

Juliana Kálnay
A Short Chronicle of Gradual Disappearance



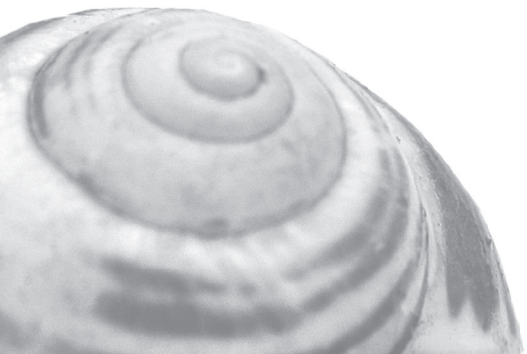
Quartbuch

Juliana Kálnay

*A Short Chronicle
of Gradual
Disappearance*

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Prologue by a resident

»The house would be ready once everything
had become its inner world«

César Aira: Ghosts

On the day that my mother was so frightened by a shadow scurrying by that she dropped a box full of crockery down the stairs, the colourful shards bouncing down the steps; the day that my father, surprised by the very same shadow, let out a cry which could apparently be heard three streets away, and the day on which they both moved into the house number 29, I was born. At least, that's how they told it when I asked them. They said: Rita, that's how you came into this house with us, between boxes and broken shards. If it wasn't me that asked, they told a different story, but I won't go into that here.

Back then, the house was practically empty. Later more residents moved in, and a lot of them at that. Almost three times as many as have lived here in recent years. Over time there were fewer again. That's just how it is.

When my parents died, Rolmar, as everyone would come to call the old man, had just learned to yell up from the balcony when someone came to the building. Or had he only moved in after that? In any case, at some point he also learned to climb the whole facade of the building – from the bottom right up to the top floor where he would wriggle through a window – with only a rope, attached to the railings of the balcony, tied around his waist.

Even so, whenever anyone wants to tell the story of what happened in the house with the number 29, they are usually referring to the past few years. Perhaps because at least three times as much happened in this time as in the many years before.

I do not see everything that goes on in this house. Sometimes, I see something in the street – something falls, you hear a loud bang and then everything is still again, until everyone begins to talk about what happened. Sometimes, I see something in the street, during the day when it isn't too cold and I am sitting on the balcony.

I have a mirror set up on the balcony. A huge, full-length mirror, with the frame against the wall, leaning parallel to the railings. When you look into it, you can see a section of the street without having to bend down. The mirror reflects the sunlight and there is a danger that it could blind passing drivers but, so far, no one has had an accident.

Many a resident has experienced things in this house which others would perhaps regard as unusual. Sometimes everyone talks confusedly and interrupts each other. And sometimes, when something has happened that has affected everyone, I ask around and try to find out how it came to pass. For I have not seen everything in this house.

Rita? Is that you?

Ground Floor, Right: Maia's Holes

When Maia disappeared, we didn't think anything of it at first. Maia often disappeared. Sometimes even for long periods of time.

She had always loved to play hide and seek. After searching for a long time we would find her in the bath tub behind the curtain, in the oven or in the drum of the washing machine. Later, she began to dig holes. She dug holes in the sand pit until she scraped the concrete at the bottom with her finger nails. She dug holes in the garden and sat in them. She dug in the park over the road and outside behind the house. She used her hands to dig her way through sand, mud or soil. Usually, crumbs of earth still clung to her hairline in the evening.

Maia's holes got deeper and deeper over the years. She would often sit in one of her holes, covering it with foliage or tree branches, and stay there until we looked for her, or until someone stumbled upon her. We had long since given up calling for her when she disappeared. She would never answer us, and would not have crawled willingly out of her hiding place. Maia had almost never spoken, she didn't need to. When she wanted to tell us something – and that happened quite rarely – we could understand her without words, anyway.

When the neighbour disappeared, nobody looked for him. The only thing that caused any excitement in the house was the tree which one day appeared on his balcony. But we searched for Maia for a long time. By the evening we had not found her, and when three days passed and she had still not returned (she had never spent longer than two nights in one of her holes before), we started to worry. We didn't know what to do, and eventually we decided to do what we had seen on TV: we called the police, had Maia's photo printed in the newspaper, and stuck it up on lamp posts. The police brought sniffer dogs, which nuzzled at Maia's clothes, and we went with them to search every inch of green on the streets. With each passing day, our worries

grew, as did the radius of our search. The gardens and parks of neighbouring districts had long since been combed through. Leaves and twigs with tiny pieces of earth clinging to them had become stuck in our hair. But of Maia there was still not a trace.

