

THIS IS OUR PLACE

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My story is nothing special. I was built in 1963 in a vacant lot on Sunflower Street in downtown Lagoa Pequena, a rural city in the state of São Paulo that rose to fame in the mid-1990s when it became the setting of a primetime soap opera, but no one gave much thought to this tiny place or its twenty-eight thousand residents after that. But I like it here so much that I never dreamed of moving.

That was a joke.

I can't move.

I thought it best to explain since I don't know if everyone gets house humor.

But I really do like it here. As far as I can tell, Sunflower Street is a great place. Lots of trees, dogs taking their owners for walks, and a sweet flower name that's infinitely better than other streets named after racist members of a monarchy that doesn't even exist anymore, or corrupt politicians who were so honored after they built a school and a clinic. Sunflower Street is an oasis in the middle of all that chaos. As far as I know, anyway. I barely have any time to visit other places.

(That was another house joke.)

The stories that happen inside me are way better than my own. And there are many of them, by the way. Being a house, I've had a lot of different people living under my roof. I'm sure that owned houses are jealous of rented houses; imagine having to live forever with the same family, listening to the same stories, the same gossip about Aunt Silmara who went through a midlife crisis and got herself a boyfriend fifteen years her junior, or Cousin Tadeu who either is gay or finds a new best friend every six-and-a-half months. My stories go way beyond Silmara and Tadeu (both

of whom have made perfectly acceptable life choices and do not deserve their cruel, gossipy family).

I call them “my stories” because I’m possessive. And because it works both ways. The residents call me “my house,” so I don’t see any problem with calling their stories mine. They’ll never know, anyway, because I’m very quiet. At least, I always have been. But now I’ve decided to break my silence.

You know when people say, “Oh, if these walls could talk?” They do. Or, “Careful what you say, the walls are listening”? They are. Or even, “Whoa, it’s as if this house can read my thoughts!” Fine, no one ever says that one. But I can. Not every thought, of course. Just the loud ones. The ones that scream in your head, desperate to pop out at any moment. It’s impossible not to hear them. It’s hard not to notice the details when they’re happening *inside* me.

So, the next time a visitor comes over to your house and you say, “Come in! Don’t mind the mess,” remember: I mind.

I mind the dishes you haven’t washed in six days just because the weather turned, and now the dirty coffee mug buried under plates is starting to grow mold. I mind the pile of laundry behind the door and the dust that is accumulating on the top shelf because you think no one will ever see it, anyway. I mind the wine stain on the couch that you tried to hide under a quilt, and the nail holes on the wall that you covered with toothpaste because you read online that it’s cheaper than buying Spackle.

But I’m not as focused on the mess in me as I am on the mess in *them*. That’s the mess I like to pay attention to. The confusing thoughts that

keep them up at night; the tears that fall out of nowhere when an unexpected song starts playing; when they sing in the shower to forget all their troubles; the hours lost in front of a mirror making faces and asking, "What if this were really my face?"; the catastrophic fights followed by apologetic kisses that, deep down, still taste of anger.

I can feel all of it. I pay attention to all of it.

And now it's my turn to speak. Metaphorically, of course. I can't speak.

I am a house.

ANA

DECEMBER 31, 1999

Ana knew the Y2K bug wasn't going to happen. In part because her father, Celso Carvalho, the computer genius of Lagoa Pequena and the surrounding areas, had spent the last six months watching every sensationalized newscast on TV, yelling, "Y2K IS NOT GONNA HAPPEN!" while pacing from one room to the other with a cup of coffee in his hand and an old T-shirt that read SUPER DAD.

Celso makes a living taking apart and fixing computers, installing software from a mountain of CDs, and speaking in a technical jargon no one else understands. If your computer has an issue, Celso can take care of it. If humankind is threatened by a mysterious Y2K bug that will cause the loss of data, power, money, and sanity, Celso will reassure you. Because he knows everything, and Ana trusts him.

Still, the two decided to spend New Year's Eve at home, just in case. In the final moments of 1999, Celso doesn't seem too sure that the world isn't about to collapse.

Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one—

The TV is still on, fireworks go off outside, the electricity remains