

Looking at her childhood home was a pastime of hers, a way to fill the many blanks in her life. She always visited via Street View, finding herself on the map, inhabiting the little orange person-shaped guide, wandering up and down her former street with the click of a button. She'd look up the house on real estate services, to find if it had been bought or sold. She once called an agent, when the house was on the market, just to hear someone else say the address. She couldn't afford the house at this point but she watched as the home was traded from owner to owner, trying to glean if it had been flipped or bombed or converted into an abstract version of the place she spent much of her childhood. She created a series of stories around the sales, something to place after the time when the house was hers. She believed a couple moved in after her family and ruined the front lawn with parties, which her Mami seemed to verify via gossip telephoned from a neighbor. A social service entity took it over, using the space as a halfway house of some sort. There was a family who seemed happy, even if they eventually went into foreclosure. A single man updated everything with a lot of money. Now someone rents the house out, given that the neighborhood is finally "cute" and "walkable" and an urban adjacent "destination for relaxation." Perhaps it was the single man who used those terrible words to get people interested in renting the house for a weekend.

This she thought after finding the house on the rental website. Should she rent the house? No, she thought, and watched the house for weeks. Should she just suck it up and visit? No, she thought, she couldn't *just* visit: she had to be inside. How could she get inside the house? No idea, she thought, but she could just rent it at some point.

She saved the listing and checked the reviews everyday, trying to see if people were viewing the childhood home in the same way she did. "Quiet street, close to

everything. Five stars,” a man named Benny wrote, smiling behind sunglasses. “Love the modern touches! The jacuzzi is heaven,” Amelia wrote, head leaning on a tall man’s shoulder. “Wonderful place to relax and recharge away from the city!” Dennis – a grinning green cartoon cat – wrote. “Wonderful and clean,” Laura wrote, wearing a beret. “Area very safe,” Brendan wrote, holding up a peace sign. “beautiful but back upstairs bedroom gets drafty,” Stefanie wrote with bows in her hair. “BONUS ROOM!!!!!!!!” Ron wrote on a boat. “If the listing is available, book immediately!” Rebecca wrote, flanked by her wedding party. The place is always booked, she thought. And all these people are *so white*.

After a few glasses of wine and hours of inspecting the house after work – Why did they paint her parents’ room light pink? Did someone remove the window in the upstairs bathroom? Did they *tile* the kitchen? What happened to her room? And my room? Or did they just look the same? – she had enough courage to contact the host. Chris.

“Hi Chris,” she typed on her phone, a house flipping show filling the silence around her. “My name is Michaella. I have been watching your listing for months because it is my childhood home. I lived there until I was seven, with my parents and baby brother. I have a lot of memories from my time there and I think you have retained much of its charm.” She rolled her eyes. She didn’t like what Chris did to the place. “I live a few hours away and will be moving across the country at the end of summer, for work. Before I move, I am hoping to stay at the house because I don’t know when I’ll next be nearby (or have a chance to stay at) the house. It’d be a final hurrah before moving on, a bit of closure before the next chapter of my life. If a night becomes

available and you can't fill it, I would love to stay there again. Even if for one night. If it isn't any trouble, please let me know."

She reread her writing, finding the message to be less desperate than the wine led her to believe. After taking a gulp, she closed her eyes and sent the note.

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"Hi Michaella," Chris wrote. "Sorry for getting back to you weeks later. The listing has been very booked because, as I am sure you are familiar, people love coming to Grata this time of year to escape from the city. I have a single night available for a visit next Wednesday, June 21. I am unable to hold the listing for you but I wanted to let you know of this availability."

She stared at her phone, covers pulled up to her eyes. A Wednesday night. Weird but whatever.

"Thank you for letting me know," she messaged. "I would love to take the available Wednesday night." She locked her phone before opening it again to the app. "One more thing," she messaged. "Could I get early check-in and late check-out? Is that possible? Thx."

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She blocked her calendar from 12PM on Wednesday to 3PM on Thursday. If someone needed to reach her, they could call her. But she was out of the office, out of the state, driving four hours south to the house. She drove in silence, sweating, not because of the heat but because of the nervousness. She stopped once for gas, even though she didn't need gas: she needed to breathe air that wasn't her own.

