

# THE DARKNESS



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The Darkness - A Short Story  
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“Mama?”

Such a simple word. Maybe that’s why it’s the first word babies try to say. Feels different on the tongue when you haven’t said it in ten years.

Alice Monroe was 23 now, but it’s like she was eight years old again. Her voice over the phone was barely a whisper. Still in disbelief as she listened to the doctor.

“Where is she?”

“New Orleans,” he says. New Orleans. Not far from Mercer Hill. *Was she coming home?*

“They picked her up after she was struck by a car running into traffic.”

He says it so matter-of-factly. It angers Alice. “Was she hurt? Where is she now?”

“St. Agnes Hospital. She’s lucky, her injuries were minor.”

Alice knows where this is going. “It wasn’t a suicide attempt. She’s off her medication.”

“We were able to stabilize her while we ran some additional tests,” he says.

Alice waits for him to continue. “What kind of tests?”

The doctor remained annoyingly vague. “Let’s discuss that when you get here. How soon can you come?”

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For years Alice questioned her mother's sanity, dismissing her stories of demons and dark magic as the ramblings of a mind broken by grief.

If you listen to the townsfolk of Mercer Hill, they’ll tell you all kinds of crazy stories.

Joyce Monroe, the local hoodoo witch who went crazy following her husband’s death.

So crazy, she killed her own sister to try and resurrect him in some satanic ritual.

It’s all bullshit. Hoodoo is not a demonic practice. Sure, all the movies made it seem that way. In truth, it’s the opposite. It’s ancestral magic that protects us through nature.

Except the Monroe women were different. The most powerful. Supposedly descendant from the oldest of ancestors who granted them supernatural gifts to protect their people from the demons that lurked in the darkness.

“None of it’s true,” Alice told her younger sister, Tessa when she grew old enough to ask. “Then what happened to Aunt Marie?” Tessa wondered as she tried to make sense of the whispers about the mother she barely remembered.

“Mama didn’t mean to hurt her,” was all Alice could tell her then.

Alice didn’t wake Tessa to tell her they found Joyce. She was just days away from auditioning for Juilliard. A dream they both want for her so badly. She wouldn’t let anything jeopardize that. Or maybe it was just an excuse to keep Tessa innocent for a little longer. Shield her from the trauma their mother inflicted.

Instead, she called Derek, her surrogate big brother after his mother took Tessa and her in. If it hadn’t been for Ms. Porter, Alice and Tessa would have been separated for sure.

“They found her. She’s at a hospital in New Orleans.” It was all Alice would share for now. Derek knew better than to press her for more. “I can drive if you want.”

“No, just stay with Tessa. I’ll try to make it back before she wakes up.” He nods and takes her hand, giving it a squeeze.

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Alice drove on the highway in silence. Her mind replaying the past like some “previously on” episode.

In the small town of Mercer Hill, Louisiana, the homes stood as relics of the past, with their Creole cottage-style and bungalow designs that exuded charm and history. The streets were lined with oak trees, their branches swaying gently in the warm breeze, shaking loose white petals that drifted down like blessings from above.

It was a serene scene, but the peace was abruptly shattered as the petals turned black, the raindrops thickening into a dark, viscous liquid.

Aman appeared, cloaked in this inky blackness. His dark skin was pallid, his eyes hollow and lifeless. He was an unsettling figure amid the otherwise picturesque town, moving slowly, deliberately, as if drawn by an unseen force.

Down the block, two little girls, Alice and Tessa, played a hand-clapping game on their wraparound porch. Their innocent voices echoed through the air as they sang a familiar rhyme.

"Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack, all dressed in black, black, black..."

The strange man shuffled closer, his feet dragging against the pavement. His presence, though eerie, seemed to go unnoticed by the girls, who continued their game with carefree abandon.

"Alice," their mother called from inside the house. Young Alice hops up and heads inside, leaving little Tessa alone on the porch, humming the tune to herself.

The man, now on the porch, stood over her, casting a long shadow. She looked up at him, her eyes wide with curiosity rather than fear. She smiled, a trusting child in the face of the unknown.

Inside, Joyce was in the kitchen, her hands busy with the preparation of a hearty gumbo. She was a woman of quiet strength, her beauty understated but undeniable. Her movements were practiced and precise as she pulled fresh herbs from the shelves lining the walls. She glanced up as Alice entered, a small smile tugging at her lips.

"Can you fetch me some basil and thyme from the garden, sweetheart?" Joyce asked.

Alice nodded and headed out to the garden, where vibrant colors and lush greenery greeted her. The garden was her mother's pride, a testament to her green thumb and her connection to the earth. Alice reached for the thyme, but as she touched it, the herb decayed in her palm, spreading death like a contagion. She dropped it in horror, watching as the decay consumed the once thriving plants around her.

Inside, the phone rang, a jarring sound that broke the afternoon's tranquility. Joyce answered, her expression shifting from curiosity to dread. The news on the other end was devastating, and the phone slipped from her grasp as tears welled in her eyes.

Alice's voice screamed from the backyard, filled with alarm and confusion, "Mama!"

Joyce rushed out to find her daughter standing amid the dead garden. She pulled Alice inside, backing into the kitchen. Her hand clutched the ornate amber amulet around her neck, her mind filled with the whispers of her ancestors, warning her.

"Tessa?" Joyce's voice trembled as she called for her younger daughter. Panic surged through her as she noticed the dark, sludge-like footprints leading into the house. Following the trail, Joyce's heart pounded in her chest. The footsteps led to the den, where the clumsy notes of a piano being played echoed through the halls. She motioned for Alice to stay back, her fear palpable. Alice obeyed, yet she seemed unafraid. Her eyes sparked with fire like a quiet rage manifesting. Ready to protect her own at the tender age of eight.

