

What Kind of Person

Alice Smith didn't know that she would be a murderer when the day began. She just wasn't that kind of person. She got up, had her thermos of coffee, and watched her husband make a feast for a family that wouldn't eat it. The antique stove filled the kitchen with the smell of onions, sage, and turkey meat. The whipped cream was whipped. The pies were cooling on the counter. She knew their son and his wife and children wouldn't even show up until they had held dinner off from midday to mid afternoon to evening. And then, right when Alice finally ate her supper and put out the pie, they would roll into the driveway and the daughter-in-law would say "No pie for us!"

Every damn time.

Alice stood by the sink, in a crisp pair of jeans and an ironed tee-shirt, and looked at the clean yellow kitchen full of food that wouldn't be eaten.

All because of *that woman*.

That woman that her son had married.

Alice's initial dreams of a family had gone out the window after her son, Stanley, had ripped his way out of her—permanently rearranging everything in there—and making certain that no little girl with blonde curls would ever be born to her. Her only consolation had been the hope that her son's future wife would be the answer to her desire for a blonde daughter.

Instead, Stanley brought home a pinched, stringy woman who refused to eat meat—not even fish!—or dairy or eggs or honey. Why on God’s green earth she wouldn’t eat honey was beyond Alice’s comprehension. To Alice’s dismay, the daughter-in-law almost immediately popped out two pinched, stringy boys who would amount to nothing but a couple of dirty hippies. She’d given up hope then, until four years ago, that woman had birthed a girl: A blonde little thing with curls and big blue eyes.

Alice sat down at the kitchen table and waited. The sweet little cat clock over the stove wagged its ticking tail back and forth. The sun outside moved across the window. Harold tinkered away in his garage, his cooking for the day done.

Alice held dinner until the very last moment she could. She poked the turkey and poked it again. It was dry as a bone.

And dry as a bone is how she served it.

She and Harold ate in a companionable enough silence, him finishing his crossword left over from the morning, and her silently fuming, eating only three peas, two bites of dry turkey, and a translucent sliver of cranberry jelly.

Just as she served the pie (Harold had made apple *and* pumpkin *and* mince, for goodness sake) she heard the pop of gravel in the front yard that heralded the daughter-in-law’s station wagon.

Alice continued to serve the pie even as her husband shuffled happily off to greet them. She set her jaw and refused to go outside. She didn’t want to see that filthy car with its shoddy peeling bumper stickers. She already knew what each of them said: “Will Work For Peace!”, “Keep Tahoe Blue!”, “Animals Are Little People in Fur Coats!”, “Arms are for Hugging!”

Alice didn't look up as the door swung open. The daughter-in-law pushed through with a cauldron of evil-smelling soup, and three dirty children in tow. The littlest one had half her hair chopped off and a big hunk of it was dyed a horrible swampy blue.

"Good lord," Alice gasped.

"No pie for us. We have soup," Jacqueline said in lieu of a proper greeting.

"I helped to make it," the oldest boy pronounced. "It's miso and radish." He had a small face and a close-cropped head, one ratty tail of hair sprouting from the very back.

"Yeah, no pie. We don't eat pie," the other boy said glumly, crossing his arms over his sparrow chest.

"What's pie?" the youngest asked, surveying the room with her great blue eyes.

The daughter-in-law ignored the children. She leaned forward and swept a place clean on the table with one hand.

Aside went the glass dish full of quivering red cranberry sauce; aside went the antique gravy boat with the little hand painted rabbits; aside went the cold crystal bowl of fresh whipped cream that Harold had made.

Into the place of all those beautiful things went a brown earthenware pot full of thin broth and bits of floating green.

"No pie?" Alice asked, pressing one hand into her side where she sometimes got a pain when she was aggravated. "Not even apple?"

"No," Jacqueline said, pressing her thin lips over her teeth. "No pie."

"We don't eat pie!" the one with the rat-tail piped.

"What's pie?" the little one said again, stomping her bare, dirty foot.

“Not even pumpkin? It's practically a vegetable. It's got—” Alice thought hard, “Antioxynests!” she said finally.

The look of disdain on the daughter-in-law's face was too much.

“Fine!” Alice sniffed. “I'll get bowls.”

