

Baghdad Roof

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In San Diego the night sky is illumined with shows of fireworks, whistling bursts, explosions and showering sparks. It's Independence Day. The roads to the harbors and beaches are choked with cars. These areas all jammed with lawn chairs, ice chests full of hot dogs, buns, Lays potato chips, Twinkies and Budweiser beer. Chunky, giggling kids and grandmothers are excited to bask in the sparks and flashes high above them. Synchronized music on the car radio thumps and rolls to the bursts and booms of the heavenly pyro-technic orchestration. Camera phones flash, trying to imitate the sky. Tearful pride and applause erupt spontaneously.

In Baghdad, the attack commences as streaks of light darting through the skies suddenly explode, or end in a dull but powerful thud, shaking the buildings and starting fires on the ground.

The children in the houses are shaken as they stumble and panic, dropping their toys. They fall into each other's arms shaking. "Awe and shock" has arrived.

A brother groans as he manages to lift his television on to the roof's surface. And now the boys sit on the rooftop under the flaming sky, as the attack begins. Flickering in the background Al-Jazeera and CNN synchronize their broadcasts with the flashes and explosions which light up the sky and buildings all around roof pilots.

This area of Baghdad is a sea of gray concrete rectangles crowded together topped by people, generations of people. Family members escape the ambient desert heat that chokes their homes below.

On hot nights, the whole family drags cushions and blankets and trudges up through the attic onto the roof. It's the coolest and only tolerable space to spend a hot night. And it's safer - from whatever waits below on the streets. Errant shrapnel or a random blast might not touch you up here.

And so, from here, high above the charred debris and streets, it's as though the whole of humanity is sleeping on their roofs. Drifting, under the vast explosion of stars.

In the darkness, sounds of life ricochet off the buildings. From another rooftop, you can hear someone sneezing.

And then coughing on your left.

Now, again, barely audible, a scratchy throat grunts somewhere below.

Then silence.

Whispers.

Then, more hacking echoes off the buildings and is broadcast into the Babylonian night.

In the distance, the random booming sounds fade into slower intervals.

Silence.

Skeptical silence.

Again, interrupting the brief interval of calm, someone's snoring rumbles through the air over the rooftops.

Floating below the dark sky a ragged symphony of humanity - a canvas, splattered and sprinkled with human rumblings and auditory squiggles.

Giggles.

In the next building, a couple of snickering children are being hushed.

The children have learned to move about carefully within the forbidden perimeter of the rooftop and the sudden abyss that surrounds them.

Eventually they snuggle up close to their siblings and parents on the improvised sleeping platform in the sky.

While the babies sleep in fits and starts, millions of tiny pulsating lights signal the beginning and the end of whole galaxies.

Winks from the abyss.

Half asleep, a restless child, or a grandfather, stares upward into the infinite and then is swallowed by the immensity, wonder and beauty of the night sky. He is touched, yet too numb and weary to ponder the imponderable.

And now, finally, across the rooftops of Baghdad and a thousand Arabian nights, the rest of the family eventually slips or falls, fearlessly, off the edge, into the past, present and future where humanity rejoices and dances and, again, the family is reunited with the ancient spirits of Babylonia and Chaldean Oracles.

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