

AT BAY

They watched the robot vacuum snuffle across the carpet with vague amusement. It seemed to eat up the dust that rained from the ceiling as fast as it could fall. When it slowed, they'd chuck it and take another from the packaged stack beside the front door. It wasn't worth emptying the bag, not with all the tiny hairs that bloomed from it and settled in the sun-shafts. They had to be careful of their health.

Tonsilitis ran in the family and they'd begun taking them out just in case. Appendices too, and spleens for good measure. The kids sat round the table with swollen cheeks spilling over the hands that propped them up. Their bellies were bloated and puckered with stitches they'd born proudly to the friends left behind at school.

The vacuum lisped as a few stray feathers snuck into the filter. Suzy's cage had shifted from her spot by the window: first to the back door, now on the far corner of the porch, but those feathers always found a way in. Her staccato thwacked through the double-glaze.

Once, a head of garlic had fallen through the bent bars and onto her perch. Unsurprising, really, as the garlic was everywhere. Hitchhikers complained at fumes that summer drew from another head hanging on the rear-view mirror. The canary was quiet in the garlic's company; one day, they had woken later than usual to nests of yellow and lilac drifting over the sills.

Their mother emerged bleary-eyed from the bathroom in a haze of ammonia. She pulled off rubber gloves and lit a cigarette on the stove, right on cue. At the increased frenzy of THWACKACKACK, her other hand went out the open window and struck the cage. That incessant chirp made people think they could come and rupture the bleary quiet she liked to keep. They were always full of things to give or want, and the slump had to pull itself upright. Above the left burner was an iris of yellow that she'd go over before company.

The vacuum gurgled to a halt as a man strode over the horizon. She brought the bleach out.

- *Anthea Duffy*