

Typing Exercise

Alice in a world

2026-09-23

I did get faster at typing as I typed this.

Alice had been meaning to return the ladder for three weeks.

It belonged to Mrs. Vale, who lived across the road in a house with green curtains and never seemed to need a ladder, although she had been quite firm about wanting it back. Every morning Alice saw it leaning against the kitchen wall, and every morning she thought she would take it over after breakfast. Then something else happened.

On Tuesday, the something else was a man at the door carrying a small empty cage.

“Is this number fourteen?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He looked past her at the staircase.

“Has it always been?”

Alice still had a piece of toast in her hand. She put it on the little table beside the door, where it immediately picked up some grit.

“As far as I know.”

The man nodded as though she had given him directions. He wore a brown suit with one button that was slightly darker than the others. There was nothing in the cage, but he held it carefully away from his knees.

“I’m supposed to collect a bird.”

“We haven’t got one.”

“No,” he said. “They did mention that.”

Across the road, Mrs. Vale opened her curtains. Alice lifted a hand, then pretended she had been adjusting her hair.

“Would you like to come in?” she asked.

The man glanced at his watch.

“I could, for a minute.”

She moved the ladder so he could get through to the kitchen.

Alice moved her accounts to the end of the kitchen table. She had meant to finish them that morning. The man set the cage in the space she had cleared and took the chair nearest the window.

“Tea?” Alice asked.

“Please.”

She filled the kettle. Outside, somebody was trying to start a car. It made the same tired noise several times, with a pause between attempts long enough to suggest a different person had been given a turn.

“Do you take milk?”

“If you have it.”

She had it, but only just. She tipped the carton over his cup first and shook the last few drops into her own.

“My name’s Arthur,” he said.

“Alice.”

He seemed pleased by this, though perhaps he was only pleased to have his tea.

Alice sat opposite him. The cage had a blue plastic tray at the bottom and a little mirror hanging beside the perch. She could see one of her eyes in it.

“What sort of bird?”

“I wasn’t told.”

“Then how would you know you’d collected the right one?”

Arthur rubbed a mark on the table with his thumb.

“I usually ask.”

There was a knock at the front door. Alice knew it was Mrs. Vale because she used the knocker, which everyone else mistook for decoration.

“I’ll have to move the ladder again,” Alice said.

Arthur stood up at once, catching his coat pocket on the chair.

Between them they got the ladder into the hall, though it was too long to turn easily and Alice had to open the cupboard under the stairs. A roll of wrapping paper fell out. Mrs. Vale knocked a second time.

“Coming,” Alice called.

“I can hear that,” said Mrs. Vale.

Mrs. Vale was holding a plate with a folded tea towel over it.

“I made too many,” she said.

Alice took the plate. It was warm underneath.

“Your ladder’s ready.”

“So I see.”

Arthur stood in the hall with one arm through the rungs. He had somehow put himself on the wrong side of it.

“This is Arthur,” Alice said.

Mrs. Vale looked at him.

“Have you parked outside my garage?”

“I came on the bus.”

“Well, somebody has.”

She stepped inside and lifted the end of the ladder with the ease of someone who had done it before.

They carried the ladder across the road, with Arthur following a few steps behind.

“Mind the gate,” Mrs. Vale said.

Alice minded it and caught her sleeve on the hedge instead.

The garage stood open. Inside were two bicycles and a wardrobe with no doors.

“Against that wall.”

They put the ladder down. For a moment nobody spoke. Then Arthur reached into his coat and took out a folded piece of paper.

“Would either of you know a Mr. Bell?”

Mrs. Vale held out her hand for the paper.

“He used to live here,” she said.

“At number fourteen?”

“No, here. Before me.”

Alice looked at the wardrobe. There was a single shoe on the bottom shelf.

“Don’t mind that,” Mrs. Vale said. “I know where the other one is.”

Then a *meteor* hit Mrs. Vale’s house. *And that was the end of the story.*

Edited on 2026-09-30