When she arrived at the house, she sat in the car for thirty minutes, staring at it. It looked blue in person? The house was not gray, as the photos suggested, but an

indigo. A deep, emotional blue. Neither color was the yellowing brown from when she lived there. The front door was bright red, not white. Was the house bigger? It hadn't changed shape, no major cosmetic upgrades to the exterior, but it seemed enveloping, uncontainable, spilling into the yard and onto the street, pooling into the driver's well at her feet. Shouldn't the house feel smaller, now that she was a more grown-up version of herself? Something was off. Maybe *she* was off, as the homecoming calm she anticipated was unavailable to her. She had the feeling of walking in on someone as they changed clothes, only to make awkward eye contact when you should look away, making you feel a bit dumb and desperate instead of sorry. *Hungry*, she realized. She was stupid, she thought, and she should eat.

She got out of the car and pulled out a small rolling suitcase. She placed the suitcase on her trunk, opening a front pocket to fish out a snack bar. She stood, eyes still on the house, standing and eating a bar of organic chocolate covered nuts. She felt better and worse, as every individual bit of hyper-sweetened nature scraped down her throat, dragged into her stomach. Her mouth was gummy with snack, mucousy and chocolatey. She needed something to drink and, despite her preparation, the water bottle she packed was empty, drained from the drive. Time to go in.

She walked along the intermittent walkway to the house, long-stepping from each kind and cute rectangular slate slab. The wheels of her suitcase dragged over the spaces, disturbing the ornamental black rocks. The house has a walkway now, she thought. How fancy.

“The code for the lock box is 9-1-1,” Chris noted in the check-in instructions.  
“Please return keys to the lock box upon checking out.”

She pressed the numbers into the box, hidden to the left of the front door. She tried to ignore the significance of the digits. The keys – one red, one white, and one blue – were each engraved with their associations: front door (red), back door (white), bonus room (blue). Bonus room? She didn't understand. She opened the glass exterior door – We had a screen door, she thought, but this door is...glass? That's not a *screen* door. – before sliding the red front door key into the red front door. Too much style. But it was kind of nice, like when reality shows give dowdy old ladies a makeover.

What was remarkable was there was no smell in the house. No garlic, no onions, no baby vomit, no sting of ammonia: there was a striking vacancy in scent. She stood in the entry and looked around and smelled nothing. The layout was and wasn't the same: living room to the left, dining room to the right, kitchen to the far right, staircase in the middle, bathroom underneath, playroom behind the living room. What was missing were the walls. Open concept, she parroted from the television, finding the living room yawning behind the stairs, into the kitchen, flowing into the dining room. It was a moat of space encircling the stairs. It was nice! But she couldn't live like that. All the coziness was gone. People could see your...everything. There were no photos. There was just art that insisted that it was pleasant, "canvases" printed with stripes of "paint" and speckles. A "screen printed" image of flowers. A "drawing" of a city skyline. A minimalist "painting" of a bygone Hollywood starlet. A "photo" of a pink wall with pink neon lights instructing, "GOOD VIBES ONLY." She walked to the sleek kitchen and pulled a concerningly thin glass from a floating shelf. She took some tap water from the shiny tap at the barn sink instead of the smart refrigerator. It tasted dusty. She left the glass in the sink, unsatisfied.

Up the stairs, there were three rooms: to the left, her room and my room, and, to the right, Mami and Dad's room. A bathroom in the middle. This was kept the same, she thought with relief, although there seemed to be more light, thanks to a dappling of skylights. She walked toward her room and looked out the window that faced the street. She stared down at her car. It seemed very far away but, again, it wasn't. *Was* the house bigger? Or was it only bigger because she allowed it to occupy so much space in her mind? The houses across the street were no longer wooden with triangular roofs but boxes, made out of cement. She noticed everything was bright on the street because...all the trees had been removed? Maybe that's why everything felt bigger: there was light pollution. There was so much space, none of it for hiding.

