

# THE APARTMENT

KRISTINE REYNALDO

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I have never been in it. I have never really seen it, except with my mind's eye, and even then the images are hazy and perpetually shifting, like one of those virtual rooms where you can add and remove furniture at fancy. It's not real, not in the material sense of the word, yet when I think of home I also think of this place in my mind, a deeply-felt echo of all the lifestyle magazines I have read, the buildings I have seen, the windows out of which I've gazed.

Sometimes, when it is dusk and I am walking alone, I imagine that I am walking home to this place. I turn into a narrow street, treading on grass growing in the cracks in the sidewalk. Children are playing on the road, but their movements are slow, and their laughter and cries, the rumble of passing tricycles, the barks of a dog—all are muffled and sound far away. Everything is suffused with the dimming orange of sundown, like a sepia photo. Along this street of old photographs I walk and stop in front of a red-brick building overgrown with crawling vines, like the walls of my kindergarten convent school, like the walls in *The Secret Garden*. I climb up three flights of stairs to the very top and emerge at the doorstep of my apartment. I turn the knob and enter, and as I do, soft piano music starts to play. My shoes, my bag, my phone—whatever it is I'm holding—disappear when I cross the threshold. The first things I notice are bare wooden floors and naked walls, and then objects start to appear, decorating the scene. Sometimes all I see is a giant teddy bear with a mug of hot milk beside it in the center of a dimly lit room; sometimes I see a swing suspended from the ceiling and

French windows all around with cream-colored curtains light as cobwebs—it depends on my mood or the weather or what I had or didn't have for lunch—but always there is the piano music.

Some time ago, I started to write a story set in this apartment, and tentatively titled it “The Tenant on the Top Floor.” It's about a girl who lived alone in the apartment and mysteriously disappeared. I never did continue writing that story. It was one of those things that I felt I had to write down but didn't know where to bring. I didn't know why that girl disappeared, or how. She just did—and then the whys and the hows ceased to matter because I couldn't see her appearing again.

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### The Tenant on the Top Floor

This is her apartment. Come in—there's no need to take your shoes off, you're going to leave soon anyway. Nobody likes to stay here for very long—not that she's ever invited anyone to stay. That girl hardly ever opened the door beyond a crack to me, and I own the place.

Her bedroom is behind that door. The bathroom is inside it. You can't go inside her room. She never leaves it unlocked. I often wonder what's in there too, seeing as there isn't much out here. Not a framed certificate or photograph, no mismatched knickknacks. No fan, TV, or telephone. No clutter. Just that rug and those books stacked in tall piles on the floor.

Take the chair, why not, I prefer to stand myself. That small table is where she sometimes takes her meals. Notice the bowl, the fork, the spoon, the mug—those are all the crockery she has. In her apartment there is only one of everything functional, because, she reasoned, she

lived alone and needed no more. If you pressed her, she might tell you a story about a girl who lived in a house full of people. In that house, everybody shared most things. One thing they did not share were toothbrushes. Instead they all had their own toothbrushes hanging in a row on a rack above the sink, and whenever they were about to brush their teeth, they would go to the rack and pick out their toothbrush. One morning the girl went to brush her teeth, but as her fingers hovered above the toothbrushes, she couldn't remember which one was hers. She stared and stared at the row, trying to remember which one she should pick out, whether the red one or the blue one was hers, but the more she stared, the more she forgot. "So," she might tell you, "for the sake of simplicity I keep only one of everything. No confusion. Nothing to have to share."

She got this apartment easy, you know, because no one else wanted to take it—it's too out of the way, too small, too high up—I got all sorts of complaints. But she never seemed to mind walking a long way to where she could flag down a ride to work, not buying a couch because it would be too bulky for the place, or having to climb up three flights of stairs. She didn't care if the ceiling leaked when it rained for three days straight, or that I hadn't repainted the walls since my husband died some twenty years ago. "I like the view from up here," she told me with her lovely smile that never quite reached her eyes.

Every sundown, she used to sit by that window, her face cupped in her hands, and stare at the horizon and the lampposts and houses and people below her, like a princess surveying her kingdom. Do you know the story about the princess who slumbered at the top of the highest tower, separated from the world by a forest of thorns, waiting for the prince who would kiss her awake? I told her once she reminded me of that princess. "But," she said, her voice

light and her eyes dark and clear and empty, “I am both asleep and awake, and I don’t wait for anyone.”

It doesn’t seem like she knows anyone. Nobody ever comes to visit her, and none of the other tenants know her name. She lives quietly, unlike the couple on the second floor who often shout at each other and throw things around, or the single mother on the ground floor who is forever running after her squealing kids, and sings nursery rhymes to her bawling toddler until half-past two a.m., or the college student on the third floor who throws a drinking party with his friends every week and barfs all over the veranda. She lives so quietly in her tiny apartment that sometimes she disappears for days at a time and nobody notices, and when once or twice she screamed in the night—I heard her, I live just across the street—nobody bothered to check up on her because we thought it was just a rat or a roach, or some other trivial thing.

No one knows for how long she’s been gone. I only found out she was missing when she failed to pay her monthly bills, and I had her water and electricity cut off. She made advance payments for the apartment, so I don’t fuss about her disappearance—got other tenants to worry about! I let the apartment to the things she left behind and leave her bedroom door locked. People mind their own business around here. She’ll come back sooner or later, is what I think.

You’re the first one to come here, looking for her.

Are you sure she’ll come back to meet you? Are you sure you want to wait?

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When I let my friends read the fragment, most of them thought it was a horror or crime story. Maybe she's infected with a vampiric illness, one said. Maybe she was murdered or committed suicide and her body was hidden inside the locked room, said another.

I didn't mean it to be scary. I didn't mean to plant any corpses under the bed. I only wanted to paint a picture of that apartment and show a snippet of the life of the tenant who lived in one of the many variations of that place in my mind.

I'll tell you something they haven't guessed: She's not dead. She's still in there, sleeping and dreaming in her room. I would be there too, but I can't only live in my mind. I can't forever hide behind a locked door—nor do I always want to. I can, however, keep returning to that place, keep climbing up three flights of stairs, keep hearing the piano music. I am certain that the room will always be whatever I need it to be. In that place where time and matter are immaterial, where to dream is to control and create, and where life makes no demands, I can sit around all day, with my reflection on the burnished wooden floor for company, and gaze out the window at the undying sunset.

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