The Night the Sirens Stopped (B2 · English B2)

Tekst / Transcript

For eleven years, Nadia had lived in a city that never really felt safe. She had learned to read the mood of the streets the way farmers read the sky. When the market emptied early, something was coming. When the boys who usually played football disappeared from the square, something had already happened. The long conflict between the government and the rebels in the hills had never officially been declared a war, yet everybody spoke about it as one.

Her grandmother remembered a different time, before the checkpoints. She liked to tell Nadia about the summer of her own youth, when children competed with a bow and a single arrow in the dry field behind the school. Nobody had guns then, she insisted, though Nadia suspected the old woman was polishing her memories. These days, a stray bullet could come through a kitchen window at any hour, and everyone in the neighbourhood knew somebody who had lost a relative that way. Nadia's uncle kept a rifle under his bed but swore he had never once touched the trigger. He said the weapon was only there so that nobody would think his family was easy to rob.

The worst months came after the bombing of the old power station, which left half the city in darkness for three weeks. Somebody claimed responsibility on television, but nobody could quite agree who. What followed was not organised fighting so much as ordinary, everyday violence: fights over water, over bread, over parking spaces. A local gang of young men took control of the fuel supply and began charging whatever price they liked. When shopkeepers refused to pay, the young men would threaten them quietly, standing outside their doors and saying nothing at all. That silence was more frightening than shouting.

Nadia's mother worked at the hospital and came home grey with exhaustion. She described the crisis in plain, tired language: not enough beds, not enough medicine, not enough hands. One evening she said that a rocket had landed two streets from the emergency entrance and had failed to explode. The bomb squad had carried it away like a sleeping animal. Nadia noticed that her mother told this story without any emotion, as though describing a delayed bus. That was what years of danger did to people; the threat of sudden death became simply another item on a list of daily inconveniences.

Then, one Tuesday in October, the sirens stopped. A ceasefire had been signed in a city far away, by men Nadia had never met. Nobody dared celebrate on the first night, or the second. By the end of the week, however, the football boys were back in the square, and someone had hung a string of coloured lights across the street. Her grandmother sat outside in a plastic chair, smiling at nothing in particular. It was not a victory, Nadia thought, because nobody had won anything and far too much had been lost. It was something quieter and better: an ordinary evening, with the windows open, and no reason to close them.

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