

# in case she forgets again

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A Memoir

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# PART I — The Witness

# Chapter One

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## The Watching Begins

**B**efore you left the Dominican Republic, you had already begun to play the part of a girl who was going to America.

It wasn't an act -- not exactly. But it was practiced, intentional, and prepared.

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You stood in the middle of your parochial school -- light-yellow walls surrounding the open courtyard, tall trees casting shade across the cracked concrete. The church was just across the street; you could sometimes hear the bells during morning lessons. Your classroom was tucked beneath those trees, always cool, with a faint smell of chalk and dust. During recess, you ran out into the courtyard with the other children.

That day, you said it with certainty—"I'm going to New York"—you were going to live in New York City with your mother.

Your friends rolled their eyes, laughed. You'd said this before. So many time before. But this time, you knew it was different, so you urged them to say goodbye properly because you knew that deep down you were already gone.

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**I want to tell you a story. About someone I know. I watched it happen -- and I want to tell you the way I remember it.**

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You always wanted to believe in love and in good things. But there was a darkness to you. Shadows that clung to the edges of your body -- not just following you but made by you. As a kid, you bent into strange shapes. Folded yourself up, squeezed into spaces too tight, curled up like the edge of an old book, or stretched long like the edge of a pole.

Sometimes you looked too small. Sometimes too flat. Sometimes too wide.

Your hair was wild and tangled, thick like rope. And your hands and feet were always just a little -- too big. As you grew, you carried weight in all the places people notice -- hips, breasts, thighs. Your body cast shadows that didn't just fall across the floor. They opened it. Pits -- dark and endless -- like a doorway to an unfinished basement.

Orifices where, if someone stepped too close, they might slip—falling and falling, straight through the Earth, and out the other side into the cold of open space. I know your story well. I remember it. I saw it.

Even if your memories are foggy, I was your witness.

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We can start with your mother.

I saw the way she pulled you close, then pushed you back. The way she packed your suitcase every summer -- too tightly -- stuffing a plastic pouch with your passport and flight info like you were cargo. The way she scolded you -- about the streets, the girls, the boys, the danger. You used to tell yourself it was love. What else could it be? You believed your mother gave you everything. That she brought you here because she loved you -- because she wanted to give you a better life. That it was a sacrifice. That she could've left you behind.

But love shouldn't feel like that. Right?

It felt like walking on glass. Like shrinking. Like sleeping beside someone who forgot you were there. Like learning how to be small not to be in the way, loud enough not to be ignored, but never big enough to take up too much space. You got good at that. The performance. You wanted safety, which is fine, I guess. That's what we all want, no? Safety. Stability. Some small, steady place to rest our head. I see that too now. But when your mother brought you to the Bronx in the early '90s, nothing felt safe. Not the sirens and not the burnt-out buildings.

The room your mother rented when you first arrived felt like cardboard.



A gust of wind could take it all.

walls. floor. roof. you.

It wasn't just small. It was a basement room in a two-story house, tucked beneath someone else's life.

The woman who owned the home was kind -- soft-spoken, careful, older. But even before she said a word, you knew she wasn't Dominican. Not just because of her accent or the way she smiled too long, but because of the way her house moved. All of her children spoke only English. Not a single word of Spanish between them -- not even the basics. They didn't roll their r's, didn't yell over one another, didn't reach for you when they talked. They were quiet in a different way -- soft, polite. American. Even the old woman herself spoke English -- smooth and clear, like she'd been speaking it all her life. There was a lightness to them. A polishedness. No loud bachata. No fried salami scent in the hallway. No trace of Vicks on the nightstand. No greasy Bengay streaks on the couch.

The room barely held you. Just a bed, pushed against one wall, and a large closet where your mother kept your things -- tightly packed in suitcases and plastic bags, like you were always on the edge of leaving again. A chest stood nearby, a small television sat on top; it mostly played static, sometimes cartoons, but usually Spanish soap operas. There wasn't enough room for both of you to move at once. If one got up, the other had to wait. No room to stretch.

But the door -- that thin, hollow door that opened into the rest of the basement -- that was the best part. On the other side was an open layout. Not yours, but available. A space where you could leave your toys. Where play was allowed, even if it was under a corrugated roof instead of the sky. You didn't have a full kitchen. When your mother needed to cook, she had to go upstairs and ask. But downstairs, you kept a fridge -- just small enough to squeeze into the corner, just big

enough to hold what mattered: juice boxes, fruit cups, sliced Kraft singles. The cheese was your favorite. Bright yellow, impossibly smooth, each slice wrapped in plastic like it had been sealed shut by magic. You couldn't find that in DR. Not in stores.

Not like that.

