

## **Beneath The Hard Shell**

Work crushes are the best type of crushes. It's not like a mate of a mate where you're constantly finding excuses to message them, just to keep yourself in their life in between birthdays, casual meet ups in pubs, and the occasional wedding.

With work crushes, every day, there's that chance of randomly bumping into them. Better yet, having something you can go to them for help with. Or, best case, them coming to you needing rescuing in some way.

I was seeing her pretty regularly, even if it was just to say 'Hi' in the corridor on my way to the office, and I was content with that. I could get by on those few seconds a day.

But then there was this whole week when I didn't see her. Not even once. And I ended up making an absolute idiot of myself, casually trying to bring conversations round to mentioning her so I could find out where she was. Holiday, it turned out. And everyone started looking at me funny.

So I decided I needed a more reliable, less obvious, way of getting my fix. As it happens, part of my job in the school IT team is monitoring the security cameras.

I know what you're thinking, and it's not like that. It's not like I was watching her in the loo, or the changing room. We don't have cameras in those kinds of spaces. Don't even have them in the classrooms; staff were worried the leaders might start monitoring their teaching in lessons, so they vetoed that a few years ago.

It's just on the gates, the doors, the corridors and the communal spaces. And we don't monitor them all the time, or at all really, normally. The monitoring person is me, one person.

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There's twenty cameras, going all the time. I keep an eye on the crunch points when I can. You know, when I'm not in a meeting or something. I'll watch the camera on the front gate at morning drop-off time, watch the cafeteria camera during lunch, you get the idea.

Mostly the value of the cameras comes from the retroactive footage requests.

Someone's arguing about who hit who first in a fight, I can bring up the recording, with audio. Someone's wondering where their laptop went; here's Person A leaving their classroom, carrying it. Helps clarify things for all involved.

Anyway, I wasn't specifically following her on the cameras. Not at first. I was just leaving the camera feeds on my screen so I could spot when she walked through the gate in the morning, or when she went out on break duty. I see her and her ponytail bouncing back up the west corridor at 11:00am and I know all is right with the world.

This brings me to the problem I wanted to talk to you about today. And I need you to get past it, when I say that I did start following her on the cameras, OK? This week I have been deliberately watching her, I admit it. Don't be judging me, because that's not what I need right now. Right now, I need help, advice, something.

It was after hours yesterday, properly after hours. My workday ended at 4:00pm, but I could still see her around site so I hung on. I try to catch her at the gates, you see, so that we walk to the bus stop together. But she was on site really late yesterday.

She was helping some colleagues move things round the building, stacks of exercise books and the like. Then the others left and it was just her. And me.

I watched her walk back to her classroom. She closed the door, but flicked on the lights so you could see in through the window in the corridor. There's this big tank of

giant African snails on the sideboard there, you see them crawling up the glass in the tank and it's like they're crawling up the window.

They do, occasionally. We've had ones escape over the years. At least they don't move fast. As class pets go, they're lower maintenance than the bloody hamsters and rabbits. If you can get over the ick factor of these apple-sized slime machines, they can be quite relaxing to watch moving around or munching on lettuce leaves.

Yeah, so, I watched her. I watched her.

I watched her pick a snail out of the tank. One of the biggest snails. And she's holding it in her palm, upside down, and the thing's curling and squirming, and she brings it to her mouth. To her mouth, no word of a lie, I see her open her mouth and bite right through this massive snail. Shell and all. She bit off half of it in one go. I literally saw some pieces of shell falling, when she took what was left away from her mouth. Then she brings her hand back up, and pops the rest of it in, rests her hands on the side of the tank, closes her eyes, and chews like she's having some kind of spiritual moment.

She just ate a giant snail, shell and all. That's not right. If you're going to eat it, at least cook it, right? And who eats the shell? Who can eat the shell, just biting it with their teeth like that? These things are huge, they're the size of a fist, how do you just munch on it?

And now I don't know what to do. I don't know if there's anything I want to do. Should I speak with her? Maybe, but I don't want to be drawing attention to myself from a woman who eats class pets raw in two bites.

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I don't know if there's anything I can do. I feel like I should tell someone, besides you. And thank you, that look on your face, nice to know it's not just me that finds this whole thing a bit worrying.

But I can't tell anyone at work, because of how I found out. How do I explain being on site late, or that I just so happened to be watching her through her classroom window, out of all twenty cameras, at that specific moment, after hours. It's her classroom, it's not like she's going to put in a footage request for the missing snail.

One thing I do know is my crush is cured. I do not want that mouth anywhere near any part of me.

The downside is the constant potential of just randomly bumping into her at work, at any time, if I don't keep a very close eye on the cameras.