

*Congrats! You found a hidden link.*

*Enjoy this flash fiction piece, then see if you can find another.*

*-Al*

My mother was incredibly paranoid. Growing up, all the doors had been padlocked, and our windows were nailed shut. I remember distinctly she told me it was all for us. That if I forgot to lock the attack door even once—she'd be taken away. I was so scared of her leaving me, of someone taking my mother, that I did everything she asked without hesitation. I heaved the thick, dark blue curtains and fastened them to the bars. I pulled with all my strength, sliding the fabric over our room, so a shadow fell down and kept the sun from my mother's sensitive eyes.

She had friends over fairly often. They would worm their way in through the cracks in the floorboards, nestling into her side and sitting with her in bed, whispering the latest news into her ear; giggling and singing new gossip to her. They combed through her long, grey hair and tied it in braided knots. Veranda was one of her closest compatriots—she was greying and old like my mother, coarse hair climbing down her neck in fat, brownish clumps. Her hands were often wrung, pinkish, and boney with bright white knuckles. She hunched over my mother's lap and chatted with her for hours, and my mother always politely smiled along.

One day, crisp and cold in mid-December, Veranda came knocking through our door, crying and squealing. She pleaded with my mother and begged her for shelter—her family

wouldn't survive on their own this year. Her daughter was expecting triplets. Her husband was sick; her youngest son was starving. I hated Veranda's family. I begged my mother not to let them stay. But she stayed silent, and the following morning I found them burrowed through my mother's chest, feasting on her energy and ripping through her time. They tore my mother apart, gnawing, biting, licking, chewing.

The smell is what finally got her in trouble. The family beneath us could no longer stand it. They hired an exterminator to flush us out. When he busted through the door, a massive, burly man of forty-six years old—even he couldn't help but scream at my mother's rotting corpse.