To you, it was proof you'd arrived in America. That something here was new. Sometimes you'd just stare at it before eating -- wondering how they got it to look that way. So flat. So perfect. You didn't know about factories or conveyor belts or machines that pressed things into identical shapes. You imagined people -- real people -- mashing up cheese in a giant pilón, pounding it into pulp the way they made garlic paste or flattened plantains. Then pressing it down with the bottom, over and over, until it came out square and smooth, like paper. You peeled it back slowly, carefully. The way it clung to the plastic amazed you -- how something so pasty-looking, so soft, could still peel away so cleanly. Even when it looked like it might tear, it almost never did. Maybe one edge would catch and break off at the corner, but nothing major. Most of it stayed intact, like it wanted to be whole for you.

And I watched you, every time, step back into that little room. Pressed against the wall, knees curled up, feet dangling over the edge of the bed. Trying to be still. Trying to take up less space than you already did.

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In the Dominican Republic, when the power went out, people lit candles or oil lamps and left them in one place. They gave off a steady light -- nothing too bright, but enough to see by. Your mother wasn't

like that. She moved about like a flickering candle, never still long enough to light a room. Unanchored. Like she hadn't decided whether to stay or disappear.

Maybe that's why you kept thinking about home. You told yourself the bricks in the Dominican Republic were different — held together by something stronger than cement. In New York, the red blocks showed their seams, lines of mortar exposed like fragile stitching. But back home, the blocks were smoothed over, sealed in a way that hid the crack.

You remembered laughter there. Dirt under fingernails. Beans planted in backyards. You remembered the mango tree that leaned into the yard's wall, heavy with fruit. It didn't just lean -- it sat on it, like it needed something to rest on. Year after year, it pressed its weight into the concrete, its branches filled with mangos, sagging low like they were tired of being held up. But the wall never gave. Never cracked. Never collapsed. It just stayed there -- still and solid -- like it understood what it meant to carry something heavy. You thought about that sometimes. How some things bend without breaking, and how some things carry weight without ever complaining.

Sometimes, you felt like that tree. Full of things you didn't ask to carry. Always leaning. Never sure if anything could hold you up.

Still, not everything felt heavy.

You remembered the backyard games. The invented soup made from smuggled goods from each grandmother's kitchen. The smoke curling from the charcoal stove. You remembered lining up with other kids at the airport in the summer, little suitcases, sky-blue pouches slung around their necks. You weren't alone. There were dozens of you -- children sent home for the summer, like mail. You held onto those memories for a long time. Not because they were perfect, but because they gave you something to hold.

Something that felt real.

You used to think if you could dig deep enough -- really dig, past the crust and rock and all the things that keep the world together -- you'd find something solid. Something that couldn't be taken away. You thought maybe, just maybe, you'd find the root of one of the beans you'd planted with your friends behind your grandmother's house. Thick roots. Deep roots. Roots that could anchor you. Keep you from floating away into space.

But you never found them. You never stopped sinking, I don't think. Not really. You sank past the ground. Past the fire. Into the silence beneath it all. Weightless. Like your body had opened a door beneath you -- one of those shadows you cast without knowing.

And that's where I found you. Not standing. Not screaming. Just falling. Right through yourself.

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**You'll wonder who I am. Whether I care for her. Whether I mean her harm.**

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who am I?

It's not that simple. I'm not whispering threats. But I'm not a guardian either. Sometimes I feel like an echo on the wall. A footstep mistaken for plumbing. I don't knock. I don't creak. I listen. I wait.

I've been mistaken for a draft. A sigh. A hunch. A panic. But I'm none of those things. Not entirely. You might think I'm your brother. A cousin. A friend. Someone nearby. Someone who slept in the room next door. I won't tell you otherwise.

What I will say is this: I always saw you.

I could hear you even when your words didn't line up with the truth. I knew what you were really thinking when you smiled and told everyone you were okay. Especially when your mother asked how you felt about her boyfriend moving in.

That one was complicated.

You wanted to feel happy. You truly believed you should feel happy. And I think, in some way, you were -- or at least, excited. The idea of someone else in the house, someone new. Someone to break the quiet tension of too much space and not enough presence...It lit something in you, briefly.

But there was a dullness to your happiness. A kind of hollowness. Beneath it, there was something else. An emptiness. It settled in your stomach -- almost like hunger. But not quite. Hunger is a signal. It tells you something's missing and how to fix it. You feel it, you eat. It has a solution.

This was different. This emptiness didn't say, "Feed me." It didn't ask for anything. It just sat there, quiet. Even I didn't know what it wanted.

And that unsettled even me.

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I saw other things too. I saw the way the television was left on -- tuned to channels no child should watch. Not just loud or violent. I saw how your eyes lingered. There were magazines, too. Left out in the open. Spines cracked from too many page turns. People on glossy covers -- arched backs, naked skin, big hair, stiletto heels, leopard print, and very little else. They weren't hidden. They were left. Meant to be found. You never touched them. Never opened one. But you noticed. Every single time.

I remember who you were before. I was there when you first became invisible -- even to yourself.

And that's when I began to watch you -- not the way the world saw you, but from beneath the skin.