

The Bradbury Residence

“What happened to you and your family, Mrs. Bradbury?”

The woman hunched over the interrogation room table, fiddling with her fingers. She’d been interrogated by multiple detectives, none getting her to even look up from the table.

“Mrs. Bradbury,” Detective Jacobs continued, “I can’t help your family if you don’t give me any information. Can you–”

“Send one of ‘em back,” Mrs. Bradbury interrupted, jittery and staring down at the dusty investigation table. At least she was talking. “An investigator. An officer. Just somebody. But the fewer people the better.”

“Alright Ma’am,” Detective Jacobs sighed and leaned back in the noisy metal chair. “We’ll send a couple of officers to check on the house one last time.”

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“This is stupid.”

Officer Mark Ellis unbuckled his seat belt and glared at the boring Bradbury residence.

“We’re wasting our morning listening to some crazy lady.”

“You talkin’ about Bradbury,” his partner, Wilson, began, “or Jacobs?”

Mark brought his glare from the house to his partner.

“Knock it off with Jacobs. She’s doing her job and you keep talkin’ smack.”

Wilson shoved the last bite of his cheap breakfast sandwich in his mouth and grumbled through his food, “I just don’t like when women tell me what to do outta nowhere.”

“That’s probably why Grace left.”

“Well, dang. I thought it was too early for an ex-wife joke.”

Wilson’s phone buzzed across the dash.

“Speak of the Devil. I gotta take this. You good to check alone?”

Mark nodded as he slid out of the patrol car and walked to the house. He’d already swept it twice before and found nothing. As he pulled the key out, he thought he saw the blinds from the left window flip around, almost like it blinked at him. He flicked his head only to find an unmoving window. This house was going to drive him crazy.

Wilson rolled down his window with his phone still mumbling audibly in his hand. “You alright?”

“Yeah,” Mark confirmed, “just paranoid.”

He unlocked the door and walked in.

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The house was exactly as expected. Plain and tidy, crosses strung along the wall, coats by the door. The lights were off. Mark decided to go through the top floor first since the narrow staircase met him there in the entryway. He flicked on the light that illuminated the staircase; the first floor stayed dark below him.

A cross on the wall to his right shifted, stopping him on the staircase. Suddenly, a quiet tap from inside the wall knocked the cross forwards, another clack banging it back against the wall. Its wooden frame swayed from the impact.

Mark held his breath till it completely stilled. He was still holding his breath as he scanned the house for any more sounds, but it was quiet and still once again. It felt like the house was holding its breath with him. He quickened his way up the stairs.

“Must be a mouse,” he mumbled to himself as he stalked through the upstairs hallway.

“Animals in the walls freakin’ me out on the job.”

He walked through the kids' rooms first. The girl's room and her posters of teen stuff, the boy's room and the toy cars on the ground. Nothing new, and pretty standard for the neighborhood. The oversized southern kitchen downstairs was the only memorable thing about this house.

Next, Mr. and Mrs. Bradbury's room. The peeling walls were this awful shade of beige, though it looked like someone had been repainting it due to the splotches of a slightly different beige in one corner. It looked like dry skin, scratchy and uncomfortable.

He finally was at the door to the smallest bedroom, the twins' nursery. His hand hesitated over the doorknob. Even when he'd been bored by the Bradbury residence in his previous sweeps, he'd found this room to be off-putting. The creepy vintage dolls? Nope. Irrationally, he put his ear to the door, hoping silence would comfort him.

Instead, he heard deep, loud breathing.

His stomach dropped. His hand went to his gun. He should have called for Wilson, but some stupid part of his brain made him grow a pair. He raised his gun, and mustered the courage to turn the doorknob, ready to take out whatever criminal broke in.

As he opened the door, the breathing abruptly stopped, like it was surprised into silence. The room was exactly as it had been when he left his last sweep. The toys stared back at him, judging.

“. . . nah.”

Mark sped out of the nursery and practically flung himself down the stairs. Wilson could call him a wimp for months; he didn't care. Something was wrong with this house, and he wasn't going to stick around to find out what exactly it was.

He was at the entryway door. His sweaty hand was on the knob, turning it with enough force he was worried he'd break it off.

The door was *jammed*. Something was holding him in.

Mark was shaking, his vision spotting in the corner of his eyes. He was breathing quickly, both fists pulling on the door with full force. He needed out.

No, he needed to calm down.

Mark slowed his breathing. He was overreacting. He'd call Wilson to come help him get out.

He placed his hands on the door's cool wood to help him ground himself, but he found that the wood wasn't cool at all, but oddly warm to the touch. He stepped away from the door, nervous. His hand was on his receiver, calling for backup, when he heard it.

The breathing.

Like it was all around him, loud, clear, and wet. There was some sort of gushing, pulsating sound coming from the kitchen, like something chewing on a large piece of gum.

Mark's eyes burned from not blinking, frozen in the warm, stale entryway of the Bradbury residence, as the room darkened around him. The blinds were slowly closing, blocking the morning sunlight. He was boarded in, the only light emitting from the flickering bulb over the staircase, and the soft white light coming from the kitchen.

The kitchen light.

The light he hadn't turned on.

Mark couldn't take his eyes from the faint light bleeding onto the entryway floor. He inched his way towards the kitchen. He was a cop; he could handle anything. He mustered up either courage or fear, but he wasn't sure which intense emotion willed him to move.

One step. Two steps. All towards the pendant light illuminating the gape where the Bradburys' sink should be but wasn't. Porcelain littered the tile floor and stood embedded in the flesh-colored walls. The hole gurgled, sour odor wafting towards him.

One step. His life flashed.

Playing baseball with his buddies in tenth grade.

Another step.

Meeting his wife at a comic convention.

Another step.

Graduating police academy.

The final step.

Getting assigned to go check on the Bradbury residence.

He looked down.

An enormous, contorting, human throat looked back at him.

The walls started to fall, revealing large chunks of slick flesh surrounding him. Mark's feet were giving out under him as the floors split and the fleshy walls shifted, pulsating.

He gunned it to the entryway. The ceiling was falling. Slimy fluid dripped onto his face.

He was too focused on getting out before he was swallowed.

He was having to crouch and run now, as the flesh evolved around him. He was on his hands and knees by the time he got to the door, grabbing the handle with all the force he had left.

He was able to open the door, barely.

Then the teeth came.

Large, brown, grimy teeth the size of his head, clamping down out of the doorway.

He screamed. For Wilson, for his wife, for Jacobs, for God, for mercy, for anything, but it

was no use.

The tongue he had been crawling on lifted, and slid him into the house's throat, undulating to swallow him down with the Bradbury family.

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Detective Jacobs lowered her phone to face the strange, hollow woman sitting beside her in the interrogation room. Officer Wilson was still screaming on the other end of the phone, a muted cacophony of hysterics and profanity in Jacobs' hand. Wilson had called for back-up, but he couldn't get to Officer Ellis, or get into the Bradbury residence at all.

Mrs. Bradbury continued to chew away at her nails, the cuticles now slowly bleeding onto her lips.

"Why is my officer locked in your home?"

Mrs. Bradbury went still. Her hands returned to her lap, staining her jeans with the blood on her fingers. She refused to meet the detective's eyes.

"I'm sorry. I-I thought it would be full. I just wanted them to see. I didn't think anyone would believe me. I... thought it was finished," Mrs. Bradbury whispered, "for now."

"Mrs. Bradbury," Detective Jacobs questioned, her tone sharp, "what did my officer just walk into?"

Mrs. Bradbury finally met her eyes.

"It's mouth."