The Children in the House

The children in the house said Maia had come from the place where it was always night. They said, too, that she had the hands of an animal, and when she spoke, you had to keep your ears covered, so shrill were the sounds she made. But we adults just shook our heads at this. If she really had made such sounds, we retorted, they would have been at a frequency too high for our hearing to detect.

Sometimes the children came home in the evening with earth smeared over their fingers and the soles of their feet. They said that they had been playing with Maia. Hide and seek they called it. But they never found Maia, and we couldn't imagine that she ever looked for them.

3rd Floor, Left: The Blossoming

Once the seed is planted, it must be watered regularly in order to ensure strong and healthy growth, I once read. Every day, I swallowed down a pill with a glass of water. The doctor said that this was the only way I would be able to grow out of myself again, after I had spent the whole winter holed up in the cellar with the potatoes.

I took my pill every day, and had a warm footbath each morning – I somehow felt the need for water under my toes. In March, when my toenails gradually began to turn green, I stopped the footbaths. When scrubbing and filing didn't help, I cut my nails with secateurs. Sometimes I think it would have been better if I hadn't done that. They grew back even more vigorously, and had the quality of plant shoots.

A month later, the longest of the sprouts were tickling my knees, as though I was walking through long grass. Green sap shot out of my nose when I sneezed, and my ears were sprouting abundantly.

My wife Lina – the proud owner of green fingers, who had always wished for a garden filled with deciduous trees – put me on the balcony. She said that only there would I get enough sun. It was also my wife who poured water into my boots every day, since during the autumn I had grown roots from my toes, and a mighty crown of branches now obstructed my vision. She dissolved my tablet in the water she used to nourish me, and hummed unfamiliar melodies while she combed the branches into my face. When I threatened to outgrow my boots, Lina cut through leather and sole before she planted me in a tub-sized pot. My roots could breathe again. They clawed their way into the damp earth, over which my wife had crumbled a couple of the tablets. Her melodies never changed.

The following spring, robins nested in my arm pits, and during the late summer the local children visited me daily, to taste the fruit that I bore. In the afternoons Lina would use this fruit to make jam, its smell

drifting out of the window and attracting the whole neighbourhood. She told me that, just a few days before her disappearance, she had given Maia a jar of this jam.

I cannot recall any other tree in our area that had been so beloved. It was not long before the usual busybodies came round with petitions. I was to be properly signposted as a site of special interest. The number of people coming to see me grew almost as magnificently as my foliage. By the next spring, I was providing shade across the whole pavement for the queue of visitors that gathered there. Although I initially had my doubts, I have to admit: the doctor was right. But before long, not a soul could remember that I had once walked through those streets myself.

1st Floor, Right: What Rita Said

Rita didn't say much when Maia disappeared. Otherwise she always had something to say, commented on everything that happened in the house, even if you hadn't asked her. It was better just to let her talk. Then Rita would sometimes mention things that nobody else knew about, and about which Rita herself couldn't really know. Sometimes Rita spoke in riddles no-one could understand. »Don, what a fruit face you have today!«, she exclaimed when she saw him walking down the stairs, and everyone who had heard it furrowed their brows in confusion. Her words knew no mercy, something which E. said more than anyone else. Where had Don put down new roots, Rita once asked Lina in the entrance hall, and E. pricked up his ears (as he always pricked up his ears when something involved Lina), and one could almost believe that Rita really knew something, and only wanted to make a point of it, but Lina just laughed and replied, »In his pot, where else would he be?«, and to everyone listening it seemed as though the two women were speaking in a secret language.

Rita didn't say much when Maia was gone, when the members of her family developed bags under their eyes from spending many nights searching the green spots of the neighbourhood for holes. »Holes are the salt in the soup«, said Rita. She said: We live over holes. She said: Once, I took her by the hand and led her behind the house. She never spoke Maia's name, and she never mentioned her disappearance. It was as though she remained quiet about it in order to honour Maia.

Instead, she said other things, many of which we did not understand. She said: Lina's jam. She said: It's gotten cold, make someone a fire somewhere. She said: It's gotten cold, I should start knitting again, before it gets even colder.

And then she slammed the door of her flat behind her, and for a few days she was not even once seen gazing down from her first-floor balcony, which she usually did so often.

4th Floor, Left: Ghosts

They had moved in without anyone seeing them. Some claimed that a removals van had driven through the streets during the late evening, and that by morning there were still cardboard boxes in the stairwell, but no one had actually caught a glimpse of the Wills themselves.

