

QUICK READS

# Pepé

A short story by Jill Prior



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## ***Part One - Nikki***

Nikki put the last heavy cardboard box down in the hall with a thud. A cloud of dust rose from the tile floor and settled on the toes of her slippers. The slippers had little bunny faces on them, with small black eyes, a pink triangle for a nose, and long pink ears sticking up that bobbed when she walked. They had been a graduation present from her sister, and though she thought they looked a little silly, the tile floor was cold on her feet. *'I should get a rug,'* she thought, pushing her long blonde hair behind her ear and straightening up to admire her new home.

She was standing by the door, looking down the long, dim hall into her new apartment. Off to the right was the door to the bathroom, and past that was the kitchen. At the end of the hallway, the living room opened up to the right, and the bedroom was across from it, through the door to the left.

It was old, she admitted, but Nikki didn't mind the cracked paint or creaky floors. She thought it was perfect. She loved the high ceilings, large windows, and old-fashioned lights and

furniture. Just now, the late-afternoon sunlight was shining through the large living room windows in rays, catching the dust in the air and making the room glow. Nikki smiled. It was the first place that she could afford herself, and it was wonderful!

As she was admiring her home, her phone beeped from her pocket. She took it out and opened a message from Margaret, the jumpy real estate agent who sold her the apartment. It read: 'Hi Nicky!' Nikki frowned at the misspelling of her name. 'Just wondering how the move is going, do you have everything you need? If there's anything I can do, don't hesitate to give me a call. And Nicky, there's one more thing I forgot to mention... it would be best not to rearrange any of the furniture in the apartment. Good luck!'

Nikki raised her eyebrows. *What was that supposed to mean? Why couldn't she change the furniture around?* She had already decided to move the writing desk from one corner of the living room to the other. She replied to Margaret's message asking what she meant.

While Nikki waited for a response, she started unpacking the many boxes she had brought with

her from her room on the university campus. The very first things she unpacked were her treasured physics books. As they came out of the box and onto the shelves, she looked at the familiar names on the books: Einstein and Newton, Hawking and Bohr. She adored them all. She was thrilled that the university had offered her a research position when she graduated. It meant that she could stay and continue working on her projects at the lab while earning a little money.

Hours later, after unpacking almost all of her things, Nikki got a message from Margaret that only read: 'Sorry, can't explain. It's just better that way. Trust me.'

Nikki frowned. *'Not much of a reason,'* she thought. She looked up at the writing desk. It really was in a strange place, and it bothered her. She walked over to it and gave it a push. It didn't move. She put her phone down on the table and used both hands to push against the heavy wooden desk. Nothing. She leaned her whole weight against it and shoved with her legs. Finally, it moved along the wall. Nikki slowly pushed it to its new location at the other end of the wall, and at

last she stood back, panting a little, and admired it. 'Yes,' she thought, *'that's definitely better.'*

Turning around, she reached for her phone. The table was empty. Nikki thought for certain she had put it down there. She checked her pockets, the floor around the table and even in the desk. Nothing. *'That's weird'*, she thought, *'I guess it'll turn up.'* She checked her watch. It was already 9:30pm and she hadn't eaten since lunch, so she went to the kitchen to make dinner.

In her new kitchen, Nikki put some water on the stove to boil and started chopping vegetables. While she cooked she thought about physics, her current projects in the lab, new projects she wanted to design, and how to test her latest theories. As she added some pasta to the boiling water, she heard her phone ringing in the other room. She quickly wiped her hands and went to the living room.

When she entered the room, she could hear the phone ringing close by but couldn't see it. She bent down and looked under the chairs, checked between the cushions and on the table again, but there was nothing there. The ringing sounded like

it was coming from right on top of the table. So she looked up.

There, above her in the glass bowl of the antique lampshade, was her phone, lit-up and still ringing. Her mouth dropped open. *'How on Earth did it get up there?'* she wondered. Her phone stopped ringing, and she realized she had missed the call. She kicked off her slippers, climbed onto the table and reached into the light for her phone. She grabbed it and jumped down, doing her best to stop from thinking too much about how it might have gotten up there. She checked her missed calls. It was from Dan, her boyfriend. She winced and slapped her forehead with her palm, then called him back.

He picked up on the first ring. 'Hello?'

'Hi Dan, it's me, Nikki.'

'Nikki! What's going on? You were supposed to call me this evening.'

'I know, I'm sorry! I forgot, really I did.'

‘Yeah fine, I believe you. Let me guess, you got distracted by some mysterious physics problem again, didn’t you?’

Nikki glanced up at the light then quickly looked away. ‘Um... something like that. How has your trip back home been?’

