibility in this day and age.

As always, Sarah took great caution in exiting her apartment. Even more so than when she came home at nights, since the sun was usually just peeking up when she made her way outside, except in the middle of winter, of course. *Oh, dear god*, she almost sighed aloud, how she so longed for those dark, cold and miserable winter days and nights.

Sarah glanced all around, making sure the coast was crystal clear. She hurried stealthily past the lift, which, on a brief second glance, seemed to be oddly on its way up to her floor. Swiftly and expertly she maneuvered her way into her safe haven, her personal emergency stairwell, all without making the slightest bit of noise. She took a deep breath and began her steep descent of the steps just as the sound of the lift doors springing open on her floor echoed out. That was a close call.

Sarah reached the bottom of the stairwell. She cautiously glanced through the stained glass of the exit door just to make sure that no one else was around before she made her move to walk across the main foyer. She felt a little shocked to see two women waiting beside the lift. They seemed to be gossiping enthusiastically about their nightshift work while waiting for the lift to come back down again. Why was it so unusually busy at this time of morning? Sarah annoyingly thought. Another few days of this malarkey and she'd have to get up even earlier.

Sarah let out a weary sigh. She checked her watch and sighed again. She continued to hide behind the stairwell door for a few minutes longer until finally the two chatterbox women disappeared inside the newly-opened lift. Sarah continued to watch the women through the stained-glass window. She would make her exit just as soon as the lift doors closed shut and took the nightshift workers up towards their desired floor.

When Sarah felt that the coast was finally clear and she was just about to pull open the heavy stairwell door and leave - a young, chirpy, feminine voice called out from behind her, startling her to her very core.

“What are you doing?”

Sarah jumped out of her skin with absolute fright. She swiftly turned around to see a little girl in a yellow dress sitting on the steps behind her. She couldn't have been much older than ten—or eleven-years years of age.

“Jesus Christ, you scared the living shit out of me.”

“What are you doing?” the little girl asked her once more while eyeing Sarah up and down with even more suspicion.

“I was just... you know... on my way... to work.”

The little girl let out a wry smile.

“You were hiding.”

“No, I wasn't. Not that it's any of your bloody business,” Sarah stated rather too defensively. She wasn't used to speaking with people, let alone children.

“It's okay. I'm hiding too,” continued the little girl. She even placed her index finger softly to her lips to emphasize that point. The gesture seemed to relax Sarah a little and she began to let her guard down.

“And what exactly are you hiding from?” Sarah quickly asked before the little girl had the chance to ask her the exact same thing.

“It's my first day at the big school today. And I really don't want to go.”

“Have you just moved here or something? I've never seen you around before.”

“Almost three months now. You should try using the lift once in a while, instead of always sneaking down these secret stairs. We might have met sooner if you had.”

“I'm not sneaking about anywhere,” Sarah replied, on the defensive again. “I'm just...”

“Just what?”

“Just ...not a people person.”

“Me neither.”

Sarah turned back towards the exit door, just to see if the coast was still clear.

It was.

“Look, I’ve got to go. Enjoy your school. They say it’s the best years of your life.”

Before the little girl could say another word, Sarah dashed right out of the stairwell and into the main foyer. She hurried along the tiled floor and out of the building’s main doors like her life and sanity depended upon it. Her heart was racing. She couldn’t stop thinking that her cover had well and truly been blown by the little girl. Would she now have to find some other route to go in order to get in and out of her apartment or would the chance encounter with the little girl just turn out to be their last and a one off for the time being?

Still rushing and caught up in a frantic whirlwind daze of stressful new thoughts, Sarah failed to notice, at first, a rather handsome-looking man in his mid-thirties who seemed to be jogging in the early morning sunlight straight towards her.

He was wearing a loose, sweaty grey t-shirt and a pair of tight black shorts that seemed like they might rip apart at the seams at any given moment the more he flexed his big, bulging thigh muscles, right in her face. Then there was the tight outline of his muscular chest, almost taking Sarah’s breath away for a second time before she quickly averted her eyes down towards the cold, hard ground and away from the handsome jogger, who appeared to be heading straight for the main building like he might actually live there.

Sarah had never seen the man around before. Ever. Fair enough, she hardly spent any time in the building throughout the day and mostly only slept there. But she’d like to believe that she hadn’t lost all of her womanly senses that she would fail to notice a nice new man in the building.

And then something amazing happened.

Just as the man jogged on past her, Sarah made a little glance up, just for a fleeting, partial moment as the jogging man did something that most normal people never did around her. He noticed her and looked at her with great, big, happy, glowing eyes and smiled warmly like he actually saw her coming towards him. And not just the physical outline presence of Sarah, but at the real woman inside too.

Now it wasn’t that Sarah was so unattractive that people never saw her. She was physically attractive. Definitely. Absolutely. In her own little quirky and book-nerdy kind of way. But if she really wanted to make that extra big effort to look stunning and gorgeous and dress up in sexy and colorful tight-fitting clothes that actually complimented her physical attributes to the max, then she would, no doubt about it, be very easy upon the male eye indeed.

But she wasn’t like that. Being sexually attractive to the male population of the world didn’t appeal to her inner needs in the slightest. She didn’t want to be

noticed or become attractive to anyone, especially the opposite sex. Which was why she never, ever wore make up. Not even a little. And always wore her hair down in a kind of bobbed-curtain style as if trying to hide her face at all times.

On top of that she always wore the mousiest, duller of clothes, and usually always a couple of sizes too big. Just in order to take her sexual appeal down to a whole new other level entirely. Although, for one brief moment just shortly after making eye contact with the man, she did kind of wish that she'd perhaps owned even just the one little tube of lipstick.

Sarah was rendered speechless. She didn't know what to think or do or even how to react. And when the man said hi, as well as looking and smiling right at her, well, Sarah just felt eternally grateful that her legs were still in some kind of working order and that she was still able to put one foot in front of the other, or else she just didn't know where she might end up. Probably stumbling through the thorny rose bushes nearby.

But Sarah did know how to react. And of course, she reacted in a way that she thought best and most appropriate: She blatantly ignored the handsome jogger, blanking him outright while picking up her pace and walking even faster with her head firmly held down like she hadn't even seen him at all.

