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Abuella's Stars

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The stars had been arranging themselves in the sky like chess pieces carved of soft ivory. They arranged themselves on the board one by one; each piece finding its place. Orion, the king, was surrounded by twin Gemini rooks. They arrived silently, and I watched each one as the air cooled and the sand began to dampen. I called to each one by name as it showed itself, Abuella had taught me how to do this. On summer nights after the evening meal, we would sit behind the house, past the garden of cilantro and tomatoes, and she would tell me the stories of each star as it peaked out into the night. She had watched the stars from that spot every night and knew them as friends. She told me their stories. She had watched in the dry season and she studied them in the rain. She could even remember the stars that had run away from the violence of the revolution, and not returned.

This had been her farm so long that most people in Puerto Desierto were too young to remember what had been here before it. They had forgotten the men who had raided French ships, and then spent their swag in the whorehouses and bars. None of them remembered the whaling company that tried to buy the entire town and create a factory on the shore. They had never seen the streets before the desert climbed into the ocean and covered all of the ground underneath. But, Abuella had lived through it all. She stayed when the men were forced to learn the fish routes and the women to be widows, burring husbands in the old graveyard. She stayed even when she went mad, whispering to the peach trees that had dried years ago, and sleeping in the yard.

The stars had still arranged themselves before Abuella watched. They had been playing their game every night, finding their place in the sky and then waiting each other out until the last of them faded into the small dark of morning. This was the game that

shepherds watched to fall asleep and that guided men back from the ocean, their nets swollen with the days catch. This had always been the game of the night, and my part had always been to call to them their names so that they could find the right place to stand in the sky. I had learned this from Abuella, and she had taught me well how to do it.

But tonight, I have called for them by name, reminding them of where they should stand, and they are deaf to me. Tonight the fishermen will be lost and the shepherds will not sleep. Tonight, when Abuella has left the farm, the desert, and her garden of cilantro and tomatoes, the stars will not come.