‘It’s been good. Hey listen, Nikki,’ Dan’s voice changed, he was bubbling with some good news, Nikki could tell. ‘I’ve got something to tell you, it’s really great, I got a call from New York today... I got the job!’

‘Dan, that’s fantastic! Congratulations!’

‘Thanks! They want me to start next month!’

Nikki’s smile faded a little. ‘Next month? I thought this job started next year.’

‘It was, but they offered me a position starting sooner, it’s amazing, right?’

She ran her hand through her hair. ‘Yeah, of course. But... I thought we were going to move to New York together.’

‘We will, babe, don’t worry! Listen, I’ve got to go, I just wanted to tell you the good news.’

‘Yeah, of course, that’s wonderful news. Congrats again!’

‘Thanks, I’ll see you when I get back in a week, then we can talk about the details. Good night, love you.’

‘Love you too, good night.’

Nikki heard the beep as the call ended and let out a long sigh. She slowly walked into her bedroom. *‘What did he mean ‘we will’, how can we move together?’* wondered Nikki, sitting down on the edge of her bed. Unless... Dan wanted her to come with him now. To give up her research position, her new apartment, everything. She closed her eyes and massaged her temples. She felt tired, she couldn’t think about that now, she was just getting settled in. She leaned back in her bed, thinking about all the reasons she didn’t want to leave, and soon she was asleep.

## ***Part Two – Pepé***

Nikki woke up with the dawn light the next morning. Her legs and neck were stiff because she hadn't meant to fall asleep. Suddenly she gasped... the stove! She forgot to turn it off last night!

She jumped off the bed and ran out through the living room into the kitchen. But when she got there, she stopped suddenly. It was already off. She peeked into the pot. The pasta looked dry but not burnt, like someone had turned off the stove just before it could start burning or smoking. Nikki stood there for a moment, then relaxed. There had probably been a power cut in the middle of the night, or the burner automatically turned off after a period of time. There were plenty of reasonable explanations, she thought happily. She smiled and made herself a cup of tea.

Minutes later, sitting at her kitchen table, Nikki sipped her tea and admired her lovely apartment in the morning light. The kitchen was bright and full of sunshine; it really was perfect, apart from that nonsense with her phone last night. And it was this thought that made Nikki remember what she had seen when she ran through the living room to the kitchen. Her teacup froze halfway to her lips and her blood ran cold...

the desk was back where it had been yesterday afternoon.

She was sure of it. As she ran past to check the stove a moment ago, she had seen it sitting in the corner that she had pushed it out of yesterday. *Someone had moved it back.*

The desk. The stove. The phone... *there was someone else in the apartment!*

It was the only logical conclusion. Her mind started racing, trying to figure out how to call the police, what was the best way out of the apartment without making any noise, or if she should scream for help. 'Stop panicking,' she told herself 'you're smart, find the solution, just think about the problem logically.'

Then her bunny slippers walked by.

Her eyes became wide and her mouth fell open. The bunnies' ears bobbed up and down with every step, as if there were a person walking in them... except there wasn't anyone. They were empty. Nikki, frozen with the teacup still halfway

to her mouth, watched them pass by the kitchen door and disappear down the hall.

With shaking hands and a pounding heart, Nikki put the teacup down and tiptoed to the kitchen door. She slowly leaned out and peered down the hallway in the direction that the slippers had gone. She saw them; they were sitting on the floor in front of the bathroom. Their little bunny faces stared innocently up at her. She rubbed her eyes. Maybe she was going crazy.

Nikki, trying to act casually, stepped out of the kitchen and walked toward the living room. She carefully kept an eye on the slippers over her shoulder. She was thinking maybe she should go back to sleep for longer, and when she woke up things would be back to normal. But as she entered the living room, things became stranger very quickly.

The swivel chair in front of the old wooden desk began to spin; slowly at first, then faster and faster. The old glass lampshade above the table began to swing back and forth, as if someone was pushing it. The curtains at the windows blew into the room like sails on a ship, even though the

windows were closed and there was no wind. Nikki, already shaky on her feet, collapsed sideways onto the sofa, grabbing a cushion to hold in front of her. Then she felt something crawling up her leg and looked down... her computer cord was coiled around her ankle like a snake. The metal plugs looked like fangs; she screamed and shook it off. She watched, horrified, as it slithered away across the floor. Nikki jumped up onto the sofa. She was about to make a run for her bedroom when the bunny slippers walked out from the hallway and blocked her escape.

She was terrified. Everything in her apartment was moving, swaying, flying, and slithering across the floor. She was at the center of a storm in her own living room. Then she saw the bookcase; her physics books were being pulled off the shelves and dropped onto the floor. She gasped. And got angry.

‘STOP IT!’ she screamed.