The man came to a halt outside the main entrance doorway and proceeded to catch his breath while gently warming down as he took a few moments to curiously watch Sarah hurry away.

Once Sarah made her way around the next corner and knew that she was absolutely and positively out of sight, she immediately leaned against the hard brick wall, clutched at her heart and began covering her mouth like she might go into an epileptic state of shock at any given second.

Her entire face and neck had turned a complete bright shade of red. It was like her heart and emotions had completely taken over her senses, and no matter how hard she tried to fight her feelings, she had become completely and utterly infatuated with the handsome smiling man, yet for the life of her she couldn't think why.

For sure, she'd seen plenty of handsome, charismatic men coming and going from the library before, even while walking to and from her work and out on the streets or inside the supermarkets, but none of them had ever gotten to her inner soul, senses and emotions like this. Why was that? Was it perhaps that this man had actually seen her? Had actually looked at her like she was alive, like she was real, like she was an actual living, breathing human being—or, heaven forbid, looked at her like she was an attractive woman.

And the way he had gazed at her: Wow. It was like no one had ever looked at her that way before in her entire life. Did he see through her invisible wallflower persona and notice that she actually existed in this crazy world?

Sarah had spent the majority of her life always trying to hide. Never wanting to be noticed. To be that wallflower that nobody ever saw or heard or talked about. And she had succeeded. Always, every day, throughout her whole entire life she had succeeded. Up until that moment.

Sarah took a few deep breaths and desperately tried to calm herself.

“He said hi to me. Oh my god he said hi.”

Sarah began slapping her own forehead for not doing or saying anything back and just running off into the day like a scolded kitten. “And I couldn’t even say hi back to him or even look him in the eye. I am such a fool!”

Sarah took a few deep breaths. Composed herself. Patted down her hooded sweat top that she always wore over her suited jacket when it was a bit chilly in the mornings and continued on her way to work.

Later than evening, Sarah returned home after another long but relaxing day at the library. She cautiously approached the main entrance doorway like she always did. Again, she stuck carefully to the carpark walls and shadows. Even ducking behind a large tree as a car unexpectedly turned on its engine then headlights and drove right on out of the carpark. Then almost at the main entrance, she quickly slipped inside the bin shelter again as two young men barged out of the building while making a noisy racket like they were on their way to a night club or a late-night football match.

She watched them loudly joke and laugh and play fight with each other as they obliviously walked past her, before heading off towards the main street and the direction that she had originally come from. Once the two loud mouthed yobs were out of sight, Sarah quietly entered the apartment building. She hesitated momentarily before remembering to check her mail. She rushed towards her mail box at the front corner of the main foyer. It was something that she only liked to ever do at least twice a week. Once on a Monday and then again for a second time at the end of the week on a Friday.

Sarah grabbed a bunch of letters and flyers from her box before locking it back up again. Glancing around to see that the coast was still clear, she darted past the elevator and headed straight for her stairwell. She made her way up to the twelfth floor and carefully exited the stairwell door. She double-checked the empty corridor just like she did every night. When she was fully satisfied that there was nobody else around, she hurried towards her apartment.

She felt so tired. It had been an unusually busy day for her. More people had come into the library to check books out than she’d ever anticipated and most likely due to the school holidays. She’d hardly had a chance to finish one chapter of her new book until well after closing time.

Oh, how Sarah loathed school holidays and in-service days and bank bloody holidays. It usually meant that people were more inclined to go read a book if they could pry themselves away from Facebook and Youtube. Yes, she really was looking forward to grabbing a quick, warm shower then falling into a deep, blissful cozy sleep right in the middle of her warm, snuggly bed.

Out of nowhere, one of the apartment doors a few doors down from her own, suddenly opened most unexpectedly. It was almost like whoever was behind the door was waiting for her to emerge from the darkness before venturing out and catching her off guard. It was such an uncanny coincidence.

Sarah froze, unable to hide anywhere. Well and truly caught and exposed in the act of coming home. She watched like a deer caught in headlights as an old man wearing a thick white jacket and an even thicker hat exited his apartment and turned slowly around to face Sarah who stood only a few feet away. She cursed herself for not turning around and walking back the way she'd come. She knew she could have done it too and nobody would have been any the wiser, since it had taken the old man an eternity to turn fully around and see her. But alas, every bad situation in life was easier in hindsight.

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Sarah gradually recognized the old man she was now standing face to face with. It was her neighbor Mister Jeeves. An old nosy neighbor at that, who she'd completely forgotten all about. A neighbor she had managed to craftily avoid for almost a whole entire year.

"Oh. Hello there, young Sarah. My god. I haven't seen you in such an age now. I was beginning to think that you'd actually moved away to another building or another city entirely. I haven't seen you for such a long time. How is it going my dear?"

Sarah looked utterly mortified as she clawed her brain for something, anything to say back to the old man. *Whatever he said*, she swiftly told herself, *do not ask him any bloody questions or you'll never get to your bed this night.*

"Oh... Hello, Mr. Jeeves," Sarah eventually mumbled. "Yes, long time no see. I've been very, very busy. Just working every waking hour like the rest of the world..." she then hesitated. Mr. Jeeves said nothing and just nodded like an old donkey. The long pause between them was now too excruciating for Sarah to handle or god forbid just walk away from. If she'd had some decent, social skills training about her, then she might have been able to just say, Good day to you, and move on. But she didn't. And so, she finally caved and did the most stupid thing she could have ever fathomed of doing: She asked the old man a bloody question.

"...And how have you been, Mr. Jeeves?"

Even before the words came out of her mouth, Sarah already regretted uttering them and knew instantly she'd made a grievous mistake in asking the old nosy

neighbor - a well-known energy-draining vampire amongst the residents of the building – a question.

If their last conversation from over a year ago was anything to go by, then the old man loved nothing more in life than to talk to someone. Just to talk and ramble and yack away about his one favorite subject in life: himself, and to anyone who would submit to his boring monotonous tone and ways and listen.

The horrific memories of their last conversation suddenly came flooding back to Sarah like a triple-decker tsunami. It had taken her well over an hour last time to get even a single word in edge ways, then another half an hour after that to make her excuses and finally scrape and excuse herself away.