She went to the kitchen, ignoring the happy laughter that the children gave to Harold. He was always the favorite. He pandered to them and their mother besides. Alice always tried to tell him that this was not the life she had envisioned. She wanted her son here and the children, though the boys *did* rather take after their rat-faced mother, rat tails in their hair and all. She just didn't want that woman in her house. Once, when he was drunk, her son told Alice that that woman put thumbtacks in his chair because he brought ice cream into the house. Thumbtacks! Because of ice cream! What kind of person would do such a thing?

Alice peeked out into the living room where the table had been set for seven. The daughter-in-law was wearing a flowing pair of pants, made out of some stuff that looked as cheap as could be. Alice noticed with a small amount of glee, that her rear-end was starting to look jiggly. Alice herself had a relatively firm buttocks, something that she chalked up to a life of healthy eating: milk and breads and plenty of meat. Why, she never ate a miso in her life and would be damned if she even knew what it was!

Alice pattered in the kitchen, straightening a towel here, consolidating the leftover meat into one container. She read and re-read the framed embroidery that read: “This is my kitchen and I'll do whatever I damn please.” She loved that embroidery. She had caught the daughter-in-law staring at it with a curled lip once. Just thinking about that woman judging her made Alice want to spit. It wasn't fair. And that blue hair on the little girl! At least it would grown back. At

least she had blue eyes and a sweet face. At least there was one girl in the family, someone to take after Alice.

Still, she thought, the littlest one was no girl, not really, but it was the fault of the upbringing. She was barely four but already skinny as a rail. She blew things her brothers called “snot rockets” all over the hand-tatted lace on the sofa. She thought farts were the funniest thing in the world. No matter how many times Alice told her to say “gas” instead of “fart” or better yet say nothing about it at all, the little one just laughed and laughed.

Alice knew she could raise the girl up much better than the daughter-in-law could. The woman wasn't fit to be a mother. Last Thanksgiving, Stanley had told her that she wouldn't let the children eat anything but soup past three in the afternoon. Alice had told him that was child abuse! What kind of person starves a child? It was right after she heard this story that Alice decided something needed to be done.

She had gone so far as to order a certain kind of tincture from a place online that promised to send it to her discreetly if she sent them cash first. She didn't really think they would send it. Honestly, she thought that she was throwing three hundred and fifty dollars right into the dust bin. But then it came in a small brown bottle with a label that said “Fish Oil” and a tiny sticker on the bottom that said “do not consume” with a familiar picture of a skull and crossbones.

The moment she had the bottle in her hands she knew she wouldn't use it. She was not that kind of person. So she had stuffed it into the very back of the cupboard and had forgotten all about it.

But now, she remembered it. It was there in the cupboard, far back, behind the bowls, and so she took it out. A small brown bottle, covered in dust. It looked innocent enough. Why, it

looked like all of the little brown bottles the daughter-in-law brought over to Harold. She told Harold they were vitamins and minerals. Supplements. Alice thought they were nonsense. Snake oil. But Harold always tried everything once. That was the kind of man he was.

She thought briefly about putting some of the poison—no, the *tincture*, just a tincture—into one of the bowls. She saw her hand unscrewing the cap. She saw her neat, unpolished fingers squeezing the black nipple and then letting go. She saw amber fluid snort into the glass dropper. But that was as far as it went. She put it hurriedly back down far into the cupboard and grabbed a stack of bowls.

“Here we are,” she said cheerily, breezing into the living room. The children were seated at the table and Harold was showing them how to tie knots.

“This one here’s the sheet bend,” he said in his measured tone, big fingers moving surely through the steps. “You put one end through the bight, see, and behind this tail here,” he demonstrated.

“What’s a bight?” the littlest one asked.

“Why, a bite is what you take out of a piece of pie!” he exclaimed, kissing her on the nose and twinkling at her with blue eyes.

“Nah, it’s the loop you make with the rope,” the middle one said, tying the knot perfectly on the first try.

“This is dumb,” the biggest one tugged at his rattail and looked towards his mother, who was spooning the broth into the bowls. “Give me the most seaweed, mom,” he demanded, holding his bowl out, his half-finished knot dangling from one fist.

“Whazzat?” Harold asked, bouncing the little one up and down on his knee while she pretended it was a horse and she a cowboy. “Seaweed?”

“It’s good for digestion after a big, fatty meal,” said the daughter-in-law. “It has *antioxidants*.” She smiled at Harold and gave Alice a sidelong look that Alice decided was pure evil.

“Well, then spoon me up some of that...whatever it is. It sure smells good, honey,” Harold said, holding out a bowl.

