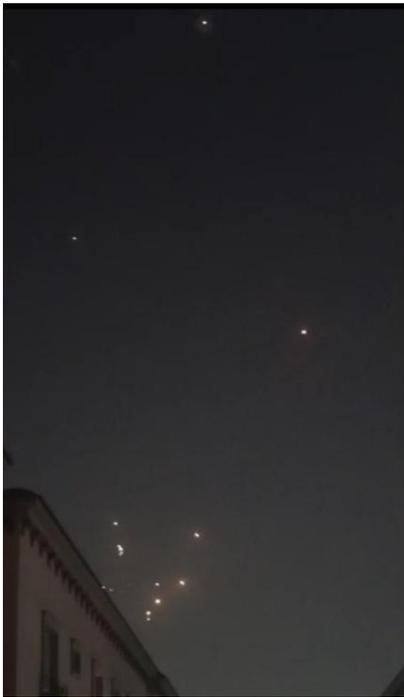


The Night of the Orange Light

By Shalindri Peiris¹

It happened again. Less than a year later, I stood in the exact same spot and counted, through the window, the orange lights moving steadily toward me. They streaked across the sky with terrifying purpose. It is almost ironic that I grew up in



Rockets in the night sky in a picture taken by the author

a country ravaged by civil war for three decades and never once heard the sound of a bomb, yet here I was, feeling the walls tremble around me. The attempt to flee felt laughable from the very beginning.

All we could do was grip our packed bags and stand on the doorstep, praying to every god we knew that the orange lights slicing through the sky would not fall on us.

In the living room, my flatmates and I carefully mapped out an evacuation plan. We listed the options methodically: the back gate, the front gate, the open space in front of the villa. We agreed to switch off the electronics and turn off the gas to minimize potential damage. It was a fragile, almost pathetic plan, but it offered comfort. It gave us the illusion that we possessed some measure of control.

On the television, the faces of the so-called leaders responsible for this destruction flashed across the screen. They debated language, choosing politically correct terminology to soften the reality of what was unfolding. While they spoke, I stood counting the orange lights in the sky, feeling each explosion reverberate through the building. After every loud bang, birds scattered into the darkness, and instinctively we would look up, as if searching for answers written above us. The helplessness was overwhelming. There was

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nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, nothing to do but wait. I kept praying that it would all stop, but the uncertainty was unbearable.

The night sky will never be the same again. Stars now resemble balls of fire. A distant car engine sounds like an approaching explosion. The ghostly echoes linger in my ears and come alive whenever I close my eyes.

I keep asking myself: where do we go from here? When that monstrous orange light dominates the sky, there is no shelter sufficient, no wall thick enough. I huddled with my flatmates in the living room, praying across faiths, hoping desperately that our door would remain intact, that no blast would force its way inside, that the burning lights would extinguish themselves before reaching the ground. Twelve hours have passed since the first strike. The night still feels endless.

My mind drifts back to last year's attack. The signs were there then too, the same orange glow, the same uneasy reassurances. We convinced ourselves that everything would be fine, that it would pass, that war was not imminent. Like Mr. Birling in *An Inspector Calls* dismissing the warnings of the First World War, we brushed aside what was plainly before us.

I think about the Sri Lankans who left behind one civil war only to find themselves in the middle of another. I think about the life I was trying to build, and how it feels as though it is slipping further away with each orange light that crosses the sky. I do not think I will ever look at the night the same way again. I once looked at the stars with awe; now I study them with suspicion, wondering whether they are stars at all.

While politicians negotiate and profit from destruction, ordinary people like my flatmates and me huddle together, praying that a stray missile will not choose us.

The weight of it all presses heavily. The fragility of everything feels exposed. How suddenly it can all stop. And still, against hope, we continue to hope that we will survive, and that somehow, someday, life will be better.

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