



CHAPTER I | NICE TO MEET YOU  
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BLDG EVELYN

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# CHAPTER I

Though it was long ago, she remembered it vividly. A severe thunderstorm had been predicted that night. Angry, gray clouds loomed on the horizon as the sky began to darken - the kind of thick clouds that were sure to be bursting with lightning. She sat at the kitchen table listening to her mom bustling around the house as she covered all the mirrors in preparation for the storm. She had heard her mom once say that if the mirrors were left uncovered, they would somehow attract lightning to the house. That didn't make sense to her, even at her young age, but that was one thing she remembered about her mother - she was very superstitious. A lot of the things she did didn't make much sense.

There hadn't been a lot of mirrors in the house to cover anyway. They lived in a very small house with two bedrooms, one bathroom, a small kitchen, and an even smaller front porch. The roof of the house was made out of clay tiles. Sometimes, there were gaps in between the tiles that allowed the sun to beam down into the rooms or let rain seep through the cracks and dampen her bedsheets. Occasionally, stray cats would traverse the rocky plane of her roof and she could see their shadows cast over her room as they picked their way around the tiles. It was like watching a movie - one that had her on the edge of her seat because sometimes the cats would misstep carelessly and a tile would shift uneasily. Other creatures would creep inside sometimes - most often small bugs and geckos that skittered across the walls.

The gaps in the ceiling tiles let all the noise from the street into her home and when it would storm, she was able to hear every rumble and crackle so loudly that it was like living in the sky itself. Lightning would strike and everything would turn into day for a moment - her small room illuminating vividly as if the sun had decided to make a brief return in a flash of white.

That night, she had fallen asleep in her parents' room for one reason or another. They had a small bed in the corner where she sometimes liked to lay when she didn't want to sleep in her room alone. All the mirrors had been safely covered and she had succumbed to sleep before it started to rain. She had been dreaming pleasantly of the sun on her face and the feeling of tree bark on her palms, when she was awakened by a deafening roll of thunder, coupled with a lightning strike that

blazed in front of her eyelids. Rain pitter-pattered into the house through the few gaps in the clay tiles and she rolled over blearily to see her father beating her mother - a belt gripped so firmly in his hand that she could see his knuckles go white, even in the dark.

It had happened in a blur - her brain scrambled to understand what she was seeing - only capturing snapshots of what unfolded before her. Her mother's eyes were green, watery, and filled with something like fear and another emotion that was impossible to place. She couldn't tell if they were saying anything or if they were yelling - the lightning flashed over and over like paparazzi cameras. The belt was wrestled from her father's hand into her mother's and time seeped into slow motion as she watched her mother rear back her hand - fingers tight on the belt - with her whole body turning as she threw her weight into this one strike.

Thunder roared. The belt buckle struck her father across the face. Rain dripped onto her mother's cheek. It was the first time she had ever been disappointed.

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Her family was very large. The enormity of it surpassed her. Legions of cousins, aunts and uncles swam through her mind in a sea of relatives. It was to the point where she wasn't sure who was family or not so she'd begun to treat everyone she knew as someone related to her in some way.

The numbers evaded her but she most often heard there were seventeen siblings on each side of her parents' families. Thirty four aunts and uncles floated through her house all throughout her life, vanishing and reappearing like apparitions. The constant stream of people was normal but it always felt like there was someone she hadn't met yet - someone that was attached to her in some way but she'd never known.

There was one aunt on her dad's side that was a more sturdy presence than all of the other extended relatives that weaved through her life. She was most often mistaken for her mother, since they looked so much alike. You could see it in the slopes of their noses, the curves of their faces, the brightness in their eyes, and sometimes he wondered if she was actually the daughter of her aunt rather than the daughter of her mother. The thought came to her when she looked in the mirror and saw the face of her aunt - little inklings scattered across her features like quaint reminders of a family's suspicion.

The aunt worked at a bank. It was gilded and shiny - air conditioning hit you like bricks when you stepped through the door. The attendants were equally as gilded and shiny - their hair pulled back in tight buns and ponytails - eyes wickedly lined with razor-sharp eyeliner and faces with bored expressions until customers forced them to bring smiles onto their faces. From a young age, she'd been obsessed with the shiny, gilded bank tellers and she'd been amazed that her aunt was among them. It seemed like they were part of an elite group, as if they stood beneath a luminescent sign

that read, "GLOSSY BANK TELLERS ONLY". Her aunt had gotten her father a job at the bank. He was not gilded or shiny.

