

A cup of coffee sits abandoned on a formica table, its contents still steaming despite the ugly brown ring the coffee's left on the ceramic. There's a half-eaten shortbread cookie at its base spilling crumbs across the table, the other half turned to mush at the bottom of the mug. The iPad propped up on its pink case flashes with the occasional automated notification: *Have you practiced your Spanish today?* and *Dinner with Dad & Tina* and *Your virtual pet misses you!*

Step back.

The floral wallpaper that frames the breakfast nook is peeling, but you knew that. Now it comes away from the drywall in lazy ribbons, their backs stained with glue. Houseflies - because there will always be houseflies, those grand survivalists - lodge their legs in the sticky surface, buzzing hopelessly. It's impossible to tell whether the kitty-cat clock on the wall stopped at 6:27 or whether its hands all just gave up and sagged that way. Its slit eyes are pointed in opposite directions, tail drooping like soft taffy.

Step back.

You're lucky the kitchen has an electric stove that's no longer working, because the sausages in the pan are baked, not burnt. The fat's congealed into an unholy mass that stinks of penicillin and rot. Crumpled plastic packaging is melted to the countertop in places, and the carton of milk on the counter bulges. Kraft dinner dishes grow fuzz in the sink. And who has flung open the fridge and freezer, leaving the heaps of leftovers to waste? On the bottom shelf, a trio of neoprene lunchboxes - one pink, two blue - sits in a neat row, untouched.

Step back.

Look out the hallway window - the one which brings in gorgeous afternoon light but looks right out onto the neighbor's back patio. See the neighbor's house. See the sliding door with its growing column of smoke.

Step back.

The dining room is the same as it ever was: six chairs around an heirloom table, wicker placemats still laid out. The remains of Sunday night drinks on the sideboard. Someone had time to close the curtains - you know because it's always been the

darkest room on the ground floor, shaded by its north-facing window and a big jasmine hedge outside. The daylight that leaks in from the hall casts an unnatural rectangle across the center of the room. It doesn't reach far enough to see what's causing the smell.

Step back.

In the master bedroom, the sheets lay in a tangled mess on the near side of the bed. A romantic rendezvous after the previous night's drinks? But no, breadcrumbs that betray a stumble toward the bathroom: dresser drawers flung open, clothing discarded, a phone lying face-up to show its shattered screen. Water from the overfilled bathtub threatens to make it all float. The stench is beyond comprehension.

Step forward.

Open the bathroom door. See hairy legs, because the door swings inward to block the other half of the tub from view. See the cold tap set to full blast, blowing ripples out across the water and falling in a solid cascade down the side of the tub. See the tiny gangrenous fingers, which can't possibly be from the same body, poke out over the surface of the water.

Step back. Step back. Step back.

Go up the stairs. Away. You know the first bedroom will be empty. Opening its door feels like cracking an oven. Its little sleigh bed has seen scant use in recent weeks, and you noticed its butterfly comforter tangled among the sheets downstairs. Here too the cheap wallpaper melts, leaving yellowish trails on the whitewashed walls. Among the toys that lie scattered across the room's rainbow carpet, wood and cloth fared best: several stuffed toys bear matted lumps of acrylic fur, and plastic dolls lie limp and malformed in their clothes. The heat radiates on your cheeks and up your forearms.

Step back.

Bunk beds in the next room, the bottom one made up neatly and the top another tornado of blankets. School clothes that were put on and quickly discarded, or perhaps taken out but never worn. Twin backpacks block the door from opening all the way. There's a black spot on the carpet where the sun's rays, magnified through a windowsill fishbowl, have melted away some of the red shag. A boiled goldfish sloughs scales into a half-liter of water the color of grass.

Step back.

Nothing to see in the jack-and-jill bathroom. No puddles on the floor. No smell. Just heat, unbearable heat.

Step back.

Nowhere to go but down now. Past the living room with its shattered picture frames and flaccid ceiling fan. Down that hall with the big sunny window. Past the flaming bones of the neighbor's house. Down the little plywood staircase off the kitchen, which bounces and shakes in its brackets with each footfall. Beneath the sweltering house, the cellar feels chilly.

Step forward.

Turn on your flashlight - you missed your chance to replace the overhead bulb - and push past the cardboard boxes, the afghans, the ruined scrapbooks, the guts of artificial Christmas trees and the remnants of bachelor apartments. Trip over clothes you said you'd fit into again someday. Toys you swore you'd donate. Run your hand along the cinderblock wall. Feel its warmth. Stop before your flashlight's beam reaches the darkest corner of the room. Notice how the air smells different here. Notice how it smells a little like pork.