Joyce entered the den to find Tessa playing a duet on the piano with the strange man. He was a surreal and frightening presence, his decayed face a stark contrast to Tessa's youthful innocence. Joyce's grip on her amulet tightened as she recognized him.

"Daniel?" Tears fell as she watched her husband's decaying form reach out, desperate to connect with his family.

He looked down at Tessa, who gazed up at him with wide eyes. The bond between them was strong, and Daniel's decayed face softened for a moment. But the darkness around him thickened. Joyce stepped forward, holding out her amulet. It glowed with an otherworldly light, pushing back the darkness. Until all that remained were ashes.

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Joyce moved with a frenzied urgency, her movements as disjointed as her thoughts. Her once vibrant demeanor was now replaced by a weariness that seemed to seep from her very pores, leaving her looking more like a lost soul than the woman she once was.

With trembling hands, she arranged small dolls by the windows of their home, each one a crude creation of sticks, cloth, and feathers—a strange assortment of hoodoo dolls that whispered of secrets and old magic.

Young Alice, her eyes wide with shock at the sight of her mother, muttering to herself in a fevered frenzy.

"Mama? Mama?" she pleaded, her words barely reaching through the haze that enveloped Joyce's mind.

Finally acknowledging her daughter's presence, Joyce turned, her wild gaze settling on Alice with a mixture of desperation and anguish.

"It's everywhere," Joyce murmured, her voice ragged with emotion. "The darkness—it's tearing us apart from the inside, wanting to break free."

As if to illustrate her words, Joyce clawed at her own neck, leaving streaks of crimson in her wake. Alice, her heart breaking at the sight of her mother's torment, reached out, taking Joyce's hands in her own trembling ones.

"Mama, please," Alice implored, her voice trembling with unshed tears. "Let me call Ms. Porter. She can help you."

Joyce's grip tightened, her eyes wild with a fear that seemed to consume her very being.

"If I bind you, he can't take you."

With a sudden, horrifying resolve, Joyce seized a knife, its blade glinting in the moonlight as she brought it down, slicing across Alice's palm.

The young girl's scream pierced the air, a symphony of pain and fear echoing and almost waking her baby sister asleep upstairs.

She snatched her hand away. This wasn't her mother.

She turned and ran back upstairs.

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A bright light brings Alice back to reality. The headlights of an oncoming delivery truck. About the only vehicles on the road this time of night. In the light, she can see the faint scar still visible on her palm.

Ahead, the hospital comes into view. She continues on, pulling up just alongside it.

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The hospital's imposing iron gates creak as Alice pushes them open, the sound echoing in the still evening air. The gravel path crunches under her feet as she makes her way to the entrance.

She hesitates, taking a deep breath and stepping inside. The sterile smell of disinfectant assaults her senses as she walks down the long corridor, the fluorescent lights casting a harsh glare on the white walls.

She shivers, feeling the weight of the place pressing down on her. At the nurse's station, a stern-looking woman with sharp features glances up from her paperwork.

"I'm here to see Joyce Monroe," Alice says.

The nurse's eyes narrow slightly. "Are you family?"

"I'm her daughter," Alice replies, trying to keep the tremor out of her voice.

The nurse nods and picks up the phone, speaking quietly into it before turning back to Alice. "Follow me."

They walk in silence, the sound of their footsteps the only noise in the empty hallway. Memories of her mother's erratic behavior flood Alice's mind.

She remembers the nights she woke up to the sound of Joyce's frantic chanting, the strange symbols drawn in chalk on the floor of their living room. She had always dismissed it as the actions of a woman driven mad by grief.

They stop outside a heavy metal door. The nurse unlocks it and gestures for Alice to enter. The room is small and sparsely furnished, with a single bed, a chair, and a window covered by bars. Joyce sits on the bed, her back to the door. Her once vibrant hair is now streaked with gray, and she seems smaller, more fragile than Alice remembers.

She enters and crosses to her. She kneels down in front of her.

"Mama?"

Joyce tilts her head as her eyes meet Alice's. For a moment, neither of them speaks.

Then, Joyce's eyes grow distant. "The darkness is always there, lurking, waiting. It wants to devour us all."

Alice sighs. She never could get used to the rambling. Just taught herself to tune it out.

"I'm not rambling."

Alice looks up at her. *How did she know what she was thinking?*

Then she remembered, her mother always knew. It was a secret connection they shared. It's why when everyone told her Joyce was probably dead and gone, she knew better. It's why she could feel her pain... and her nightmares, vivid and terrifying, leaving her drenched in sweat and gasping for breath.

Joyce takes her daughter's hand. "I came back to warn you. I can't keep it at bay much longer. It's growing stronger. You must be careful, Alice. It will come for you. Your sister."

"It's okay, mama. I'll take care of everything. I want you to stay here and get better. I'll get everything ready and then we can go home. Okay?"

Alice rises, preparing to leave. She stops.

In the corner, something crouches in the darkness. Its nostrils flare as it growls.

Alice stares, afraid to move. Afraid to breathe.

As she takes a step back, it lunges for her.



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Alice opens her eyes. She sits up in bed, confused. She checks her cell phone.

No call from St. Agnes Hospital.

“What?” It couldn’t have possibly all been a dream. It was too real. She could still hear her mother’s voice. Her warning.

Alice shakes her head. Why would her mind play such a trick on her?

Wishful dreaming. That’s what her ex used to call it. Jacob always had a way of keeping her grounded. The dreams were her heart making a wish. She couldn’t exactly tell him sometimes she dreamed of things to come. Otherwise, he’d think she was crazy too.

*Are you crazy if your dreams come true?*