In her early childhood, life had been good. Looking back now, all she could remember about being young was a faint vibe of amicable happiness. It wasn't discontent and she supposed that was all that mattered. Her life had been neither shiny nor gilded, but for a little while it had felt like it until things started slipping through the cracks of her carefully constructed life like misty shadows and otherworldly smoke. Being young was nice. She hadn't been known by things she'd done, the people she'd encountered or the experiences that had befallen her, but by her name - Evelyn.

At some point, she'd begun to accompany her father and her aunt-who-looked-like-her-mother for lunch on the days they worked at the shiny bank. She'd walk into the bank - the sound of her shoes click-clacking against the tiles - and sit on a stiff bench by the door while waiting for her father and aunt to get off for lunch break. The air conditioner would wash over her and sometimes she'd shiver.

The company provided the employees money for lunch, so once her aunt and father finished the first half of their day, her father would emerge from behind the blinding, granite bank counter to meet her, looking disheveled and tired next to her aunt's vibrance. He'd smile, help her off of the bench, and they'd click-clack out of the bank together. They always ate at this tiny little restaurant that was a short walk from the bank that not many people went to because it sometimes looked like the roof was about to cave in on itself.

She'd been small then. She remembered going into the restaurant and eating the food there, propped up on her aunt's lap and haphazardly eating with a fork and knife. She remembered the way her father had looked at her back then - a soft smile on his face. She'd seen the way his eyes lost their hardness when he looked at her. He was proud of her, back then. She wasn't sure if he was proud of her now.

He was happy with her back then. It was nice waiting for him to get home from work, sitting at the kitchen table swinging her legs and watching the mosquitos buzzing around their heads, as her mother-who-was-not-her-aunt plucked dishes from the table and washed them at the sink. It was normal that her father did not join them for dinner due to the time he got off from work. Dinner was at 6pm and her father usually didn't arrive home until 7:30pm. His portion of the daily meal of rice and beans remained on the stove. Soon, she would hear the metal bars of the front door swing open, meaning her father was home.

She'd wait for him to set his things down in the front room and walk from the front to the back of the house where the kitchen was. The sounds of the night outside spilled into the kitchen through the back door. Her mother would continue to wash the dishes, even when her father walked into the kitchen.

He would smile at her. She would smile back - dark hair falling into her eyes. He would sit

down at his place at the table, setting his lunchbox down next to his plate, and she'd ask, "How was your day?" He never really answered the question right, especially since he would start to eat, but it hadn't really mattered. She was happy with him, and he was happy with her.

She'd always crawl under the table to help him take off his shoes as he ate and prattled on about some pesky customer at the bank that day. It was difficult removing his shoes because the knots in the loops would be tied too tight and her nails were too short to pick them out. He'd help her when she struggled, scooting back in his chair and propping one foot up on his knee to deftly undo the laces with practiced ease. She remembered the threadbare soles of his socks. They'd wear more and more as he continued his daily walk to and from the bus stop.

She'd drag herself out from under the table with her father's heavy shoes in hand, which was an ordeal. Her father would have pieces of chicken set aside on the plate, next to the mounds of rice and beans, for her when she emerged from under the table. She'd have already eaten dinner by then, but the small scraps of chicken hanging onto the bone covered in rich seasonings, were too tempting to resist. She'd plop back down in her chair and scarf down the chicken like she hadn't eaten in days, getting paprika and chicken grease all over her fingers. She'd gnaw on the bone until she got bored, or until the flavor left.

She'd been so young. The only reason she remembered those moments was because it had been a time where they'd both been happy, complacent and proud of each other. All the other memories in between morphed and meshed together like a stirred pot.

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Around Christmas-time, the bank had a party for its employees and the customers. The gleaming tile floors of the bank shone even brighter with all the tiny white Christmas lights strung all over. The tree they had was massive. The star on top brushed the high ceilings. It was a real tree—although no one really knew how one could purchase a real Christmas tree in Brazil and the smell of the pine was so strong that it would be on her clothes for hours afterward. The tree would always be decadently laden with ornaments and baubles and it's sheer size was intimidating. Santa would sit at the base of the tree, looking hot and round in his red suit and foamy white beard. When her aunt would lead her to sit on his lap, she'd be able to see the beads of sweat on his tanned face.

It'd been magical. It hadn't seemed real. Santa gave her a small purple box with a glittery gold bow and she'd almost dropped it, not sure if what was happening was even real. She dreamed every day for Christmas-time. She wanted to get gifts from the sweaty but charming Santa. They'd go to the playground afterwards - her, her aunt, and her father. She'd frolicked around the playground, showing everyone her special box if they'd let her. She didn't even particularly want to open it. The feeling of having something so solid and hers in her hands felt so much more important.

