

The Specialist

As the Specialist arrived, it was raining.

Rain was something of an inevitability when visiting any small English village in the middle of nowhere, but to the Specialist, this sort of arrival was new: holding the umbrella to shelter her hair, walking carefully through the streets to avoid the worst puddles, long tan coat pulled tight around her with one arm to keep the warmth in as much as possible. The Specialist had never had to deal with this sort of thing before.

In fact, this was her first time dealing with any case, though she had decided she wouldn't mention that to the family when she arrived.

In all likelihood, this case would be much the same as what the previous Specialist, from before she took over the position, had encountered. Cup of tea with the mother, go and talk to the child, complete the usual ritual, add a little bit of flair to make sure the parents felt they were getting their money's worth, then leave before any consequences could catch up with them.

There had been specific instructions left by her predecessors, from who knows how many generations back, and case files documenting every instance of a successful transference, so really, she should have known that her fantastical ideals of this job wouldn't live up to reality. The Specialists' task moved in loops, back and forth, essentially the same job over and over again, stretching back for an eternity, and she would simply complete her part in it. That was all.

Thunder rumbled and lightning crashed across the sky as she neared the house she had been called to. It was an old cottage, tucked away to the side of a dead-end road lined with thick hedges, right at the edge of the village. The walls were covered with plants that had long since forced a surrender from generations of gardening efforts, stretching from side to side to form a mesh that obscured any trace of the stonework underneath. Lightning flashed, and the sudden brightness cut through the general gloom of the night, accentuating the shadows and exaggerating the grim atmosphere. The Specialist shivered.

She stepped off the road and onto the narrow path that led to the house. The only success of gardening this house had seen was a valiant attempt to keep these stones clear, the tangled roots having been cut sharply at the path's perimeter providing a clear walk to the similarly outlined front door. The paint was slightly flaking, and the handle had seen better days, but it was a normal door, illuminated by a normal little light overhead which flicked itself on as the Specialist stepped closer. Further inspection uncovered no doorbell, so the Specialist rolled up her sleeve, took a deep breath, and rapped her knuckles against the wood.

A moment passed, then a brief shuffling came from within, and a woman heaved open the door. She held it ajar and looked expectantly at the Specialist.

The Specialist cleared her throat. "Mrs Williams, I presume?"

Mrs Williams nodded, but made no effort to move out of the way. She looked precisely like what she was - middle-aged and tired - and the Specialist was perfectly willing to believe she was simply a mother worried about her son.

"You the exorcist?" Her voice was similarly unremarkable, so the Specialist didn't remark on it.

"Among other things"

Mrs Williams looked the Specialist up and down, then nodded again. "You'd better come on in from the cold."

"Cheers."

The Specialist stepped over the threshold, and was ushered into the kitchen as she rested her umbrella against the wall to dry and pulled off her coat. The kettle was already on, the teabags already out, and Mrs Williams was searching for another mug in the back of a cupboard, then turned as she heard the kitchen door shut.

"Tea?"

The Specialist nodded, smiling politely. Mrs Williams resumed her search, eventually settling on a bright yellow one. The Specialist watched as Mrs Williams tossed a tea bag into two mugs, poured the water, and added milk with what could under no circumstances be described as careful precision. Her hands shook a little as she held the yellow mug out to the Specialist. The mug had a strange matte texture which rubbed against her hands, but the Specialist tried her best to ignore it as she took a sip, then set it carefully on the table as she sat down.

"You'll be wanting to hear about Tommy, of course," Mrs Williams said.

"Of course." The Specialist took out a small notebook and a pencil. "When did his problems start?"

Mrs Williams sighed. "Well, I suppose... The problems really started a few months ago. Of course, he's always been strange, poor thing, there were hints of things since he was tiny, but never this bad. I just didn't know what could have caused it... until I realised the obvious."

The Specialist scribbled a few notes down, then looked up. "And Tommy is your only child?"

"Yes. Yes, I never understood how people could cope with more than one. One small boy is enough of a nightmare for me and my husband, a nightmare!" She forced out a laugh. "How people can cope with more than one... The Stevensons, friends from church, bless, they've got six. Six!" Mrs Williams shook her head slowly, took a gulp of her tea, then continued. "He bit a teacher, did I say that on the phone? You don't expect that beyond a certain age, but he bit him, right on the arm, drew a bit of blood. That was the final sign that something wasn't right."

"And when was that?"

"Last week, a few days before I called. Apparently Mr Butterworth had corrected him incorrectly on something, then tried to take his toy away."