The backyard now had fake grass. It was fenced in too. Someone had put an awning over the back of the house, making it a patio instead of a stoop. The jacuzzi was here, a wooden triangle with a soft top that seemed more cheesy than relaxing. She wasn't one of those *design* people but she knew there was an aesthetic gap between the overly considered *blue* house with the brown "wood" tub that sat freestanding on white cement. The garage across the fake grass no longer featured a garage door facing the house. It no longer appeared to be a garage, considering what there was no longer a rocky alleyway for cars. There was no entry or exit for a car, just a large frosted glass door. Was it now a large shed? A studio? Office? There was a staircase that hugged the exterior, up to a blue door. Bonus room? That's supposed to be an attic.

She walked back in the house and dragged her suitcase up the stairs, into her old room. She sat on the bed, white and full with a monopoly on the room's real estate, a monster compared to her ratty corner daybed (which was technically a couch). She lay down, closing her eyes. There was still no smell. No hair scents, no bathroom scents. No

nature. No breath. No baby powder. No burnt rice, onions, garlic, Mami cooking for Lita, thanking her for watching me. It was like a museum that was a home. People came to live here but there wasn't any life. People are weird, she thought.

In a dream, she was in the house. She was walking around without shoes. The floor was too cold and she couldn't find anything to cover her feet. She felt wet but couldn't find anything to dry herself. She searched the places she always went in the house to be with someone: to the kitchen, for Mami; to the garage, for Dad; to the nursery, for – for me. Not to talk to me. Not to touch me. Just to look at me. All she ever did was look at me, never getting too close, never touching, for fear of dropping me, making me cry a cry that ripped the house apart. That was the only sound I ever made, she thinks, staring into the crib – but I'm not there. There was a dull silver space. She felt more wet the closer she stepped. She planted her feet but leaned forward, to closer inspect what she was seeing. It wasn't a cloud, nor was it smoke. She reached out a hand and entered the nothing, finding a deep cold – and deeper wetness. No one was inside the nothing. She pulled her hand out, finding her arm to be un-present: her arm was clear. No skeleton, just clearness, erasure. The nothing in there had taken a part of her. She took steps back, tripping on something, falling into an open closet. She opened her eyes, sitting, staring at the dull silver space. A line so faint it seemed nonexistent extended from the dull silver space. It spanned the length of the room to – above her head? Something was above her. She turned to look up, feeling something drifting in the air and finding herself – but it wasn't her. She had become clear and cloudy. Dull silver. She was a part of whatever was in the crib. She looked down at herself and noticed that she was becoming more clear. More than just the arm, her entire body started disappearing. She didn't feel anything. Everything was going dark and light and she felt

a pressure on her chest because the space for her to breathe was getting smaller, to the point where she had no breath at all. It was nice. Calm – until she realized that she wasn't breathing, like me. *Gian*, she thought. *Died in sleep*, she thought. She drifted from her body. *Wake up*. Was she with me? *Wake up*. Was that where

She gasped, blinking her eyes open to find a modern “chandelier” staring back at her with four small old-time bulb eyes. She sucked air in and out while looking at this light fixture that seemed to be in the wrong room. She didn't remember this. What was she looking at? Could you call a series of pipes a chandelier? Are you supposed to put chandeliers in a bedroom? And a *guest* bedroom at that?

She sat up and found that she was not in her old bedroom but the mirroring room. My room. Was this where she had lain down? Or did she...sleep walk? This bed was similarly oversized – but it was placed in a strange position. It should have been where the giant television was on the wall, to the right of the door, where the crib was. She sat up and stared at the empty space. There was nothing on the wall under the television. No cables, nothing. Just white wall leading to white carpet. No one had any idea that a crib was there. No one had any idea that a child lived a life in this room, she thought.

She stood, careful not to step in the space where the crib was, trying to project her memory of my room onto the way the space was now. She could get the general idea of where things were: the crib would be under where the television was, toy box under the window, rocking chair where the bed was, closet where – where the closet was. To the right of the bed was a discreet sliding door, painted white. Including the formerly metallic recessed dot to slide a finger in. She walked toward the closet. It can't be the same door. Why change everything in the house but the closet doors? Closet doors

weren't expensive. Were they? She rested a finger in the pull. She slid the door to the left, nearly halfway open. She cupped her hand around the door, dragging down the interior until she felt a few scratches. She looked left and right, slapping her free hand at a lazy rocker switch, turning on the closet light. She bent, reluctantly, inside. She inspected the scratches: scrawled in large, crude letters was the sentence, "I HATE YOU." The light popped, going out above her. She bumped her head trying to draw herself out of the closet. That was *stupid*, she thought to herself as a shiver ran up to the top of her head before racing down to her feet. She closed the closet door and walked out of the room.