Before Sarah could even think about making an excuse this time though, the old man was already rambling away in full flow in a one-sided conversation. And there was absolutely nothing that Sarah could do to stop it.

“...Oh, can't complain, young Sarah. Can't complain. Had a bit of a bad back issue there for the past few months which is why you probably haven't seen me out and about for a good long while now. I've been to see the doctor on so many occasions. But they just can't seem to sort the blasted thing out. So, they've finally put me on a waiting list for an NHS physio. Whatever the blasted hell that means. So, of course, I've had to postpone my trip to Australia to go and see my dear younger sister and her family over there. And oh, just you wait until I tell you all about what's been happening to my sister all the way down under over there in the great Land of Oz... You'll never believe it once I tell you...”

Sarah felt like she was dying inside. Like she was trapped in her own private, personal hell and there was no escape. She would have given ten years of her life just to be swallowed away whole by the corridor floor and transported into her seductively waiting apartment bedroom.

The old man continued to ramble monotonous nonsense about his mundane life for a long, long time. And all Sarah could do was just grin and bear it and nod like a useless donkey until it was all but over. Exactly fifty-two minutes from when she'd first uttered her question. And it only ended because the old man had suddenly remembered that he was very late for his Friday night bridge club.

When Sarah finally made it back inside her apartment and closed the front door firmly shut, she had just enough energy to crawl into her waiting bed and nothing else. She fell fast asleep with her clothes still on and her handbag still strapped over her shoulder.

3.

That night, Sarah had a very strange dream. She didn't usually dream. She usually just slept right through the night until the following morning without a peep, sheep or a little Bo-peep in sight. But because she'd had so much running through her mind, her brain refused to settle down during the night and she dreamed some crazy scenarios instead.

She dreamed about the jogging man, of course. She saw him running through the streets as she, dressed in her own jogging outfit, chased frantically after him. She was desperately trying to get his attention and catch up to him. But he was much too fast for her and she could never quite seem to get anywhere near him. No matter how loud she shouted for him to stop and wait.

She wanted to apologize for being so rude the previous morning and totally ignoring him. But in the dream, there was always too many people and various obstacles in her path the closer she came to catching him.

When she finally lost sight of the man and couldn't decide on another direction to follow, Sarah jogged back towards the apartment building instead. As she turned onto the footpath leading up towards the main building, the jogging man suddenly came flying out of nowhere, crashing and colliding straight into her.

They both fell and tumbled to the ground. The man clumsily pinning Sarah down onto the grass and both of them utterly exhausted and out of breath,

"I'm sorry. Are you all right?" the handsome jogger asked while staring right into her with those same happy, smiling eyes from that very morning.

Sarah, once again, acting like a deer caught in headlights, just simply nodded like a stupid child. Everything that she had wanted to say she still couldn't get out. The handsome man smiled even wider this time and she could feel herself melting into his arms that were still wedged into the ground either side of her slender shoulders.

"Do you mind if I kiss you?" said the man very casually, which was the most inappropriate thing anyone had ever said to her before in her life, but right at that very moment, she didn't particularly mind. And it quickly became the most agreeable thing anyone had ever said to her. Without words Sarah just nodded like a mule and let the charming jogging man gently kiss her on the lips. It felt glorious. She wanted it to last forever, but it didn't. When she opened her eyes again, she almost exploded from the inside out with the utmost repulsive fright.

The old man from next door, Mr. Jeeves, was now on top of her and kissing her with such passion and wild abandonment.

Sarah gasped and pulled away. The old man chuckled with a hideous shriek. Half his teeth were missing and both his tongue and gums were of a burnt-charcoal black. Sarah shrieked with even more disgust and tried to push the old man right off her sweaty body. She couldn't seem to budge him an inch though. The old man continued to laugh outrageously, while more of his teeth fell from his mouth, right on top of her. He then tried to kiss Sarah again, this time with even more vigor and passion.

Sarah frantically awoke. She screamed in terror before violently kicking away her sweat-soaked bedsheets. It was the first time she'd had a nightmare in years, and certainly not since her parents had died.

For the rest of the night, Sarah couldn't sleep a wink so she decided to get up and have an extended yoga session. After that, she indulged herself in an even longer shower. Alternating every thirty seconds between hot and cold, cold and hot, just to be sure that she would be fully awake for the day ahead.

Fully dressed and ready to begin her working day, Sarah approached her door and put her eye to the peep hole. Everything looked peacefully still and quiet outside in the main corridor. Although, she knew that on some rare occasions those looks and sounds could be very deceiving. She had only to look no further than her encounter with the old man the night before for evidence of that.

Sarah took a deep breath and left the apartment. She crept down towards the end of the corridor and entered the stairwell. She felt grateful for not encountering anyone else so far, but that didn't mean that there wouldn't be someone around somewhere.

Sarah dismounted the steps, this time quieter and more careful than she normally did. Would the little girl be there again, hiding in the shadows waiting for her in the shadows just like yesterday morning?

For the final staircase, Sarah climbed down the last few steps as if she were living in a world of slow motion. Eagerly she checked around for the little girl who was thankfully nowhere to be seen. Not even in the darkest corner shadows of the stairwell or even under the hidden space behind the very bottom steps.

It was roughly the same time as yesterday. Sarah swore to herself that she'd keep to her usual strict schedule. But if she encountered the little girl one more time then she'd be forced to alter her routine and leave 15 minutes earlier the following day. What other option did she have?

For the time being though, she wanted to stick roughly to the same time as always. She wanted to see the handsome jogger again too. And she hoped beyond all hope that his healthy exercise habit wasn't just a one-off or some kind

of sporadic routine scheduled around his constant shift work. Sarah desperately prayed that he went for his daily jogs at about the same time every morning. If that were indeed the case, then it would utterly make her day to see him every other morning before she went off to work.

Sarah cautiously approached the stairwell door but didn't pull it open immediately. Instead, she pressed her face firmly up against the dirty stained glass and watched the main foyer area with hawk-like eyes. There didn't seem to be anyone else around. The whole world appeared so deathly calm and so peacefully quiet at the crack of dawn.

