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CHAPTER 08 · IT WAS ALREADY THERE

The Box Under the Stairs

A story about seeing what was always there

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The summer Beatriz turned thirteen, her family cleaned out the box under the stairs.

It was a large cardboard box, taped shut, that had been there so long no one remembered putting it there. Her father opened it and inside were photographs — hundreds of them, loose and slightly faded, from before Beatriz was born and from when she was too small to remember anything.

They spread them on the kitchen table.

There was one of her grandmother at a hospital, holding a very small baby. The baby was Beatriz. Her grandmother's face was turned not toward the camera but toward the baby, and the expression on it was something Beatriz had never seen in a photograph before — complete, uncomplicated joy.

There was another of her father outside her first school, carrying a backpack that was almost as big as she was. He was watching her go through the door, and his hand was still raised as if he'd just let go.

There was one of her mother at a swimming pool, standing at the edge while a small girl in orange floaties thrashed around nearby. Her mother was not watching the pool. She was watching the girl. Every muscle in her body, even in the photograph, looked ready.

"Is that me?" Beatriz asked.

"That's you," her mother said.

Beatriz studied all these photographs for a long time. They were ordinary moments, most of them — nothing dramatic, no celebrations she remembered, no holidays she could name. Just Tuesday afternoons and Saturday mornings and ordinary days that no one had expected to matter.

And yet there were hundreds of them. Hundreds of moments when someone had thought: *I want to remember this. I want to remember her.*

"I didn't know about these," Beatriz said quietly.

"They were always there," her father said. "Just waiting for you to be old enough to want to see them."

She looked at the photograph of her grandmother's face again — that unguarded, enormous love — and understood something she wouldn't be able to put into words until much later: that she had been loved her whole life, completely and constantly, and had simply not had the eyes to see it yet.

*The love that has always been there is the easiest to miss — and
the most important to find.*

N O I R A C I E L

A companion to “It Was Already There”

Contributions help fund The Invisible Roots Scholarship —
supporting students who carry invisible roots.

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