Alice looked on in exasperation as the daughter-in-law gave him a big helping of the stuff. She turned on her heel and stalked back to the kitchen.

She took out the brown bottle again and put it next to the sink. What had possessed her to buy such a thing in the first place? She felt like she could hardly remember now. Perhaps she was going to use it on mice or rats. They sometimes got into the back pantry and ate through cereal boxes and crackers. That must have been why she would even purchase such a thing. She touched it with one hand and walked back into the living room.

“Who wants coffee?” she asked, watching them all around the table eating their soup, lashings of brown broth dotting her good white table cloth.

“I’ll have some,” her son said from the couch and Alice startled around to look at him.

“My god, Stanley, I had no idea you were here!”

“Thanks a lot, Mom,” he snapped and went back to watching the game on the television.

Jacqueline raised one thin hand. “I’ll have Rooibos tea if you have it,” she said, handing the little one a green tablet. “Herbal tea if you don’t, and nothing if you don’t have either.”

The little girl popped the pill into her mouth and chewed it right up, teeth turning green.

“What’s that now?” Harold asked, bussing her chin with one big thumb. The little girl grinned at him with her swampy mouth.

“It’s algae,” the daughter-in-law said, offering a tablet to him.

“Whazzat?” he asked, looking at it through his reading glasses.

“Algae. It’s from a lake. It’s good for you.” Jacqueline leaned forward, her sharp cheekbones catching the light from the football game.

“Is that right?” Harold mused. He put it in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully.

Alice stalked back to the kitchen.

When the daughter-in-law announced that they were leaving, Alice reached for the littlest one. She wanted to see if the blond hair was as soft as hers used to be. The girl kicked and screamed and said that Alice smelled like farts. Aghast, Alice went to the kitchen and stayed there until they were all gone. She sat at the kitchen table with her face in her hands. Harold came in eventually and was soon elbow deep in greasy water, washing the dishes. When he was almost done, Alice stepped behind him and sighed. He didn’t turn around so she sighed again.

“That bad?” he asked, running a sponge slowly up and down the carving board.

“She’s horrible, Harold!” Alice burst out.

“Can’t you try to get along?” he asked, turning one side of his face to her. From this angle his eye look like the color of sand, though she knew that if he turned to face her it would be blue. He always did have the most beautiful eyes.

“I don’t know if I can stand it,” she said. “The things she decides are right for my grandchildren...”

“You’ve always thought yourself a better judge,” he said mildly, draining the sink.

“You don’t think I am?” she snapped.

He dried his hands slowly on a dishcloth and slung it over his stooped shoulder. “I think that you know best.”

She stared at him.

“You do?” she quavered.

“Course I do,” he said, brushing her cheek with his dry lips.

"Oh, Harold," she said and she leaned her face into his big chest.

That night she didn't sleep. She lay in the bed she had shared with her husband for fifty years and clenched her hands over and over and she thought of blonde ringlets and blue eyes and poison. She didn't move when Harold got out of bed with the sun. She listened to him cooking his breakfast in the kitchen. She knew exactly what steps he took: first he mixed up a batch of oatmeal with pine nuts and dried plums and the nasty wheat germ the daughter-in-law had given him, then he boiled a big pot of water for his coffee, then he poured the leftover into a big thermos for her when she got up. The familiar sounds were comforting and she drifted off to sleep, finally, as the sun slowly crept in through the window.

She woke up when the sun elevated itself up into the blue sky—a sky that didn't have a single cloud in it—and only then did she sit up, pressing one hand to her forehead. She had a horrible headache that she didn't think she would ever recover from.

Alice tottered out into the brown living room, blinking in the dusty light. She stared for a moment at Harold's armchair. It used to be pink but was now it was the dusty greasy grey of a dishrag left in the sun. Suddenly, she felt a dread so pure it felt almost like laughter. It shot through her and she dashed into the kitchen.

Alice rounded the corner and slipped in a small brown puddle of coffee.

Her world went sideways as she fell and she hit her head on the white stove. Her skull staved in and sent a shard of bone into her brain. She landed on the linoleum, staring eyes meeting those of Harold's, who was stretched out of the floor with the coffee cup broken to pieces in his limp, dead hand. She thought of her daughter-in-law-in-law. She thought of antioxidants. She moved her eyes with careful slipping concentration to the little brown bottle by the sink. What kind of person...

The End