Now would be a good time as any to make her usual move through the main foyer and out through the entrance doors and be on her way to work, with nobody else in the building ever realizing. But she didn't budge an inch. She would wait a little while longer. She would wait and watch out for the jogging man. Even though every fiber in her body was telling her to leave.

This was not like Sarah in the slightest. This was not part of Sarah's routine or general outlook on life. To casually stalk someone that she had only ever briefly met for just a few moments. To be obsessed with someone so easily, or ever, for that matter. Especially a man. This was not like her in the slightest.

Sarah gently pulled out her very dated mobile phone from her pocket. It was only so she could check the precise time. She rarely used it for anything else. There were barely half-a-dozen contacts in its entire directory. No friends. No family. Just a few numbers of her council bosses who she never even saw in real life and only got a hold of her whenever she wasn't at the library.

The other numbers were that of another local library, a book supplier, and an Indian takeaway. She did love a bit of Indian food from time to time. And last but not least, another number for her favorite book shop-café in town where she could reserve a seat during a busy Sunday afternoon, her only day off if she wasn't holed up at the library like she usually was and taking advantage of the one day a week she could actually have the place to herself without any interruption from people.

The mobile phone had no internet access either. No social media apps. Even on her work laptop Sarah had no Facebook account. No Instagram page. And no personal e-mail address. She did have a work email address though. And the only time she did use the internet was while she was at work and only for organizing the libraries online database or ordering and updating any new books that came and went from the library.

Sarah checked the time. 5:52 am. It was precisely the same time as yesterday when she had bumped into the jogging man outside. She watched as the clock turned to 5:53 then in the blink of an eye it turned to 5:57. And still there was no sign of him.

Shit, Sarah thought. It must have been a one-off after all then. Or else he was only visiting friends or relatives in the building for a few days and had left to go back to wherever it was he was from.

She sighed and put her phone back inside her handbag. She was about to push the door open and stroll across the foyer when suddenly she heard a commotion. The main entrance door was opening, and much louder than usual. It was followed by heavy breathing. Lots and lots of heavy breathing. It was him. Absolutely spent and exhausted after his long hard morning run. Sarah's heart skipped two beats as she pressed her face up against the stained glass of the steel door even harder.

For a few moments, the jogging man rested his hands on his knees while gathering his breath. After a few seconds more he stood upright and approached the mail boxes. He took out three letters before making his way over towards the lift. As he stood there waiting for the lift doors to open, Sarah quickly studied his hands and fingers, but she couldn't seem to make out any kind of wedding ring. Or any kind of jewelry for that matter.

She delightfully smiled to herself. And secretly hoped that the lift would take another hour at least to make its descent down towards the ground floor so she could study the man further. To her utter dismay it did not and swiftly sprung open after only a few moments of the man putting his finger to the button.

As he stepped inside, the man seemed to feel the oddest sensation that he was being watched by someone, somewhere. He even made a darting glance over towards the dark stairwell door at the farthest region of the foyer.

Catching his glance, Sarah ducked rapidly down and well out of sight. She didn't feel too entirely confident that the man hadn't seen her, but then again, it was a very dark stairwell and the glass window on the door wasn't particularly well cleaned. When she finally found the courage to stand up straight and glance out through the window again the handsome jogger was gone.

Sarah took another deep breath. She placed her palm gently upon her frantically beating heart and desperately tried to compose herself all over again. With another deep breath she firmly placed her other hand upon the door handle, ready to leave. Suddenly, she heard the little girl's voice again from behind her. And for the second time in 24 hours she almost jumped out of her skin.

"What are you doing now?" asked the curious little girl.

Sarah let out a frightful yelp. She let go of the door handle and turned slowly around to face her. She knew she was going to have to get out of bed much, much earlier in the mornings ahead from now on.

"Not that it's any of your bloody business, young madam, but nothing... Nothing at all. Just felt a bit of cramp when I went to open the door, that's all. Nothing else

to see here.”

The little girl unleashed a very mischievous smirk.

“You were hiding from the neighbors again, weren’t you?”

“Oh, just bugger off, will you?”

And with that Sarah stormed right out of the stairwell door and into the main foyer.

The little girl chuckled hard to herself and shook her head as she watched Sarah hurry off, rather noisily, right out of the building and all without her usual cautious, creeping stride to her manner.

4.

It was late. Almost ten pm. Sarah approached her apartment building, her work finished for another day. Same as always, she hesitated for a good few moments, tucked up beside the dark and spacious bin shelter just to make doubly sure that the coast was clear over by the main foyer of the building before making her way inside.

This time though, instead of cautiously creeping her way through like she always did, she swiftly scrambled up the emergency stairwell and all the way up towards her apartment door like there was a prize on offer for the quickest time to make it there. In truth, she was just very anxious to get home. She had some new and important things to try out and time was of the essence.

Just as soon as Sarah found herself settled inside her apartment, she placed herself right in front of her long and narrow bedroom mirror. She was going to start a conversation with herself, as maddening and as crazy as that would have seemed to her at any point before that moment. Now, it seemed to be the most normal and natural thing to do in the whole wide world. In the conversation, she would be Sarah and her reflection would be the handsome jogger. It was as simple and as straightforward as that.

Sarah coughed a few times just to release the built-up tension and gain some much-needed composure. She stood up straight—but not too straight. More like a casual, relaxed straight. She hated making confident eye contact with anyone, to be perfectly honest, even with her own reflection. But she kept a strong will and fought through the heavy temptation of not being the first to glance away. Although, she might have just fainted with the shock and horror of it all if it indeed it had been her reflection that did indeed glance away first.

“Hi,” she said with a slight, confident smirk that just didn’t suit her complexion at all. “How’s it going? I’ve seen you around here a few times before, haven’t I?”

She waited for her reflection to answer her back but it didn’t seem to be that entirely bothered to do so or even appeared like it had anything to say for itself.

“Hey,” she started again. “So... How was the jog? Hot and sweaty, I’m guessing? Yes, you look very...sweaty... So, it must have been awfully hard and tiring work... I imagine...”

Both Sarah and her reflection cringed excruciatingly at her words. She really did have no idea how to flirt.

