

The Night We Lost the Stars

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In the summer nights of my childhood in Iraq, we used to sleep on the roof of our home.

The sky was unbelievably clear, as if it had been washed just for us. We could see everything, stars scattered across the darkness, and sometimes even the planets shining quietly above us. It felt like the whole universe was close enough to touch.

We didn't just look at the stars. We knew them.

Each one had a name.

We named them after people we loved, people who were part of our world. And every night, they would be there, waiting for us in the same places, as if they were keeping us company.

The breeze was soft and cool, sweeter than any dessert. It wrapped around us gently, carrying the scent of flowers from the garden below. The trees were so tall they almost reached the roof, and their fragrance stayed with us all night, calm and comforting.

The night was never truly dark.

It was full of light, starlight.

And when the moon was full, it lit everything so brightly that we could even solve puzzles under its glow. We didn't need lamps. The sky was enough.

We loved shooting stars the most.

Whenever we expected them, we would go quiet. Completely quiet. We believed that if we made any noise, they might get shy and not appear. So we watched in silence, barely breathing, waiting.

And when one finally crossed the sky, it felt like magic. We truly believed that our wishes would come true.

My mother used to tell us stories about the stars. Every night, a new story. And because we had already named them, it felt like she was telling stories about people we knew.

There was one pair of stars we loved the most. We called them the mother and the baby.

They were always close together, one bigger, one smaller, like they belonged to each other. Every night, we would look for them, just to make sure they were still there. As long as we could see them, we felt safe.

My mother also taught us how to tell the time by looking at the stars. It felt like a secret, like we understood something special about the universe that others didn't. It made us feel connected, and somehow important.

Those nights were full of peace, wonder, and quiet joy.

Until one night.

We heard a loud noise, louder than anything we had ever heard before. It didn't stop. It kept coming, again and again.

This time, it wasn't shooting stars.

It was war.

We all ran inside and stayed in one room. My parents quickly covered the windows with thick blankets, hammering them in place to protect us. We sat together, close and silent, but this silence was different. It wasn't peaceful. It was heavy, full of fear.

After that night, nothing was the same.

The war didn't stop.

And we never slept on the roof again.

We moved from place to place, always searching for somewhere safer. The nights were no longer about stars or stories, they were about survival.

One day, we broke the rules.

We went upstairs, just to see the sky again.

But what we saw was not the sky we remembered.

Or maybe it was what we did not see that hurt the most.

The sky was gone.

It was covered in thick, dirty air. It smelled like something burning, like matchsticks and smoke. We looked up, searching, but there were no stars.

Not a single one.

It felt like the war had stolen them, taken our sky, our stories, our wishes.

And from that day on, we never saw the stars again.

The soft breeze disappeared too.

In its place was the smell of burning.

And the nights became empty.

But somewhere deep inside me, the stars never disappeared.

I still remember their names.

I still remember the mother and the baby, always close together.

I still remember how we waited in silence for shooting stars, afraid they might be shy.

And I hold on to the quiet belief
that somewhere, under a clearer sky,
they are still there.

Waiting.