"And how old is Tommy?"

"Ten."

The Specialist made a small note on her pad that had nothing to do with the conversation.

"I should say," Mrs Williams continued, "we had several complaints from our friends about that. They wanted Tommy removed from the school entirely, you know? I agreed for the time being, but not permanently. It wasn't our Tommy, it can't have been. I know my Tommy. You'll get my Tommy back, and we can send him back, and everything will be the same."

"Were the other parents afraid that he'd attack their children too?"

“Oh, no, they were outraged that their children had learned a few new rude words from their teacher in the aftermath. I don’t know what their problem with it was, though, I mean, the whole point of school is to be educational, isn’t it?”

“I couldn’t possibly comment. I never learned much in school myself, I was about Tommy’s age when I stopped attending.”

Mrs Williams eyed the Specialist suspiciously.

The Specialist sipped her tea.

“So, with Tommy... What do you think the issue is?” Mrs Williams asked. “Is it a demon?”

“A demon?” The Specialist folded her notepad shut and looked Mrs Williams in the eye. “That’s quite a conclusion to jump to, don’t you think?”

Mrs Williams laughed sharply. “That’s what James, my husband, that’s what he said when I first suggested calling you. I’d have thought someone in your field would be more open to those ideas.”

“I do try my best, but in this case...” The Specialist considered for a second. “There are many other things in this world that have something to gain from the bodies of small children, which often act in ways which lead themselves to an explanation for Tommy’s situation more so than the idea of demonic possession.”

“Such as?”

“I won’t name them in a place like this. Names have power, Mrs Williams, why do you think I’m only ‘The Specialist’?”

“Well, to be blunt, I had assumed you were trying to make yourself sound more mysterious.”

The Specialist laughed. “A little bit of that never hurt anyone. The point is, any number of these things could have their metaphorical or literal claws in Tommy right now.”

“But if that’s happened,” Mrs Williams said, “How can you get my Tommy back?”

“Now, let’s not jump to conclusions, Mrs Williams. We don’t know what’s happened to your son.”

“But you can find out?”

“Yes. However, the process of diagnosis and application of a solution will be draining, so I might not have a chance to speak with you about it after the fact. And, well, your child will probably not want to recall the experience.”

“What are you saying?”

“That I might not be able to let you know exactly what it was that is in Tommy.”

“Oh,” Mrs Williams said, “I see.”

“First things first, though, I need to speak with Tommy, or whatever it is that claims to be Tommy. With any luck, there’ll be a completely rational explanation, and my services won’t be necessary.”

“Is it really worth talking to... it?”

The Specialist smiled. “I always try to see something of myself in them, by the time I’m done. That’s the most important thing.”

“I just want my son back.”

The Specialist picked up her mug. “I will try my best. Where is he?”

“James locked Tommy down in the cellar. Part of a punishment. He’s much harsher on Tommy than I could ever be.”

“Does he not also believe this isn’t Tommy’s fault?”

“He thinks Tommy’s being difficult on purpose for no reason. That’s ridiculous, though. Tommy wouldn’t do that. He’s not like that, he’s a good boy.”

“And to teach Tommy a lesson, James locked him in the cellar?”

“Yes.”

“James isn’t here now. I assume he’s at work?”

Mrs Williams nodded.

“Why is Tommy still down there?”

“I might not agree with his reasoning,” Mrs Williams said, “but he’s right. Whatever’s pretending to be Tommy right now, I don’t want it near me.”

The Specialist nodded, and stood.

“I’d better take a look, then.”

The Specialist walked slowly down the steep stairs to the cellar, mug of now lukewarm tea still in her hand.

James was probably more right than his wife about the cause of Tommy’s strangeness, the Specialist thought. She’d have to make sure before proceeding, just in case, but really, from what she’d heard, Tommy wasn’t possessed. There was no real need for her to be here, from that point of view.

The Specialist had her own reasons for staying.

The door was bolted from the outside, and as the Specialist pulled it back, the scraping seemed to echo off every wall. The hinges creaked as she pushed it open and stepped inside.

Floorboards squeaked underfoot as she stepped into the dark cellar. A single lightbulb hung from the ceiling, casting a dim orange glow into the centre, and directly underneath, knees tucked to his chest and eyes screwed tightly shut, was Tommy. He was rocking back and forth, and tapping something in his hand against the floor, and made no indication he’d noticed the Specialist enter and shut the door behind her.

“Hi,” the Specialist said quietly.