“Hey!” She tried again. “Nice jog? Where do you jog off to on your... jogs? Oh, that’s cool—just down by the canal. Uh huh, maybe you’d like some company next time? I mean jogging company, of course. I’m not that kind of girl, I’ll have you know... Oh you would... That’s great... That’s cool. How about I just meet you in the foyer tomorrow morning and we’ll—I don’t know—take it from there, I suppose.”

Sarah let out a deep sigh of frustration before planting her face straight into her open hands. She then let her body fall down sideways, straight onto her large and comfortable double bed.

“Jesus Christ, Sarah. What the bloody hell is wrong with you?”

When Sarah awoke the following morning, she cursed herself for not setting her alarm clock for an earlier time. Twenty minutes earlier to be exact. She desperately didn’t want to bump into that annoying little girl again. But then, she didn’t want to be late for work either.

She convinced herself that the little girl wouldn’t be there for a third day in a row, surely not. And just to be on the safe side she decided not to do her yoga routine after all and quickly got showered and dressed instead.

Sarah made her way down the stairwell. Eagerly, she listened out for any strange sounds that weren’t of her own making. Why was it, she asked herself, that she never heard the little girl creeping up on her, even though Sarah was supposed to be the master of all creepers?

Sarah slowed down to a crawl as she reached the very bottom of the stairwell. She eagerly checked every nook, cranny, and dark corner of the ground floor for any sign of the little girl who, of course, was nowhere to be seen. Sarah sighed. She checked the time on her mobile phone. It was 5:55 am. She hesitated. She told herself she should just go. She should leave and go to work and forget all about this light stalking and spying-on-her-neighbor nonsense.

But no, she decided to wait it out. She had another plan today. This morning she wanted to keep a keen eye on whichever mail box the jogger took his letters from. She was curious about what his apartment number might be and which floor he could be living on. Perhaps he even stayed directly above her or right below, or possibly on either side of her for that matter. Her imagination began running riot again. She could even picture herself with an empty glass held right up against the wall or floorboards, keenly listening to every sound and movement that the man made inside his apartment.

What craziness Sarah thought as she swiftly shook her head with shame. No, she insisted to herself. She would never do such a sad and demented act. That was borderline heavy-duty stalker material. Although, she knew in her heart that

if she did happen to find out that the handsome jogger was indeed her neighbor from above or below, then she probably would start omitting such weird and drastic behaviors. She shuddered again at such obsessive thoughts.

Sarah patiently resumed her waiting position at the bottom of the stairwell. She glanced out of the main doorway, checking to see if the coast was clear. It was, but she continued to stay put, rooted to the spot and just...watching. She glanced at the clock on her mobile phone for the umpteenth time in just a few minutes.

When she was about to make her exit, the jogging man suddenly appeared. He burst through the main foyer door, just as he'd done the day before, with such a strong, masculine presence. His chest and shoulders heaved up and down, hard and deep, as he tried to regain some composure over his breathing and exhausted state of being.

Sarah watched him move with fiery eyes and a stir in her belly that she hadn't felt since her teenage years, as the man made his way over towards his mail box. She tried to read the number on the slot, but it was too far away to see. Even if she squinted her eyes it was impossible to tell. She made a quick mental note of where his box was situated in the sequence of mail boxes, all piled up and down on top of each other.

Instead of grabbing his letters and taking them over to the lift, the jogging man hesitated for a moment before starting to open one of his letters.

A thought swiftly entered Sarah's head. This was her moment. This was her chance to exit the stairwell. Walk casually on out there and greet the man like a friend, and even perhaps begin that conversation she so desperately wished to begin.

Sarah took one deep breath after the other. She was going to do this. Damn right, she was going to do it. She really was gearing herself up to opening that stairwell door, strolling out, and talking to the handsome jogger—or at the very least, just to pass him by with a friendly smile on her face and a simple word of hi.

The man hesitated. He finished reading his letter before folding it back up into its envelope and moving over towards the lift. He didn't seem too happy as he ran his fingers through his sweaty hair.

Sarah firmly gripped the door handle. She was going to do it. She was going to open that dirty and stained stairwell door and present herself with a big wide smile to both the entire empty foyer and the handsome man still standing and waiting for the lift doors to open.

Sarah hesitated. She froze where she stood and couldn't even think straight. Immediately she lost her momentum and spontaneity the more she thought about what she was going to do or say. She began to nervously whisper to herself over

and over again about what exactly was the right thing to say when the best thing to do was to just not think about it at all, open the damn door, and just go with the flow. Whatever comes to mind, comes to mind. Whatever will be, will be. But it was too late. Her thoughts gripped her like a heavy vice. And she rooted herself even more steadily to the spot.

“Hi... Hey... Hi... How was your jog... Nice jog... Nice legs, I mean, nice jog... Do you always sweat so much when you jog...? That was a joke. Hi... Hey... Hi... How are you?”

Okay, she thought. *I'm ready*. And she really, finally was. She was just about to open the door and do what she had to do. Say what she had to say, but then alas! She froze in anxiety all over again and just couldn't go through with pushing down the handle and opening up that blasted door.

“Fuck!” Sarah cried to herself in utter defeat. “Fuck...”

The man then disappeared into the lift and the lift doors swiftly closed behind him. Sarah shut her eyes and turned her back to the grimy steel door. Gently she slid all the way down to the dirty, dusty floor. She unleashed another deep pent-up, frustrated sigh. Tears began welling up in her eyes.

“Why can't you just bloody well talk to people?” she sobbed while slapping her forehead over and over. “Why can't you just look people in the eye and say bloody hi?”

Suddenly, from the darkness of the upper stairwell steps, Sarah heard the sound of a faint and gentle chuckle. She opened her eyes to see the figure of the little girl sitting at the very top of the first row of steps. She had covered her mouth with her hands and was trying her utmost not to laugh at Sarah's strange and bizarre antics

“Jesus Christ!” Sarah cried out in anger. “Do you bloody well live in this stairwell or something?”

“If you can't talk to him, why don't you just write him a letter?” said the little girl, completely ignoring Sarah's question.

Sarah looked even more annoyed, if that were entirely possible. For a second, she looked as if she were about to tell the little girl to bugger off again. Instead, a slight calmness fell upon her and she let out a deep, deep sigh of relief before quickly realizing that the little girl might have a point after all.