A book by Tesla paused in mid-air, as if surprised.

She threw down the cushion and pointed at the book. 'You heard me, I said stop!' she yelled again.

The book quickly flew back onto the shelf.

'The others too!' she demanded.

There was a pause, and the other physics books flew up onto the shelf.

She took a deep breath. The curtains, light and cord had stopped moving, as if stunned, but the swivel chair was turning slowly. She turned and spoke to it.

'So you're a poltergeist. I assume you don't want me living here and messing with your things?' she asked angrily. In response, the chair sped up its spinning and the curtains moved again.

'OK, OK, I get it. Well, guess what, I live here now. Too bad.' The light started flickering and swinging crazily, and the curtains billowed out. The sofa she was standing on began to shake.

'Listen to me!' she shouted. 'I like this apartment. You like this apartment. You turned off

the stove for me last night, didn't you? You don't want any harm to come to this place. I think we can make a deal.' The sofa calmed down.

'I won't change anything about the apartment; I'll keep it nice and clean and treat it respectfully. In exchange, you keep your antics to a minimum. Don't act up when guests are over, and my bedroom is off-limits... and the bathroom too,' she added. She waited. There was no change in the spinning chair or shifting curtains. The bunny slippers paced the floor anxiously.

'If you don't keep your part of the deal, I'll make sure I find the messiest, smelliest, filthiest new tenants from the university male sports teams. I'm sure you'll love what they do to the place.' The chair suddenly stopped spinning. Everything stopped moving.

Nikki wasn't sure if that meant yes. 'Spin the chair again if that means you agree.' There was a brief hesitation, then the chair moved a little to the right.

Nikki let out a sigh of relief. 'You sure are a pesky poltergeist. I'm going to call you Pepé.'

Thank you, Pepé.’ She leapt over the slippers back into her bedroom, closed the door, and locked it.

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A few hours later, Nikki slowly opened the door to her bedroom and peered into the living room. On the floor just outside her door, there were the bunny slippers, as if waiting patiently for her. Nikki quietly stepped over them and out of her room.

‘Pepé?’ she said quietly. Nothing was moving. She cleared her throat.

‘Pepé, are you here?’ she asked the room more loudly.

She heard a noise behind her and looked around. The bunny slippers had turned to face her. She gave them a weak smile.

‘You like those, don’t you? It’s OK, you can have them.’

The slippers jumped happily and walked off across the living room floor, ears bouncing with

every step. Nikki watched them circle the table and smiled.

‘Pepé, can I ask you something? I would like to clean the apartment, is that all right with you?’

The bunny slippers paused mid-step.

‘I wouldn’t change anything of course,’ Nikki quickly added, ‘I only want to make this place bright and clean.’ She held her breath and waited. Then the swivel chair by the desk started gently spinning. Nikki guessed that meant ‘yes’, like before. She relaxed a little.

‘Thank you, Pepé,’ she said. The slippers started bouncing around the room again. Nikki tied back her hair and got to work.

She started cleaning in the bathroom and slowly worked down the hall to the living room and bedroom. At first, the only evidence of Pepé was the occasional passing-by of the slippers in the hall. Slowly, he became more and more helpful.

Before she started cleaning the shower Nikki went into the hall closet to get a bottle of cleaner.

When she opened the door she saw it was on the top shelf, just out of reach. She stood on her toes and stretched her arm up to the shelf, when suddenly the bottle slid six inches off the shelf and fell into her hand. Nikki stepped back, amazed, looking from the bottle to the shelf.

‘Thanks’ she said quietly.

Later, she was on her knees scrubbing the tile floor in the hall and needed a new rag. Just as she was about to get up and fetch one, a fresh one appeared in the air next to her. She took it and smiled, saying, ‘Thanks, Pepé.’

An hour later she was washing the dishes, when suddenly one of the clean, wet plates rose into the air with a towel, was quickly dried, and then floated gently up to the shelf in the cabinet. Nikki laughed, and the two of them finished the dishes twice as fast.

### ***Part Three - Home***

The next week passed quickly, and Nikki gradually became used to living with a poltergeist. Every time she came home from school she would

say, 'Hi Pepé, I'm back!' and look for his response. Sometimes he would be pacing around the apartment with the slippers, other times he would play with the curtains or spin the chair, but he was always there to greet her. She usually talked to him about her day, and they often cooked or cleaned together before she went to bed. Nikki was happy.

Then, on Sunday evening, she heard a knock at the door. She was confused for a moment, but then she suddenly remembered that Dan was coming back that day. She gasped and ran to the door.

'Hey, babe!' Dan said in his slow southern accent. 'Miss me?'

'Of course!' she said, smiling. 'Come in! I want to show you my new apartment.'