No reaction.

“I’m here to help you, Tommy.”

Nothing.

The Specialist tried a different approach. “What’ve you got there?”

Tommy stopped rocking and looked up, then opened his hand slowly to reveal a small plastic dinosaur, scratched and worn.

“Do you like dinosaurs, Tommy?”

Tommy nodded.

“I did too, when I was your age,” the Specialist smiled warmly at him, “do you have a favourite?”

Tommy muttered something that could have been “velociraptor,” although the Specialist wasn’t entirely sure.

“Really?” she laughed quietly. “That was mine too.”

“Did Mum ask you to talk to me?”

The Specialist nodded slowly. “Yes, she did. Do you know why?”

“She says I’m under the influence of Satan.”

“... Did she now?”

“She said she was going to get someone to force me back to how I used to be. But that wasn’t me, I just pretended to be that way. Dad always preferred that.”

As the Specialist got slowly closer, she could see the red mark across Tommy’s cheek. “And then... you stopped pretending?”

“Yeah. I don’t pretend at school anyway, but...”

“You bit your teacher.”

“I didn’t want to, but it was the only way he’d listen. I wouldn’t bite anyone else, either, I know that Mr Butterworth likes me so I thought I’d be able to do it once before he started to force me to be normal too.”

The Specialist nodded. “You know, when I was your age, I was very similar.”

“You bit your teachers too?”

“No, not quite like that... But then someone came to help me. A specialist in working with children who are different. She helped me, then once I was ready, I got to do the same job that she did. And she stayed behind, and did all my pretending for me.”

“What does that mean?”

“Would you like me to do that for you? You’ll never have to pretend to be normal ever again. I’ll do it for you.”

By this point, she had reached Tommy, and crouched down opposite him. Tommy met her gaze.

“That would be nice.”

“Do you think you’ll be up to it? Doing my job, helping people like you?”

Tommy nodded carefully.

“Excellent,” the Specialist said, “just give me a moment to prepare my things, and then we’ll begin.”

She put her half-empty mug of tea down on the floor, and retrieved three items from her pocket as she shrugged off her coat: a piece of chalk, a single blue plastic glove, and a hair tie.

Tommy’s eyes followed the Specialist as she scraped the chalk along the ground, leaving a circle of white around him. She leaned down and marked a few details around the edge. Some of them were important symbols, little bits of writing that would help the process along, but most of it was just decorative; the Specialist held her predecessor’s philosophy that people were more willing to believe something supernatural had happened if there was a big chalk circle on the floor by the end of the night.

Next, she picked up the hair tie, and pulled back her long dark hair into a loose ponytail. She rolled up the sleeve on her right arm, and pulled on the glove. Picking up the mug from the floor with her other hand, the Specialist drained the last of her tea. It had cooled much

more as she had spoken to Tommy, and she felt the texture rubbing inside her mouth, but choked it down. She could feel the remnants of the texture clinging to the inside of her mouth.

The arm holding the mug dropped down to her side and she let it drop. It bounced slightly as it landed on the wood of the floor, but didn't smash. The last dregs dripped on the floor as it lay on its side.

The Specialist took a deep breath, raised her other hand, and, trying hard to ignore the plastic taste, pushed it into her mouth.

The fingers wormed themselves inside first, wriggling against her tongue and teeth on their journey downwards. As they wriggled towards the back of her mouth, the rolled-up end of the glove caught slightly on her teeth, and snapped down onto her wrist as she jostled it free.

The Specialist's fingers prodded downwards now, into a space which should have been barely wide enough for a single digit, but she nudged at the sides of her throat, and a *pop* resounded as her jaw opened wider, and the gap inside broadened.

Tommy's eyes widened. The Specialist didn't see - her eyes were tightly shut as she concentrated.

The hand went down further, tickling at the sides of her throat and yet meeting no resistance. Her mouth opened wider and wider as the other end of her arm raised itself up, until the elbow was almost within as well.

Suddenly, the hand met no resistance at all, as it burst into an even more impossibly wide space within her. As the Specialist pushed more of her arm inside, the tips of her fingers brushed against the surface of a liquid, then, with only a moment's hesitation, she plunged them down beneath the surface.

The liquid was thick, and as she wriggled her fingers and stretched downwards it pushed back against her. She reached down, and then, at the bottom of this space, she found what she had been looking for - and pulled.