“Actually, that's not a bad idea,” Sarah said as her eyes lit up.

“But I mean, like a proper letter. With pens and paper and nicely written handwriting. Perfumed-scented envelopes too. The old-fashioned way. Not emails or text messages. Just a good old-fashioned letter. Nobody writes those

things anymore. It's such a crying shame."

Sarah looked astonished at the little girl's wise words and when she squinted her eyes almost saw an image of a wise old Yoda sitting perched up on those stairs in her place.

"Wow, how old are you again?"

"Eleven."

"You have a very wise old head on your shoulders for an eleven-year-old little girl."

"I read a lot. Plus, my mum always used to say before she died that handwritten letters come from the soul. So, they speak to the soul. It's how she won my father's heart in the end. Through writing him letters."

"Your mum sounds like a very cool and wise person indeed. I'm sorry for your loss."

"It's okay. It was a long time ago."

There was a long, silent pause. But it was far from awkward or uncomfortable. Just a nice mellowed out silence. Sarah cleared her throat. She decided it was her turn to be nice and curious and ask the little girl a question or two about herself.

"So, how was your first day at the big school?"

"It was scary at first. But as the day went on, I actually started to enjoy it."

"Did you make any new friends?" Sarah enquired further.

"No, not yet. Well, maybe just one, kind of. But they didn't really ask me any questions about me or even tried to get to know me in the slightest, so I'm still a little unsure. I don't really consider people my friends until they ask me some questions about my life first."

"That's a good philosophy to have. But maybe your friend was just nervous about her first day at school, too? Just like you. Perhaps, you shouldn't discount her friendship just yet. Give her time."

"Him."

"Oh, right. Him."

"I'll try. But sometimes you can only listen to people talk about themselves for so long, you know."

Sarah chuckled at that. She knew what the little girl meant.

“Agreed. I know exactly what you mean.”

Another comfortable silence drifted upon them. Sarah took a moment to stand back up onto her feet again. She brushed herself down and ran her fingers through her tangled hair. She smiled warmly at the little girl before half turning to leave the stairwell. She was becoming very late for work. Not that anyone would ever know, since she was her own boss and the only person who worked in the building. But still, she would know. And that’s what mattered to her most of all, her principles.

Sarah put her hand on the door handle and pushed it down. She then paused before turning back to face the little girl again.

“Hey, sorry for telling you to bugger off the other day. I was just a little bit stressed. I wasn’t in a very good place or mood, to be honest.”

“Don’t worry. People telling me to bugger off happens more often than you’d think.” The little girl replied with a sly wink.

“What’s your name?”

“Alice. What’s yours?”

“Sarah.”

They both smiled warmly at that.

5.

In the dark of night, Sarah approached her apartment building. Finished work for yet another day. Same as always and through a force of habit she hesitated again, taking safe haven just inside the bin shelter before making her way into the block.

Inside the foyer, Sarah checked her mail box. There were two letters waiting for her along with some flyers. All unimportant. She picked them up and placed them inside her handbag. She started scanning over the other mail boxes until her eyes fell upon the jogging man's mail box. The name said: Mr. S Rankin. Flat 19 F.

He was two floors away from her.

Sarah let out a disappointed sigh. Still, she had a pretty good idea about what to do next. Her new friend Alice had given her the idea after all.

Back up at her apartment, Sarah sat down at her small tidy desk in her living room. With a pen and a notepad, she started to write a letter...

Dear Mr. S Rankin,

I don't know your full name just yet, but I'd like to think you are a Stephen or a Sam. You look like a Sam. Anyway, sometimes we pass each other coming and going from the building. I don't mean to be horrible when I completely ignore you or even never say hi when you do, or hide away from you in the stairwell working up the courage to come out and say hello. It's just, well, I have some social difficulties and trust issues with people in general and have done so for most of my life. But by writing a letter like this one, I hope to take little baby steps in overcoming these difficult issues. So, let's start at the beginning...

My name is Sarah...

Sarah continued to write her entire life story. About how she grew up with her strict parents. How they never let her go to a proper, traditional school and decided to homeschool her instead. How they never let her have any friends. And always made her believe that people were bad and could never, ever be trusted. That everyone had an agenda and always wanted something from you. They shielded her from society, foolishly not realizing the long-term damage they were doing to their little girl with her total lack of exposure to the outside world.

Finally, she finished off her letter with...

...All I'm asking for really is to perhaps, one day, make friends. That's all. This is not a soppy love letter. Nothing of the sort. Just a friendly neighbor asking another neighbor for a friendly cup of tea or a coffee someday, just to say hi and introduce ourselves. Nothing ventured, nothing gained and all that.

Sarah signed the letter at the bottom and even printed her name in full underneath. She didn't go through with Alice's suggestion of smearing a drop of her favorite perfume onto the envelope. She thought that it might be a bit too much and over the top. She wanted it to be a friendly letter, and making friends first and foremost was a good starting basis for all budding relationships. She'd of course read that in a good book somewhere.

Sarah folded up the paper and slid it into an envelope that she had borrowed-slash-stolen from the library's stationary drawer. She then licked the seal and firmly closed it up. Wasting no more time, Sarah left her flat immediately, smiling warmly to herself and looking like a woman with a new spring in her step. She knew that if she waited until the next morning to deliver her letter then there was a strong possibility that she would inevitably talk herself out of doing such a daring act. An act of declaring her feelings for another person, no matter what the motive or intentions.

She was just about to sneak down the emergency stairwell, just like she always did. It was a force of habit that she was going to find extremely hard to break. But with that new spring in her step she decided to turn confidently back around and take her chances with the lift down to the ground floor instead.

It was to be the very first time that she'd ever been inside one.

Nobody else entered the lift during her journey down to the main foyer. Which she wouldn't have minded anyway in that perfect serene moment, and would have just smiled gracefully at them instead while trying her utmost to be perfectly friendly.

On the ground floor, Sarah exited the elevator. She made her way over to the mail boxes still glowing and looking like a new woman possessed with a joyful spirit. For a second she thought that she might even start whistling too, but quickly stopped herself from doing so. That was surely a step too far for her.

