

We're hiding. I can hear footsteps tramping, heavy breathing. Someone is inside this house that does not belong here. It's not Papa. I haven't seen Papa in days.

I'm holding onto Juli, closely so she doesn't make a sound. The footsteps close especially close, and I press my finger to her lips, holding my breath.

There is paper rustling. Footsteps. Leaving. I hold my breath and wish to be anywhere else.

The air is silent, all sound died away. Juli's fingers are leaving scratch marks on my skin. I want to hold her, to reassure her, but I am afraid to speak. I am afraid to raise my voice.

The steps do not come back. We stay huddled there for a time unknown, our breaths in tandem. Then Juli's stomach growls loudly in the quiet, and I am overwhelmed with guilt. I crawl out of our dusty crawlspace.

The house is overturned. Cabinets are torn and wrecked, and there is no sight of anyone. It is all destroyed. I spot a soft toy on the ground, its stuffing partly torn out. I scoop it up: I remember Juli cuddling it at night once upon a time. I hope it helps her now.

The cabinets are nearly bare. I grab dried fruit and granola, searching for water, but there is precious little. Only a few bottles are safe. I take them and hurry back to Juli, her breathing shallow with panic.

She is afraid. I am even more afraid, but I have to stay strong. I have to be the oldest. I hand her the stuffed toy and a piece of fruit, as well as a bottle of water. She drinks with reckless abandon and chokes, and I almost yell, warn her not to waste water, not now, but she is so frail, so small and fragile. I stay quiet.

I think, fleetingly, that someone good will come to help us. Someone who is not the police. Someone who Papa told us not to avoid. Someone safe.

But then I hear a click and a whirring noise, and my heart plummets. I have heard it once before. I know what it's supposed to sound like. I know I should never need to hear it.

It is the sound of our home's temperature moderation, powering down.