If the Wills bent over the railings of their balcony they could peek at the crown of the tree growing on the balcony below their own. This tree would soon grow so big that it would encroach onto the Will's balcony. But no one had ever seen the Wills on their balcony. In fact, they were only ever heard. That's how you knew they were there. This was especially true at night, when the chronic insomniacs in the house could hear voices from the flat on the top floor, and noises as though furniture was being disturbed. Some believed that the lights in the Wills' flat turned on and off at short intervals, but the testimonies of the insomniacs were, generally, not to be trusted. More believable were those who claimed they had seen one of the Wills' coattails disappear around the corner in the morning, or heard the clattering of a Will's heels on the stairs. How many people belonged to the Will household nobody knew. The plaque on the letter box said only 'Will', in plain block capitals. Some suspected that they also had a cat, but nobody could say precisely why they thought so.

Soon, the most outrageous theories were circulating, about what the Wills looked like, but above all about what they did for a living. Everyone agreed that, whatever their jobs were, they could not be virtuous: smugglers who, by night, used headlamps to send Morse code signals; ex-Mafiosi in a witness protection programme; or counterfeiters with a huge printing press, which they only brought out of the cupboard, set up and operated under cover of darkness.

Some residents wanted their suspicions confirmed, and began to keep watch on the stairway. The Wills would have to be seen at some

point. »Peephole duty« was recorded in a table. This worked quite well, as someone was always at home, and since a tree had begun to grow on Lina's balcony visitors were always coming and going, so it was never boring, listening for footsteps. Some even took turns standing in front of the letter boxes and the front door. A chair, a blanket, a thermos full of coffee. In the morning, the postman came. In the evening, a newspaper could often still be seen poking out of the Wills' letterbox. The insomniacs were favoured for the night shifts. But by morning the Wills' letterbox was always empty, and during the night you could hear the sounds of voices and furniture moving from their flat, but still no one had actually seen the Wills.

Only Maia claimed to have met one of the Wills, in the cellar. She did not, however, say what they looked like or whether they had spoken to her. And when people asked her about it, she only looked at them mutely through narrowed eyes. Her family requested that Maia be left alone, and that was the end of that.

After a few weeks, someone eventually suggested that they ring the Wills' bell, under the pretence that they were selling something or handing out a survey, but in the end nobody did it.

Other issues began to occupy the residents of the house number 29: they looked all over for Maia. The discussion as to whether Maia had once seen one of the Wills, and whether this accidental meeting had anything to do with her disappearance, was never had within earshot of her family. Nevertheless, the odd person would still try to fish post out of the Wills' letterbox every now and then. Amongst the non-descript envelopes from the electricity supplier, addressed to the Wills, Maia's missing person poster fluttered out. Everything was stuffed hastily back into the letterbox.

When some of them decided to get into the Wills' flat in secret, Lina's balcony seemed to offer a good opportunity to achieve this. It should happen at night, to create less of a stir. Lina was not convinced of the plan herself, but eventually she was talked into making her flat and her balcony available for a night. Some had brought ropes, others all their mountain climbing equipment. The best idea so far was to

climb the tree, and then the thickest branches up to the Will's balcony. The lightest was also the bravest. But even so, at the first attempt to jump from a branch onto the balcony, the branch snapped, and the bravest fell with a loud groan – it almost seemed as though the groan had come straight from the tree itself – back down onto Lina's balcony. The furious snorting scared everyone away. When she closed the door, she had a watering can in her hand. The insomniacs later told everyone that they had not only heard the Wills that night, but also Lina, as she nestled up to her tree and sang to it.

But when Maia did not return, and the police regularly patrolled the streets, nothing more was heard from the Wills, and a few weeks later a sign bearing the telephone number of an estate agent hung on the balcony railings. No one had seen how it got there.

On the Floor

After the Wills had disappeared, their flat remained empty for a long time. You were the only one in the house who dared to venture there. Some people even thought it was cursed. Perhaps they were right.

When I asked you what you were looking for up there, you said: peace. You could lie on the wooden floor with your arms outstretched and see nothing but the ceiling beams, and then get up, turn on your own axis and see nothing but the walls. Apart from the floor, all around you was only white, without a trace of the Wills or their furniture.

You told me that sometimes, when you lay up there like that, you fell asleep. When you awoke, you rubbed the dust from your nose and the corners of your mouth. Dust: the only thing in that place that made you aware of the passing of time.

There were days when you thought that one day the flat would be rented out, and then you would no longer be able to go up there. On these days, you did not say very much, and so I leaned my head against your shoulder and didn't say anything either. On other days, you thought that if anything should ever happen to you up there, it could be months before anyone found you. Although people would look for you, the way they looked for Maia. I think that you only ever began telling me about your visits upstairs because of that.

