

# Another day in the City of Men

(1062 words)

The air was brisk and pure, cold but dry. Turyalai Muhammadzai orientated himself for the Fajr, the Khyber Pass facing his right shoulder and his silk worn out carpet turned towards Mecca. Like his Prophet, he deeply savoured the first prayer of the day, with his mind as unclouded and peaceful as possible. The soil was still dormant from the cold invasion of the winter night. After several years of outdoor physical labour, his knees resented the prostrating and kneeling parts of the oration, but he mentally waved at the pain, like an old friend, and went on with the litany.

After accomplishing his praying rituals, he quietly stood up, mechanically smoothing his simple white but impeccable Salwar-Kameez: the ample trouser and long sleeved shirt could not conceal the quiet strength his body exuded. He slowly turned his face towards the East. Feeling absolutely serene, clean and pure, he offered his harsh profile, seemingly carved in a dense, dark and knotty wood, to the tender light of the rising sun.

Back inside his home, the warmth seemed to intensify the lingering smells of cardamom, fresh coriander, grated ginger and Garam Masala. Even though there was never a lot of beef or chicken, his wife always managed to prepare a delicious Nihari. She was as gracious and slender as when he had married her. Just more tired. Like a weary ballerina whose hands once so elegant were now full of calluses. On her face, the only visible concession to time was some thin lines whose

geography he liked so much. She was loyal, honorable, brave and had a great sense of righteousness. She never complained about their difficult life. She never complained about the secret hopes she had to give up over the years. But he knew it was weighing heavy on her shoulders. She was really a good wife to him. Could it be said that he was a good husband to her? He was not so sure.

Their quietness was disrupted by the ring of the telephone. His back to her, he said ‘Yes, it’s me’ and after a few seconds. ‘Very good. Thank you’.

He turned to face his wife. She was looking expectantly at him.

He broke the news: ‘We can have them, they are ready.’

She, ordinarily self-contained, could not help but jump with joy and reach out to him, her eyes glistening: ‘Finally, Turyalai, we can start all over again. We have waited so long for this. These visas are our door to a new life. Everything is possible now. We can dream again.’ He looked fondly at her and said ‘I will go this morning to the American Embassy.’

A few minutes later, she was heading towards the main door and another grueling day of work, but today, her steps seemed to be much lighter. Before she could leave the house, he grabbed her arm and while watching her intently, he slowly brought her close to him. She welcomed this unexpected show of love with a luminous smile. In silence, they held hands, their foreheads tenderly touching. Then he gently pulled himself away from her, turned abruptly and went back into the sleeping room: dignity was part of his Pashtun code of life. He heard her leaving. He carefully combed his hair and beard and closed the house as he did every morning.

Before climbing on the bus that would take him to the City of Men - Peshawar -, his gaze lingered on the rugged mountains, the benevolent sentinels guarding the vast and open plains of his beloved homeland. He quickly bent down and grabbed a handful of brown and powdery earth, brushing it in his fingers before dropping some in his left pocket.

Usually languid and yet energetic, the atmosphere felt different today. It was the last day of Ramadan. An explosive result of the tiredness, irritability and expectation heightening with each day of fasting, the electricity prowling in the streets was palpable. Slaloming with dexterity between the cacophony of cars, trucks, cycles, people, donkeys, scooters and rickshaws, the bus passed through the old part of the city. Looking absentmindedly at the typical chiseled wood doors and balconies, he could feel the lingering fragrance of the past.

The roads had hungrily swallowed the meager rain that half-heartedly appeared minutes ago. It had only served to intensify Peshawar's unique scent, a powerful blend of different smells: roasted meat, ripe fruits, animals and men body heat, tobacco smoke and spices.

The bus was full. He could recognize from the clothing, speaking or intonations Pashtuns, but also Hazaras, Penjabis, Tajicks: a delicate human patchwork which balance was so tenuous and fragile. He was watching a woman with her young son. They came from the mountain region and the shiny eyes of the little boy told Turyalai it was his first trip to the City of Men. There was a beautiful eagerness in his behaviour, an avidity for embracing life. Turyalai wondered how long it would be till he lost that breath of pureness. Just then, the little boy looked at him and smiled: he was answering 'never'. Turyalai smiled back 'I hope!' Feeling observed, his gaze scanned the bus

till he met the stare of a very old man. His arthritic hands were holding tight against his heart a holy worn book. His frail appearance contrasted vividly with the highly unusual blue of his searching eyes. Turyalai acknowledged him with a slight head tilt. Innocence of youth and wisdom of elderly, both saluting him: another sign of Allah's presence in his life today.

They reached the cantonment of modern Peshawar and stopped in front of a contemporary building. He stepped down and looked at the bus, with its passengers, vanishing into the hustle and bustle of the city. He was facing the white and emblematic building: the American Embassy. His wife was right: here was the door to a new beginning, to a new life. A better one, he hoped.

He was just on time for the Dhuhr, the mid-day prayer. He breathed deeply before murmuring the familiar bismillah invocation: "in the name of God". His left hand grasped the earth still in his pocket. He closed his eyes and with his right thumb, simply pressed the button on the heavy explosive belt hidden below his ample shirt.