

City Scene

There was such strange scarcity of life in that place. It had nothing to do with the hospital, rather, the lack of green spaces contributed to the feeling that it was a life-lacking town. There was wind but for some reason did not feel as pure and strong as back home. Because there were only a few and small trees, the sound of the wind was minimized to a whisper. No leaves anywhere, no birds' chirping, no life. In a way, seemed like somebody would collect the few leaves fallen from the smaller-than-normal trees and that simple act would scare birds, crawlers, insects, and the wind.

That made me realize things we take for granted, recreating in my mind how nice it was to see branches' swinging back and forth back home, as if one tree would caressed the other while sharing its strength and whispering something to the next. Then the second tree would do the same to the next, and so on in an endless dance of glittering leaves circling around each tree, moving to the rhythm and strength and the direction of the wind: by the river an orchestra of wind, water running, and creatures' natural sounds. In the city, the birds were unlike and behaved differently too: crows and pigeons, for instance, had an easy life: waiting for people to simply litter and scatter food of all kinds, the birds did not seem as concerned and acute as the ones back home. These were simply living an incredibly easy life. I would dare to say that these flocks were more numerous and maybe also chubbier than their cousins in the valley. Can't really explain it, but life was less liveable by some means, or its value seemed devaluated there. Such depreciation was highlighted by the mixed scent of the city, consisting mainly of burned oil, rust, fumes, plastic of all kinds, and foul food.

It was until Jaime was better that they allowed somebody to share a bed inside the place. At that moment father decided he could get back to work full and extra time, and try to make up for the lost time; probably taking Linda back home so that we did not pay any more hotels. Brody and mother would take care of the both of us, alternating between the car and the couch in Jaime's room.

The city was a strange creature. I started to dislike everything about it, from so many posts, signs and cables, to noise and smell. However, it was mainly there that I appreciated human compassion is universal. I know people become selfish and immovable due to the pressures of the environment they are immersed in; but even so there's a lot of good deep inside everybody.

There was that café or deli behind where the car was parked that Linda went to. There were a few happenings around that place that made it look as an entire system out of and in itself. Some people visited the place to get some food, any food, and then left the place as quickly as they came in. Some other formed behavioural and time patterns in an almost religious manner: there were the two elder men that would get there apparently every day to order a warm drink and some cookies, in order to start their ritualistic chess game. Always doing it at the same time and always finishing the game, the drinks and the cookies simultaneously; then always finally opening their mouths at the end not to put something in it, but to discuss the whole game play by play, then chatting about themselves for a few minutes, while putting back the chessmen in the wooden box; shake each other's hand and part ways.

Mainly elders would get there early morning. By mid-morning, school kids would be doing homework of some sort, lunch time was for workers from nearby places, and afternoons would comprise a mix of people, mainly adults chatting about anything and everything.

Some specific people had a daily routine around breakfast or coffee break or lunch or dinner, so we learnt that some people in the metropolis were quite like the ones in Kundust: full of customs and habits that formed part of their lives. They changed clothes very often, then it was obvious that clothing was a big part of city life as well: there were the teenage girls that were at that place every other day; and none of the three -sometimes four- that met at that place wore the same outfits, ever. I could not believe a single person could possess more clothes than our entire family. First I wondered whether those clothes were somehow rotated among them, then some comments from Linda made us realize that it was in fact a social thing to possess such an array of garments for some specific classes of people in such big urban areas.

One other difference between the city and a small town was the need to educate or entertain oneself, perhaps the fact that there was not much conversation among city people -for whatever reason- made it necessary to immerse in books of all kinds. The coffee place was where I could appreciate it more clearly, but by Linda and dad's comments and my own glimpses of people travelling on buses, I noticed that a lot of city people read all kind of things, not only the newspapers and magazines that made the bulk of waste, but also books of all shapes and forms. That was something that rarely happened back home.

A nice sighting at that place happened too: some days, a lady in a wheelchair would be enjoying a late breakfast or an early lunch placing her chair as close as possible to any of the three small tables outside the café. I never really noticed how she got there or left, yet I realized

that the only limb she could barely use was her left hand. One of the employees served her order then placed the glass on her mouth, helped and gave her some food to chew and went back inside; later to come out again and repeat those steps. The chair lady chewed slowly, and could pick up and put small pieces in her mouth herself, but it was obvious the glass was beyond her might.

Once, a customer sat at the same table, asking her first if he could do so. They were close enough to the car for me to see the action, nonetheless far enough to be able to hear the conversation. After what seemed like a brief introduction, he started helping feed her while chatting who knows what about. They were there long enough for her to finish her entire meal then have some minutes left to talk to the stranger. After being there for forty-five minutes or so he stood up, shook her left hand in an awkward yet sincere way and went away.

There was another incident that got recorded vividly in my mind. For a few days I noticed a pile of black bags, old clothing, dirty bottles and cans in a corner of a tall gray building. At first it looked like nobody from the city or the building had any intention of picking up such eyesore, waiting for somebody else to do it; some passers-by threw small pieces of garbage to the pile. One morning I kept in a particular position that forced me to look in that direction for a long time, I noticed an old lady leaving a small wrapping together with a cup of something seemingly hot by the pile. After a minute or two the mound moved. A hand protruded from below the mass of clothes and took the package, a grey human figure erected and collected the coins -not garbage- people threw there; took a sip to the cup and started munching at whatever it was the lady left in there. I could not believe a human being was living in such conditions, with nobody around to offer him a roof; no organization to take him somewhere else, and nobody else doing anything realistically good; except provide some spare change. That scene made me

realize there were perhaps more problems in big cities than what one can barely grasp on the surface.

It was also at the city that I realized all I knew until then was virtually nothing. The so many different skin colours, body shapes, sizes and features, and the realization of so many different faces, voices and ways of talking made me feel inadequate in that place. The languages were one of the most amazing features of the human being. Although I have heard a few different languages from a movie or the news on TV, I thought those were something of an invention so to make the program more appealing to the audience. I am still in awe to know that despite not being able to understand the so many and varied languages, humans can communicate, deal, care for, and even fall in love with one another. Listening to a woman reprimanding her son for -apparently- not being careful enough with the basket, or the carpenter giving instructions to his aide on what to buy at the warehouse -I guess-, or the old, slow, bearded grandpa singing that peaceful song; all in languages I knew were totally different from each other and yet sounding so fascinating, blew my mind.

The main aspect of Nueva Victoria that we outsiders seemed to abhor the most was the incredibly amount of waste city people went through on a daily basis: there were all these newspapers and magazines of all sizes and shapes that people took from who knows where, read or skimmed quickly, and then abandoned on coffee tables, garbage bins and even simply threw to the floor. Paper and plastic cups were ever present on the streets, accumulating in piles by the gutters; even food was thrown away as if it was normal. Entire half sandwiches were abandoned on tables, broken cookies left for the birds, coloured drinks bottles *adorned* some doorways and even clothes were left hanging on posts, bike racks, and park benches.