She found Mr. Rankin's mail box and raised the letter up towards it. She was almost ready to slip the letter inside when she hesitated, freezing up instantly like some evil witch nearby had cast some sinister paralysis spell upon her.

For some inexplicable reason that she couldn't explain, she just couldn't find the strength and will power to go through with it.

For a further ten minutes, Sarah struggled emphatically and obsessively with

herself about placing the letter into the mail box. But no matter what her brain told her hand to do, the two would just not work together as one.

When she finally took a couple of deep breaths and convinced herself that everything was going to be all right—that this was something that she wanted, body and soul—that she had just about gathered enough courage and conviction to finally slide the letter through the slot, the noisy mechanics of the nearby lift started giving out loud clunking noises again, like it was back in use. Of course, this jolted her right back out of her comfort zone.

From behind the lift doors she could hear the voices of a man and a woman laughing and joking away. They were getting louder and louder the more the lift journeyed downwards.

Sarah started to panic. She didn't know what to do or which way to turn. In the spur of the moment she decided to bolt outside the building instead and into the darkness. She guessed that the people inside the lift must be on their way outside as well, so she hurried straight for the hidden comfort of the nearby bin shelter. It would be the best place to hide. Dark, smelly, and revolting. No one would hang around there too long.

When Sarah glanced back at the building's main foyer, her heart sank to the pit of her stomach. She could see that it was in fact the handsome jogger who was coming out of the lift and heading for the entrance along with another woman walking by his side.

Sarah's heart sank even deeper into her gut. Who was this woman? And what the hell was she doing with the handsome jogger, both of them chatting furiously and joking away?

As they exited the building, Sarah's heart was about ready to explode. She didn't think that such a thing could indeed be possible, but yes, it very much was, once she discovered just what the couple were holding in their hands.

Bin bags. Oh shit. There was only one place they could be heading. Straight for her and her hiding place.

Panicking frantically and clearly not wishing to be seen, Sarah, with no time to think or assess the situation any further, swiftly lifted the lid on the nearest waste bin, climbed up onto its lower metal step, and dived, head first, straight inside the dark, gloomy, and very stinky half-full bin. It was so dark inside that she had neither the time nor the inclination to see what exactly she was getting herself into.

She landed though on something very soft, squidgy and moist and which seemed to cover the entire surface area of the bin. Without any further delay, Sarah slammed down the lid on top of her. It was only when she had settled down into a squat-like position inside the soft and moist wetness that she quickly

realized just how bad the terrible smells inside really were.

It was absolutely disgusting. And when she pressed down with her hands to explore the area further, she could feel that it was piles and piles of old, rotten food and thousands of kilos of the stinking stuff too.

Sarah thought she was going to throw up at first, but soon pinched her nose with one hand while covering her mouth with the other. She told herself that she could get through this. It couldn't last for more than thirty seconds, surely to god. They'd throw their bags into one of the bins closest to the entrance before quickly heading off on their merry way again. Easy as that.

Outside, the jogging man and his lady friend, still chatting away about a recent episode of some crazy new Netflix show, approached the bin shelter and the first row of bins. With a stroke of luck in Sarah's favor, they only opened up the first two bins to throw their respective rubbish bags inside.

When Sarah heard the bin lids being closed shut again, she was just thankful that the ordeal was almost at an end and that she didn't have to hide inside the stinking food waste bin for too much longer.

Instead of leaving the bin shelter right away though, the woman casually stood, leaning up against the first rubbish bin as she lit up a cigarette. She offered one to the jogging man but he declined from taking it. The woman then began speaking about a recent movie she'd seen and how it was one of the best films she'd ever watched in a really long time.

Sarah continued to sit in a horrid and miserable silence inside the dark, grotty, and stinking bin. All she could do in her endless torment was listen to the never-ending conversation going on outside.

When would this torture be over? She continued to ask herself, over and over. Until finally, she found her answer.

Her mobile phone began to ring.

From outside, the jogging man and his lady friend instantly stopped what they were doing. They thought they might have imagined it at first, but no, there it was. The sound of a mobile phone ringing away, over and over, coming from somewhere nearby. At first, none of them could seem to pin point or understand where exactly the ring tone was coming from. Definitely somewhere within the bin shelter but from where exactly?

As the jogger and his lady friend listened more carefully, they soon realized that it was actually coming from one of the furthest away bins. The one where everybody in the apartment block dumped their wasted food.

The phone continued to ring.

The man and woman slowly glanced at each other without words, both of them totally bemused at how a phone could have gotten inside one of the waste bins. But soon concluded that some unlucky neighbor had accidentally thrown their phone out by mistake. Surely that had to be the answer? There was no other plausible explanation for it.

Back inside the waste bin, Sarah frantically rummaged around in the dark, then through her pockets, trying to find her blasted phone that kept ringing and ringing, nonstop, cursing herself for even bringing the damn thing with her in the first place. But in all honesty, she had just simply forgotten that it was even there in the first place, tucked up safely inside her jacket pocket for weeks without use.

She was even surprised that there was any damn battery left to make such a racket. But no, there appeared to be plenty of battery left to her eternal dismay.

With her hands and fingers covered in mucky, stinky, rotten food, Sarah eventually found the bloody thing and after several failed attempts, managed to turn it off, not even bothering to check who on earth could be calling her at such an ungodly hour. It must be something to do with the library, she assumed. Perhaps it had been broken into after she'd left this evening or had burned down due to some faulty electrical wiring. Whatever it was, she fumed; it could bloody well wait until the following morning.

Silence filled the air once more.

Sarah couldn't hear the couple talking any longer, but she knew instinctively that they were both still there, eagerly watching the bin she was still hiding inside and wondering just what on earth was going on in there.

Sarah closed her eyes and silently prayed that the couple would swiftly get bored of waiting and watching and soon leave. But they didn't. Instead, she heard them stepping even closer towards her bin. She even faintly heard the man say, "We should at least take a quick peek inside and see if we can find the phone. It must belong to someone in the building."

Sarah let out a deep, weary sigh. The game was up. Without further thought or hesitation, she rapidly stood to her feet, threw open the lid of the stinking bin like it was the most natural thing to do and the most normal place for her to be, in the whole wide world, before hurriedly climbing out.