At some point, she'd set the box down in the rocks to go down the slide. She'd clamber up

metal stairs and launch onto the slide. The friction of sliding downward sent static through her hair and onto her clothes. When she tumbled off of the slide, the box was gone. She was devastated when she'd discovered her gift was missing, and she broke down crying by the end of the slide. She sat down hard on the rocks, the pointy edges jabbing into her legs, and she sobbed until her father found her and told her they had to leave.

It was dark but she did not want to leave. She wanted to find her present. Her father insisted that they had to go because he had things to do. Her aunt was hovered in the background, hands folded, shoulders straight - elegant as always.

She cried all the way home, angry and sad that her father made them leave the park when her special box was still missing. Has someone taken it? Who could've done such a thing? She was extremely angry with her father at that moment. That night, she went to bed with teary-eyed, head hurting - still upset at her situation.

The anger didn't last long though. When she woke up, sunlight beaming through the gaps in the ceiling tiles, there had been a quaint little pile of wrapped boxes at the foot of her bed. Approaching with hesitance and disbelief, she eyed the boxes critically, crawling to the end of the bed. There were three of them, small and all carefully wrapped in a uniform brown paper. Gifts! Presents! For her! It was so exciting, even more magical than the bank's Christmas party, even without the twinkling lights and the smiley Santa!

So little had pleased her then. It was easy to be pleased when you didn't have much, and she never had much as a kid. Simple things like three small toys at Christmas-time or the pieces of chicken her father left for her at dinner, or the feeling of the sun on her face when she went outside made her ridiculously pleased when she was younger. She wasn't sure if that was the case anymore.

Another one of the simple pleasures of being small was the trips she took to the grocery store with her father. The grocery store was several blocks away and wasn't very big. Flies flew around the produce, having come in from the open doors and windows, and sometimes the lines for the cashiers were very, very long. When they'd go on quick runs to the grocery store, her father would grab a basket for the few items he wanted to purchase, and she'd be able to fit in the basket. Her father sometimes placed a few fruits and vegetables inside the basket with her as if she was part of the groceries, which made her giggle. It was sort of like flying, until her father laughed, told her his arm was tired, and set the basket on the ground for her to get out.

He'd take her to school too. They'd walk down the sidewalk together, the sun at their backs - skinny motorcycles zipping by on the street. She had a uniform, as did all the students in Brazil. It was yellow overalls with a white button-down shirt with a rounded collar. Her black shoes were also part of the uniform, but they were in considerably worse condition than the rest of the uniform - all scuffed from all her running around. When they arrived at the school, he would wait at the wrought iron gate until she went inside the building. Sometimes she would turn around and wave

enthusiastically at him, walking backwards and beaming as if it was her first day of school. He'd always wave back. He stopped walking her to school after fourth grade.

Either way, school had been okay. It was a private school. All the teachers were nice and smart, and the school grounds were vast and expansive. There was plenty of space to run around and explore, and she would often find herself plopped down in the dirt in a patch of trees, getting dust all over the knees of her pants. It'd been fun to sit in the grass and gaze up at the trees. The leaves were mesmerizing with all their rustling and dancing in the wind, and seeing patches of blue sky and fluffy clouds had been so entertaining to her then. The world seemed so incredibly big back then, but maybe that was only because she was so small. Lunchtime had been the best time in school. She would spend all day anticipating lunch - her legs swinging and her fingers drumming away on her desk. The closer it would get to lunchtime, the less she would pay attention in class. She eagerly awaited the break while daydreaming and looking out the window. She had a black lunchbox that looked like a miniature version of her father's lunchbox. The only exception being that her lunchbox had a small compartment for her juice.

Her mother made orange juice from scratch. They didn't have enough money to buy the store-bought juice like some of the other kids in her class did, but back then that hadn't mattered to her. Every day, her mother would fill a small glass with a screw-on lid with juice from a well-used pitcher, then she would tuck it snugly in that small compartment in her lunch box. The styrofoam insulation in the lunchbox would retain the smell of the juice even when there was nothing inside, recalling a memory of a sharp sweetness that never really went away.

The juice had been one of her many small pleasures. It always made her happy to taste the slightly watered down, slightly over sweetened orange juice every day. It always made her happy to catch the scent of orange juice trapped in her lunchbox. Sometimes she wondered when those simple pleasures stopped being enough. It'd been a simple pleasure to wait in the sun after school was over for one of her relatives to come and pick her up - sweat clinging to her lower back under her shirt. Now, all her simple pleasures were just that - simple. They didn't seem to be enough anymore.

She remembered thinking that her dad was her favorite out of her parents. She remembered a time when they had been happy with each other, before he ever disappointed her and before she ever disappointed him. Her mother was different, though. Looking back, she could only vaguely remember bits and pieces about life with her mother when she was younger, back before everything started spiraling out of their control, and, from what she could recollect, that had been nice too.



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