Her arm burst out of her mouth with an explosive motion, and the Specialist doubled over and threw up. The tea came first, splattering across the floor and over the chalk circle. Then, a moment later, there was the stomach acid, mixed with mucus that made it cling to the surface of the wooden boards. Finally, with even greater retching, something thick and painful and awful was pulled up. She spat hard, but this time something seemed to cling to her mouth. Even as the mouthful hit the floor, it was hanging on by a thin, black, sticky thread to wherever inside it had come from.

The Specialist looked up, mouth coated in a viscous black *something*, and smiled at Tommy.

Tommy smiled back.

The Specialist reached up the other hand and wrenched her jaw back into place as she crouched down to pick up the empty mug, then coughed slightly as her neck bulged. She spat a mouthful of inky thick liquid into the mug, and a layer dripped down her chin as it continued to force itself up. Another retching cough, another mouthful of black liquid, and the mug slowly filled, gradually warming in the Specialist's hands as she held it tightly under her mouth. Her fingers were like a vice around the handle, and still this blackness poured out, the cup half-full already - and then it stopped.

The thing she had pulled out from that black pool pulsed in her other hand, and more of that black substance dripped onto the floor to a regular beat.

With a slow and careful fascination, the Specialist lifted it, held it over the mug, and squeezed. More liquid oozed out and fell into the mug, dripped over her hand, or splattered onto the floor. She then carefully dipped the lump into the mug, and twisted it apart as it dissolved, smiling with satisfaction.

The Specialist put the mug down on the floor, inside the circle, then stepped back, carefully peeling off the glove. There wasn't a trace of the black substance on her hand. Her arm was entirely coated.

The Specialist motioned to the mug, and looked at Tommy. "Drink."

Tommy nodded, and picked it up. With scarcely a look at the vile dark mucus, he put it to his lips, and drained the mug in one breath. His lips gained a similar coating to the Specialist's. Tommy placed the mug back on the floor, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Tommy and the Specialist waited in silence.

For a moment, nothing happened.

And then, Tommy's face started to melt.

The different features of his face began to shift and merge together, slowly mixing and flattening into one monochromatic mass, until suddenly, the pinkish hue changed to a pitch blackness. It began to expand outwards, drifting slowly over the circle on the floor, towards the Specialist.

The Specialist gave a final choking cough, and the last of the dark liquid inside her dripped out of her mouth, then lifted and joined with the cylinder which was stretching from Tommy. The end of the tube of blackness hovered just in front of her for a second. The Specialist held her breath.

A second later, it burst forwards and captured her face.

In the darkness that stretched between them, an understanding was reached. It wasn't just this that bonded them, it was memory, thought, awareness of the other in a way nobody else could have reached. Their stories were so similar, in past, present, and future, and the Specialist took that narrative, grasped it, pulled, and climbed inside.

Tommy did the same from his end, and the two of them tugged at each other's stories, making it impossible to tell where Tommy's past ended and the Specialist's future began. Their roles were equal, their trauma shared, their parts to play almost identical. Their minds hummed in mutual harmony, neither with thoughts entirely their own. Their hopes and dreams were no longer of the individual, but the collective. They were alike, akin, about to be changed forever, and both knew this was what they wanted.

They pulled apart in unison, became the individuals that were required once again, and stopped.

Mrs Williams slowly opened the cellar door. Her child sat on the floor on one side, perfectly calm. The child wasn't kicking and screaming, wasn't rocking from side to side, wasn't shouting anything, didn't have teeth embedded in the Specialist's arm.

The Specialist was sitting, legs crossed, in the centre of a large chalk circle. Mrs Williams didn't recognise any of the writing around the circle, but it made her shiver.

"Did you do it? Did you save my child?"

The Specialist opened his eyes, and looked up at Mrs Williams. "Yes, I did. Emily is free now." They glanced at the child, Emily, who nodded briefly. "I think I should be on my way," he said.

"Yes, yes, of course," Mrs Williams said.

The Specialist stepped tentatively across the chalk circle, as if he expected something to happen as he crossed it. Nothing did. He let out a breath, then strolled over to the other end of the room, next to where Emily was sitting, and collected his coat from the floor. He ruffled her hair as he passed, then pushed past Mrs Williams and through the door, not making eye contact. Mrs Williams looked at Emily, her daughter, and smiled. "Are you alright now?"

"Yes," Emily said slowly, "I'm alright now. I'm better."

At the front door, the Specialist had paused, listening to Mrs Williams and Emily downstairs. He nodded, satisfied, then opened his umbrella and stepped out into the world.

As the Specialist left, it was raining.