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CHAPTER 13 · THE EMPTY CHAIR

Sunday Lunch

A story about the ones we keep at the table

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The first Sunday lunch after Avô died, nobody sat in his chair.

It was a wide chair, a little higher than the others, with arms that were worn smooth where he had always rested his elbows. He had sat in it every Sunday for as long as anyone could remember. Now it stood empty at the head of the table and no one said anything about it.

Filipa was eleven. She noticed everything.

She noticed that her grandmother served the same food as always — the roast, the potatoes, the salad in the blue bowl — but ate almost nothing herself. She noticed that her uncle laughed too loudly at things that weren't quite funny, and then looked surprised at himself. She noticed that her mother kept putting her hand briefly on her father's arm, and he would nod slightly.

After lunch, Filipa stayed at the table while the others moved to the living room. She looked at the empty chair.

She was expecting to feel sadder than she did. She was sad — there was a weight in her chest that had been there for three weeks now, and she didn't think it was going away soon. But sitting here alone at the table, she also felt something else, which was harder to name.

Her grandfather had sat in that chair for decades of Sundays. He had said things that made people laugh so hard they had to put down their forks. He had fallen asleep in the middle of a sentence once, and that had become a family story told every year. He had held his grandchildren's hands at this table when they were small and taught them to say the names of things in his village language, which no one else in the city knew.

He wasn't here. But none of that was gone.

Her grandmother appeared in the doorway. She looked at Filipa, and then at the chair, and then she came and sat down next to Filipa, not at the head but beside her.

"I don't want to move it," Filipa said.

"We're not going to," her grandmother said. "It's his chair. He can keep it."

Filipa felt the weight in her chest shift slightly — not lighter, but shaped differently. More like something she could carry.

Grief is not forgetting — it is learning to love someone who is no longer where they used to be.

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A companion to “The Empty Chair”

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