How Love Survives Loss

written by an anonymous Palestinian refugee | July 24, 2026

NP *editor's intro: This reflection is written by a refugee who left Gaza at the end of 2023. It was forwarded to us by a regular contributor who has known her for around a dozen years.*

My sister spent more than twenty years as an elementary school teacher. To her students, she was far more than a teacher. She was a friend, a mentor, and a caring mother who never hesitated to offer guidance, encouragement, and compassion to her little students. All she ever wanted was to finish her years of teaching, retire, buy a piece of land, and build the home she had always dreamed of for herself and her children—a home with a large garden where she could plant the trees and flowers she loved. She retired at the end of 2022. Then, in October 2023, the war in Gaza began. Her dreams slipped away, not only the dream of buying that piece of land, but even the simple dream of living in peace, free from the constant fear of losing the people she loved.

In May 2025, my sister, her husband, their son, their daughter, and their three grandchildren were killed when a missile struck their home in the Al-Amal neighborhood of Gaza. They left behind four grieving daughters and their youngest son, Mohammed, who had fortunately left Gaza in April 2024 to continue his university studies in Egypt. The war gave my sister no chance to say goodbye, and it gave us no chance to say goodbye to her or to the rest of her family. Eight lives were taken in an instant. The youngest was only four years old. The oldest were my sister and her husband.

Now, more than a year after their deaths, I still have not cried for my sister as deeply as I thought I would. I have not grieved her as fully as I expected because, somehow, she is still alive to me. I still hear her voice in my memory. I still find myself expecting my phone to ring and her name to appear on the screen, or imagining that she will walk through my front door the way she always did, with her peaceful smile. I know she is gone, but my heart has not yet learned how to live in a world where my sister no longer exists. Perhaps that is why my grief still feels unfinished. Not because I miss her any less, but because a part of me still waits for her to come back, as though love itself refuses to believe what happened.

For almost a year now, Mohammed has been coming to my home. I am his aunt, and I try to make it a place where he can spend time with family,

enjoy the meals he loves, and feel that he still belongs somewhere. After losing his parents, his brother, his sister, and his nieces, I want him to know that this is his home too, and that my sons and daughters are now his brothers and sisters. Mohammed is in his twenties and has always been a shy young man. Even with close family, it took time before he felt comfortable enough to simply be himself. What strikes me most is how every familiar scent of food brings back a memory of his family. Whenever I prepare a meal he has requested, he often walks into the kitchen and says, “This smells like sunset during the war, when my mother used to cook this.” Sometimes he says, “This is the smell of ten o’clock in the morning, when my mother used to fry potatoes and falafel for breakfast.” Other times he smiles and says, “This smells like Friday lunch, when we all gathered after Friday prayers to eat together.” Or he says, “This is the smell of Eid—the meat, the fried liver for breakfast, and the aroma that filled our home.” I rarely respond. I simply smile, carrying a sadness too deep to be expressed in words.

His memories have made me wonder: Do scents bring the dead back? I am sure they don’t. But perhaps they bring back the life that was once shared with them. A familiar scent can unlock an entire world: a mother standing in her kitchen, a family gathered around the table, the comfort of an ordinary morning, or the joy of Eid. In a single breath, the people we have lost seem to draw close again as love has found another way to remain present. Perhaps that is the gift of scent. It does not summon the dead. Instead, it preserves them gently within those who loved them. It keeps their laughter, their habits, and the warmth of the homes they created alive in our hearts. Every time Mohammed stands at my kitchen door and tells me what a meal reminds him of, I realize that, for a brief moment, his family is with him again—not in body, but in memory, in love, and in the familiar scent of home. Perhaps that is how love survives loss, through the memories carried in a photograph, in a familiar voice, or in a certain scent.