She stared at the kitchen, knowing that Mami wasn't going to walk in and whip together some dinner on these new marble countertops. Is it worth trying to make a meal in this house if it isn't Mami's cooking? And for just one night? She stood and stared at the gigantic oven and stovetop situation. There was what appeared to be a small computer screen to control heat. The refrigerator had a large touch screen. She shook her head: where *was* she?

She sat on the stiff couch in the never-ending living room. The sun was still bright even though it was decidedly evening. She scrolled down her phone, at the options for delivery. El Borricua! She giggled and drafted a text to Mami about ordering El Borricua. She stared at the message before deleting it. Mami didn't know where she was – and definitely didn't know she was in the house. It would not go over well. There was no way to explain herself either. She sighed. What was the place we used to order from at the old-old house, she messaged. El Borricua? She knew the answer. Pollo asado, tostones, arroz con gandules. It was too much food but she ordered it anyway. She could always bring leftovers home.

The doorbell rang. She looked up from her phone. The sun was finally setting, even though it was almost officially “late.” The never-ending living room was cast in a red-orange. The doorbell rang again. She opened the door.

“Delivery,” a small man said.

“Thank you,” she said, offering out her hands to receive the distended plastic bag. He placed the bag in her hands and stood there.

“Thank you,” she said again with a nod.

He crossed his arms. “No tip?” he asked with a tsk.

“Sorry, sorry!” She turned around, placing the food down. She grabbed her wallet. She searched for a few dollars, finding a single five dollar bill. That would do, she thought. She handed him the money, smiling. “Here you go.”

“Sure, thanks,” he said with a dryness. “At least it’s a tip...Y’all cheap over here.”

“I don’t live here.”

“Why you in this house?”

She shrugged. “I’m visiting. It’s a rental.”

“Nice ass rental.” He turned around, walking toward the street. “Rich bitch,” he mumbled within earshot.

She took the food out of their containers and made a nice dinner of chicken and rice and tostones on a taupe plate that felt purposefully sandy on the fingertips. She ate in silence as the room turned dark, lit only by a light that announced itself and its night mode via the over-intelligent stovetop. She sighed. Why am I here, she thought. The food tasted good but was boring in her mouth, like she had eaten a meal already but was now being polite, going through the motions as to not be rude to her host. She thought

about spitting food out into her napkin. She sighed, stood, placed the remains of the food back in their packaging and put it in the refrigerator.

She changed into a swimsuit and went out to the jacuzzi. It was still warm outside, humidity like a sticky hug. Was she going to boil in that hot water on a summer night? She placed her phone, the keychain with three keys, and a thick towel on the last step of the stoop. She pulled back the stiff padded jacuzzi cover and pressed on the bubbles. She slid in, one foot at a time. She sat in the warmth, imagining that she was becoming a soup. What would she taste like? She didn't think she would be salty. Besides the bubbles, it was quiet. It was never this quiet at night when she lived here. It wasn't loud, no, but people would be driving home from work. There was the occasional car horn or fireworks. People played music. Dogs barked. Kids screamed. Nothing now. Not even birds, not that they had trees to perch on.

She dried herself off, making a wrap-dress with the towel. She held the keys in a hand and marched toward the garage, up the stairs to the bonus room. She unlocked the door and turned on the lights. There was a pool table and a bar. A jukebox. A long window toward the top of the wall opposite the door. The pitched ceiling had track lighting. No pink insulation fluff. Who needs a room like this? She had no answer as she tossed the cue ball across the table. They should photograph this space for the listing, she thought. Must be new. She walked out and locked the door. She heard a baby cry. She turned around, startled, staring at the house. There was a single light on in the corner right. My room. She shivered and sighed.