'Forget about the apartment, I want to see you,' he replied, and kissed her on the lips. She felt herself blush with embarrassment. '*What if Pepé saw?*' she thought, then immediately felt silly. '*Dan is my boyfriend; it doesn't matter if a ghost sees us kiss.*' But she knew that wasn't quite true.

‘Wow, what an ugly apartment, Nikki! Why did you get this place, it’s so old!’ Dan laughed, looking around. Behind him, Nikki saw a single bunny slipper step out of the dark bathroom.

‘Oh... it’s not ugly!’ she quickly said, taking Dan by the arm and leading him down the hall away from the slippers. ‘It’s a little old, but I like it!’ They sat down in the living room.

‘Sure, whatever, I just don’t understand why you had to get an apartment in the first place. Why couldn’t you move in with me?’

‘Dan, we talked about this. I want to have my own place now, I want to support myself and prove I can be independent.’

‘Sure, whatever.’ Dan said distractedly. He suddenly turned to her. ‘Hey, listen Nikki, this job in New York is a great opportunity... not just for me, but for us.’

Nikki looked at her feet. She knew what was coming.

‘Come with me, babe. Let’s go together. I’ll have a good salary; we can find a place together... one that’s nicer than this, that’s for sure!’ He said laughing.

Nikki didn’t laugh. They were sitting on the sofa and Nikki saw the computer cord slither out between Dan’s feet. Its fang-plugs glinted in the evening light. Her eyes widened and she quickly put her foot down on it, pinning it to the floor. ‘Pepé!’ she whispered angrily.

‘What?’ asked Dan.

‘Er, nothing.’ She pushed her hair back nervously. ‘Dan... I’m not so sure I want to leave now. I have my job, my apartment, and my experiments here. My life is here, not in New York.’ Dan leaned back. Nikki saw that he was surprised.

‘What are you saying? You mean you don’t want to come with me?’

‘No! It’s not that, it’s just... this is my home.’

‘You have got to be joking. You want to stay here for your physics stuff? Come on, Nikki! Our future is in New York. I’m going to earn a lot more money than you will at the university. And my work is way more important than your silly physics experiments!’

Nikki was hurt. She stared at the floor and felt the tears well up in her eyes. ‘I’m sorry you feel that way,’ she said quietly.

‘Yeah, well, it’s true.’ In that instant a huge physics book appeared in the air and smacked Dan straight in the face.

Nikki gasped and covered her mouth. The book dropped heavily into Dan’s lap. Dan sat there, mouth open, too shocked to move.

‘What...?’ he started to ask. But suddenly the book leapt off his lap and began to attack him again. Dan screamed and jumped off the sofa, waving his arms as the book swung at his head and shoulders again and again. He staggered wildly around the living room until he finally caught it in his hands. Nikki could see it was *A Brief History of Time* by Hawking, one of her favorites. It looked

like a trapped animal in Dan's hands, shaking and jerking, trying to free itself from his grip.

'Nikki, what's going on?' Dan cried. His eyes were wide and he was panting. Nikki was still too shocked to answer.

Then her entire collection of physics books flew off the shelves together and began to circle Dan in the air, as if Dan were at the center of a book-cyclone. They started to swoop at his back and shoulders, making him duck and cover his head.

He ran out of the living room and down the hall, still being chased by the swarm of books.

'Nikki!' he screamed as he ran. 'What is wrong with your apartment?'

Nikki followed books down the hall, still too stunned and amazed to do anything.

'I don't think it likes you,' she said quietly.

'That's crazy! Nikki I'm getting out of here,' yelled Dan, pulling on his shoes and dodging books. 'Come with me!'

‘No, I’m staying here,’ she said calmly, as Dan swung open the front door.

‘Well... you’re never seeing me again then!’ Dan shouted as he jumped out into the hall. The books stayed inside, hovering around her in the air.

‘That’s fine, bye-bye!’ She waved, and slammed the door shut.

Nikki leaned against the door and closed her eyes. Her heart was pounding; she let out a long breath to slow it. She heard Dan’s footsteps fading down the hallway outside, but she didn’t really care. The apartment was silent. She heard a noise at the end of the hall and opened her eyes. The books were back on the shelves, perfectly neat, as if nothing had happened. At the end of the hall the bunny slippers were peeking out from behind a corner, barely visible except for their long floppy ears and pink noses. She gave them a stern look.

‘I see you Pepé. You broke your promise, didn’t you?’

The slippers shuffled and waited apprehensively, like school kids waiting to be scolded.

Nikki paused, and slowly smiled. ‘Thank you, Pepé. Want to help me make dinner?’ she asked and started down the hall. The slippers bounced happily and followed her into the kitchen.