We stood on the pavement, exactly where Lina's tree cast a shadow in the afternoon. You asked me if I knew that, once, when you were trying to climb onto the Wills' balcony, you had broken your arm. Obviously. You believed that the tree had groaned when you fell, and when they removed the bandage, the skin on your arm had felt a little like bark. You told me that since your fall, it was only upstairs that you could really feel at ease. You did not want to explain that.

You were always considered particularly brave. Toni makes the first

step, and then all the others follow, they had always said. But I knew that, when it came to words, even you could be cowardly sometimes. Better to pretend not to have heard anything. As if there was absolutely nothing to say about it. I think that when you kissed me for the first time, you only did it so that you didn't have to answer me, to silence me so that I wouldn't keep asking why you had argued with your brother. That was on the lawn behind the house, you smelled of damp grass and sweet chewing gum. Later, we couldn't stop. We hid ourselves in the lift and, after dark, in the entrance to the house, even while your mother called you to dinner. Mine never called.

Nobody was surprised about us. Hanging on each other like fruit on a tree, people said about us, ever since they were little. As soon as we were out of the door of our flats we followed the same path, to the playground, to school. On the first day after the holidays, you led me down the stairs by the hand.

You never took my hand to lead me up the stairs, but once you told me that I should come with you to the Wills' apartment. I didn't want to at first, but eventually I agreed. But I didn't feel at home up there. Nobody disturbed us or anything like that, just the empty room without its furniture, the hard floors and the dust, which settled in my hair. When it was totally quiet, I imagined that I could hear someone singing. A woman's voice. You just shook your head.

After that I never wanted to follow you into that flat again. Slowly I began to believe the rumours, and became suspicious of your obsession. Almost every day you sought peace up there. Strange, that nobody ever caught you up there. I was determined to keep my promise, and didn't accompany you again. But on the day that you didn't come home for dinner, and people asked me if I knew where you were hiding, I knew where I had to look.

In the Hall, Eavesdropping

Something's not right there.

Exactly, on the fourth floor.

That was weird, about them.

Something about that flat.

Yes, and before them the Grans
and the Lovo, and before that...

I don't even know what they were
called anymore.

They were only here a little while,
like all the others. No one's ever
lived there longer than about ten
or twelve months, at least, not that
I can recall.

Some flats are just like that.

It's not being rented any more,
that's what I've heard.

The estate agency people
must still have the key-

You mean the flat up there?

The one where the Wills used
to live?

To hide themselves like that.

Always someone moving in
and out of there.

I don't remember them at all.

But why not?

Do you know who's going to-

They should find someone,
someone trustable

You don't want it then? You do
need more space.

Oh, I don't know. I don't feel
very good about the whole
thing.

Somewhere in the Stairwell: the Rust-Coloured Door

When I was little, I had the habit of running up and down the staircase until my mother shouted after me. Then she had to catch me again. Sometimes I escaped from her, without her noticing. I ran up and down the stairs for a while then, until someone noticed me and brought me back to the flat. Humph, said my mother then, humph, there you are again! And the next time I disappeared, she didn't notice anyway.

Once, I ended up in front of a rust-coloured door. In hindsight, I can't even say whether I was going up or down the stairs, let alone which floor I found myself on. But I think it can't have been too high up, maybe the second or the third floor. What I did know was that I had never seen this door before. A door the colour of rust, I would definitely have noticed that! I stretched out my arm and pushed down the door handle.

It was only a narrow room. Long, almost like a hallway. There was only one window. At first I thought it was open, I saw leaves lying on the floor that the wind had blown in. But when I looked closer, I noticed the shards of glass lying in between. No wonder it was so cold here. I went further into the room anyway, heard the shards of glass crunching under my feet. There was a rustling coming from under the leaves. Beetles I thought, spiders I thought, little creatures; if it was a snail it would crunch.

I supposed there was another door at the end of the hallway and I wanted to see what was concealed behind it. It was a very long hallway, and I had not yet reached the other door when I heard a noise. A dull rumbling. Something very big, very heavy, which had fallen, been pushed over. And although there was absolutely nothing in this room that I could have knocked over, I became frightened and I ran back. Out of the room and through the rust-coloured door, which fell clo-

sed behind me. Whether I ran up the stairs or down the stairs, I cannot remember.

I do remember though, that once, maybe just after this, or maybe after a long time had passed, I asked my mother about a door in the house which led to a long hallway. She looked at me in surprise and shook her head, there was no such thing here.

I have never stumbled upon the room again. I looked for the door a couple of times, but there was nothing to be found.

To this day, I have never spoken about it with anyone.