She walked back into the house and up the stairs. She took a shower in a clear cube that had replaced her childhood tub. Nothing was the same but everything was the same, she thought while washing her hair. She brushed her teeth. She put on lotion. She

turned off the light in my room. She stared into Mami and Dad's room and saw a bed built upon rustic slats set against a pale pink wall. The closet door was a barn door. There was a random stack of very organized wood in a corner, despite there not being a fireplace. There were a series of frames above the bed. In cursive, a print read "THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME." That wasn't their room and she wouldn't sleep in this room. She closed the door.

She walked to her old room, plugged in her phone, turned off the light, and got into the bed. She faced the television and realized that the room was almost a reflection of my room. Did they do that on purpose? The closets weren't on the same side, no, but the way the beds and televisions were arranged created a mirror image. But the rooms themselves? They matched up like two left hands. She turned the television to a home design network, even if it felt a bit on-the-nose to watch home makeover shows while within her made-over childhood. She sighed. This wasn't what she expected. There was no closure here. There was never going to be joy here, which is why they sold the house to begin with.

She double checked her alarm clock and set a timer on the television. She turned the volume low and lay down. She sighed. A man was talking about applying wooden planks to the wall to help "bring the outdoors in." She stared at the ceiling, watching as it lit up blue and white and blue and white then black then red and orange and yellow and blue. Maybe she would sleep better in her childhood room although not in her childhood bed.

She had another dream. She was watching herself in a doll version of the house. She watched herself going from room to room, looking for something. Or was it someone? The more she looked, the less there was in the house, until there was nothing

but her and the house. She didn't stop looking though — until the doll version of herself started to grow. She watched herself until the house started to buckle and break as she grew from the size of a toy to a lifesize model. This other her stood and stared back. She was exactly the same. She looked around and her mirror looked around. They were within some sort of structure, in the open air but still confined. She looked back at herself but there was someone else in the mirror's place. It was like her but more masculine. Male? Was this the male version of herself? They hugged, for a moment. It was fast but full. Warm. The person let her go and she stared at them. They began to grow and grow and grow, leaving her doll sized. This person was now watching her and she was within the structure. There was nothing around but she and this person, who stared and stared and stared at her. She didn't feel uncomfortable because it felt like it was the right thing to do, being watched by this person. She tried to speak but couldn't. She wanted to speak to this person but she couldn't. She could see their large face watching, smiling, shaking their head. It was all she saw, as if her sun. She realized there was no need for words. She nodded. She could see the person was breathing. She felt calm. They breathed in unison and stared at each other. They stared and stared and stared and

She opened her eyes. It was daytime. She could hear a bird chirping outside. It felt very early. She grabbed her phone and saw that, yes, it was well before her alarm was set to go off. She wasn't sleepy though. She sat up and yawned for show, still feeling like someone was watching her. She looked at her messages. yes El Borricua, Mami texted back. y? I thought ud be too young too remember that place lol She put her phone down and looked to the window. Sunlight was flooding the room because the curtains were too sheer to keep light out. If she were staying another night, she'd fix that. But she

wasn't. This was not her home. She got out of bed and pulled aside the curtain, staring out onto the street. A car passed. She spotted a single squirrel. There was nothing here.

She packed up her clothes and toiletries. She stood with her suitcase at the top of the staircase. She didn't want to leave, even if she had nothing to do here. This was not her home, she reminded herself and nodded. She walked into my room. She took a deep breath and stepped into the space where the crib was.

"I want you to know" – She gulped, clearing her throat of these first words she said of the day. She inhaled and exhaled and closed her eyes. "I didn't hate you."

She stood, eyes closed. The sunlight pressed on her eyelids. There was a draft. There was the faint smell of skin. Milk. Perhaps a neighbor making breakfast? She felt warm. She felt calm and awake and like she could stand in this spot for hours. This was the best part of the house, she thought. This was where he was. This was his place.

"See?" someone on the television interrupted. "It's little details like this that can make all the difference."

She opened her eyes. The television broadcast a woman placing a sage wreath on the wall, across from photos of herbs and plants in black frames. A distressed piece of wood was painted black and had the word "GRACIAS" in an elaborate white script. Text on the bottom of the screen offered a title for the segment: "Living Alone, Happily."

She laughed and laughed and turned the television off.