

Haunted House

by Jennifer Paull

Through the gate and down the path, the house is a darker space in the world, its door a portal to unknown depths. If someone were brave enough to go through the iron gate and down the winding, weed choked path and into the darker space in the world, somehow enter the portal past the door stuck fast with damp and age they would enter a bare and barren hall, a lighter patch on the bare and splintering boards the only memory of a kinder covering. A lighter patch but no more free from dust and the creeping mould that seeps from the bloated flaps of wallpaper clinging to the walls and the rise of the stairs. The damp and dirty wallpaper, its pattern of green stripes once verdant, now barely visible anymore is broken by the dull wood of a door to the left, ahead the hallway recedes into the gloom. A step forward, a little more and what little light had made it through the smeared window in the front door is lost and all that remains are the sounds of something moving in the dark and a prickle of fear. The only choice is to block out the sounds and feel down the spongy wallpaper, trying not to think about the grime and mould and the feel of tiny legs scuttling away into the dark. A scrape of wood and a forceful push and the gloom recedes reluctantly to accept the weak light from a distant window. The tiles of the kitchen floor are smooth and square, littered with scraps and crumbs of forgotten spills and long ago meals. The room is bare, doors to the right thrown open to reveal two tiny utilitarian rooms, just as bare. Under the small window at the far end of the room that brings the only light to this place, sits a lonely sink, the broken crockery at its base a bleak reminder that this place was not always so lifeless, although this patch of chaos amidst barren surroundings is unnerving. A smear on the edge of a broken plate resolutely ignored.

Another door, to the left this time and hanging so heavily on it's hinges it is lucky it stands open already. The living room beyond is likewise dim, puffs of thick dust rising from the carpet with every movement. The shadows of furniture stand on the musty carpet as grey heaps of grime and detritus lost under cushions and behind cabinets. Against the walls, paint less faded than that around it marks out a cosy room. The door that had seemed so immovable from the hallway stands open, moving freely in a gentle breeze.

Avoiding that door and heading towards the dining room a terror reaches out and time freezes. The violent shouts are without sound, but rather felt in a ripple of goosebumps and cold sweat.

Out in the hall, retreating up the stairs, every step screeches as the wood protests the sudden use. A sharp crack encourages a quicker retreat as an ancient board succumbs and hole opens into the blackness, a sudden scurrying sound suggesting some life left in the house.

The upstairs opens out on a landing, the bathroom doorway straight ahead, its door missing and conspicuous splinters hanging from the hinges. Its window sheds the only light into this place and a new tone enters the smell of dust and mould that permeates the house. A few steps closer and the smears and sprays of dark stains against the crumbling white tiles is clear and the source of the metallic smell is all too apparent. A trail of dark spots across the moth eaten remnants of a forgotten carpet leads passed two doors and round the corner. It's thick at first, the marks clearly visible, then less so, the spots smaller and further apart. The closed doors hold no interest compared to this guide. The hall grows darker with every step, the light from the bathroom unable to reach around the corner. The trail fails, but the destination is clear: a room ahead, door open wide and inviting. This room is full, the furniture all still in place, papers and CDs and jewellery arranged on the desk and dresser and shelves. The bed on the right hand wall is still made, though the covers are brittle now and faded, nibbled by moths and other opportunists. Soft toys are piled in one corner, their glassy eyes the only part untouched by time and decay. The walls were once a pale pink, though the paint is faded and the walls riddled with damp. The posters that had once adorned the room lie scattered across the floor, fallen from their perches, though a handful remain, stolidly crying out the names of their bands and stars to the last.

A chair lies fallen in the middle of the room, the belt above it swinging in a breeze that cannot be felt.

The door closes.