Sarah gave the couple such a horrid fright at first.

The woman even thought that it might be the start of some zombie invasion. Initially mistaking the flaps of rotten food smeared all over Sarah's skirt and blouse as flaps of dead, rotten skin.

The smell was absolutely god-awful atrocious, too. Even the jogging man covered his nose before gasping and staring with utter disgust and disbelief at

Sarah.

Sarah then held out her phone, waving it in the air for the gob-smacked pair to see, as she walked casually on past them.

“Found it!” She cried. “Silly me. Threw the bloody thing out by mistake.”

And with her head held low, Sarah swiftly departed the bin shelter faster than a rat running up a drain pipe and headed straight back in the direction of her building.

The jogging man and his lady friend continued to watch her go on her way, absolutely speechless. They couldn't think of a single thing to say or action to make. They were so in shock by it all.

Sarah returned inside the building. She walked hurriedly past the lift and towards her secret stairwell again. In the harsh lighting of the main foyer the majority of her backside was still covered in raw food, from wet tea bags to mushy peas and dirty rotten banana skins. One skin even fell out from underneath her skirt and onto the tiled floor beneath her feet. But she kept on moving. Not even stopping to acknowledge it or pick it up.

Once inside the safety and darkness of the stairwell, Sarah came to a sudden halt and stopped dead in her tracks before putting her back right up against the wall. She started slapping her head over and over again too in great despair before finally bursting out into a fit of uncontrollable sobs.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid!” Sarah cried, over and over again.

When she finally stopped sobbing, she glanced to her right at a small bucket attached to the far stairwell wall that looked as if it hadn't been used in years. Without any further hesitation, she took out the letter from her jacket pocket and ripped it up into dozen little pieces before throwing them straight to the bottom of the nearby bin.

Sarah hurried all the way back up the stairwell, back up to her apartment, just as the next flow of tears started running down her cheeks.

6.

That night, Sarah couldn't sleep one little bit. The entire night she just continued to lie as straight as an arrow in her bed, eyes wide and gazing up at the ceiling, while gently sobbing to herself about what a fool she'd been.

When the morning finally came to end her suffering and it was time for Sarah to drag her sorry self out of bed, for the first time in her life and since she'd begun working at the library all those years ago, she was positively considering calling in sick and staying at home.

She would have done so too, but being so early in the morning there was absolutely nobody else she could call to fill in for her or at least open the library doors for the few public patrons who may or may not turn up.

Her council bosses worked in another building across town entirely and wouldn't even be starting their working day for another few hours yet either, at least. Plus, the thought of somebody else filling in for her, sitting at her desk, going through her things, using her coffee machine, and rearranging her books—what if her replacement even did a better job than she did and her bosses then decided that the library needed an extra pair of hands after all?

No, she had to go to work. She just had to.

Sarah made herself get dressed, but fought with herself every step of the way. Even forgoing both her daily yoga routine and shower. Of course, she'd had a good long hard scrub down in her shower the night before anyway, after her miserable ordeal in the bin shelter.

Sarah left the apartment. She felt so distraught that she didn't even bother checking the corridor for any sign of her neighbors as she duly headed for her beloved stairwell.

As Sarah reached the bottom of the steps, she went to pull open the emergency exit door at the bottom, but for the very first time since she'd been using the damn thing, she found that it had been locked firmly shut.

She couldn't believe it at first. And tried again. She must have pulled it incorrectly or it was perhaps stuck on a latch. But no, it still wouldn't budge or open one little inch. She frantically pulled it again and again with all of her strength and might, but still nothing.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” she cried on the verge of tears and some kind of hysterical breakdown.

Suddenly, from behind she heard footsteps coming down the stairwell from the next floor above. Sarah turned around, expecting to see her new friend Alice gazing down at her with pity. She didn’t want the little girl to see her like this, fearing that she may burst into tears at the precise moment she turned around to face her.

“Oh, Alice,” Sarah finally said without turning. “I fear that I’ve made such an absolute fool of myself, yet again.”

Whoever was behind her though didn’t utter a single word in response. When Sarah finally turned around, through teary eyes she focused on the figure standing at the top of the first set of stairs in front of her.

To her sheer and utter amazement, it wasn’t Alice at all, it was the handsome jogger. Only this time he was dressed more casually, wearing just a pair of jeans and a jumper. Just like he’d been dressed when she’d seen him the previous night in the bin shelter. A horrific memory that she sorely wished could be rapidly erased from her mind for all eternity.

“Hey,” said the man, just above a whisper and with the faintest hint of a warm smile brewing across his face.

Sarah looked stunned for words. She tried to speak but nothing would come out of her mouth.

“Sarah, is it?”

Sarah continued to look like a deer caught in headlights. Eventually she managed to make just the faintest of nods.

“I—ah...” the man said before hesitating mid-sentence. He then slowly pulled out Sarah’s letter from his back pocket. All of the pieces had been sellotaped back together again, in perfect symmetrical order and without a single piece missing.

Sarah looked even more stunned and confused and still at an utter loss for words.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I read your letter.”

Sarah took a moment to glance over at the small empty bin on the stairwell wall beside her.

“How—how did you...?”

All of a sudden, Alice, the little girl, emerged at the top of the stairs just behind the man.

“Actually, my daughter Alice found your letter and gave it to me last night. She said that you guys had become friends over the past week or so.”

Little Alice smiled warmly down at Sarah. Sarah though was still frozen in a stunned mess of emotions. No one could tell if she was ecstatically happy or really bloody mad, or perhaps just somewhere in between.

“Anyway...” the man continued. “We uh... We just wanted to invite you to breakfast with us this morning. Perhaps to make friends properly...”

Tears began spilling from Sarah’s eyes and down her cheeks. Alice smiled harder and warmer as Sarah finally snapped right out of her stunned state of mind. Immediately she began nodding and smiling uncontrollably like she had been waiting for such a moment all of her entire life.

“That would be... That would be really, really lovely... Thank you. Thank you both so very much.”

Sarah then began making her way back up the stairwell, one step at a time and one foot after the other, up towards her two new friends.

The End