**The City At Night**

It’s a night as dark and hopeless as my life right now, and I’m sitting on the sidelines, watching the terrain of people go by. Or perhaps I’m on the sidewalk. In fact, I am the sidewalk. People walk all over me. Not metaphorically, but in fact, literally. It’s as if, I’m a glob of gum or a food wrapper thrown to the ground carelessly, floating in the air aimlessly. Worthless. Meaningless. Nickel-and-dime. It would be easy to say I feel invisible. Instead, I feel painfully visible and entirely ignored. It’s one of the reasons why I love observing the city at night. I like the night; it hides my flaws, my imperfections, my status and my eye bags. No one would have to see my cheap, crumpled, ripped jeans and my dirty, scruffy hair unwashed for God knows how long, or my white paper cup filled with a few rusty copper coins. I wouldn’t feel shameful, unwanted and rejected. I wouldn’t feel like an alien on Earth. Like I feel every mortifying morning. It’s not like they look at me anyway. But it is engrossing to see all the drama unfold right on the wet, damp, pitch-black streets — my home. It is strange to call a road home, but to me, an orphan who was transported from one disinterested foster carer to another till I turned eighteen, the home had always been an illusion. A word used for temporary stay, and not a safe haven, a cocoon from the troubles of this world, a place of belonging, which is how I feel other people spell home.

It was a cold night in early December, and the moon looked pale and wan as if it shouldn't be up on a night like this. I was strolling along the well-trodden, narrow pathway of Jones Street, gazing at all the fancy kebab houses, restaurants and cafes. I had memorised the names of all the elegant, high-class and extravagant restaurants; Keen’s Steakhouse, Le Bernadin and THE GRILL, You name it. Those places cost an arm and a leg. I would always dream that one day, just one day, I would be the one sitting on the bright, red, leather chairs in Le Coucou, listening to the calm, classical 1960s music being played on the radio in the background. I would be blissfully eating a big, red, delicious lobster and slowly sipping a fresh, mint margarita with satisfaction. But instead, I’m caught having to beg for a few pennies every day and getting painfully rejected every time. I’m caught having to hear my stomach growl at me. Angry. Anxious. Aching. Sometimes, I’m caught scrutinising my pained reflection off the big, shiny glass windows from a small sweets store, now closed. My skin was hidden behind layers of grime, and my hair was a tangled mop of brown and blonde. I had prominent, thin, high cheekbones. My cheeks as pale as one who saw ecstasy beyond foretold agony. I had eyes. The eyes which live but the life is lost. I feel as though energy is being rapidly drained out of me, as though I’m leaking electricity. As though, I’m leaking life. And then, I think of the lucky, affluent population. Those who are born with a silver spoon in their mouth. Those who are living the high-life in the Bahamas or Hawaii and Dubai. Those who are clinking glasses on cruise ships like the ‘Harmony of The Seas’ or the ‘Liberty of the seas’. You see, in reality, now that I have nothing, I could dream of having anything. I’ve got nothing to lose, except for coins and clothes. And this fearlessness makes me the dangerous one. Is it too much to even ask for a good night’s sleep? Because I dream more than I sleep. The thing is, If I dare to sleep, I may not wake up the next grim, gloomy morning because some deranged psychopath could have traded my life for a jingle or an old, worn-out, shabby sleeping bag. I can’t take risks. My life is always on the line. I’ve seen it happen — a myriad of poor, hopeless, homeless people disappearing in the mists of time. Nobody knows. Nobody cares. It makes me feel down-hearted and demoralised. I sigh and meander on.

You know the pubs and clubs are out when the streets are full of folks who walk as if they’re on the deck of a storm-tossed boat. Each foot comes to the sidewalk as if the collision of shoe and concrete wasn’t entirely anticipated and the person staggers, stumbles and falls. Drug abuse statistics have risen dramatically, costing people their lives like dollars. Each digit is a person, a family, a tragedy but just an unfortunate statistic that may make a small part of the news next morning highlighting the city’s homelessness crisis in this bitterly cold month of the year. Of all the pains endured in the streets, nothing burns like the cold. The cold is as fatal as the fang of a King Cobra or the Black Mamba. It is agonising, excruciating and extremely tormenting. Especially when all you own is a worn-out sweatshirt from Tesco, ripped jeans and a tattered pair of shoes from Nike. The cold numbs your heart and senses as much as freezes the body, or maybe more so because whatever affects your heart scars you for life. My hands and feet may warm up again, but my frozen heart will always come back to this moment when there was heat in all the toasty buildings and cars, but outside on the streets, there was none available for the residents of open air.

The city at night is intriguing. Sometimes the city was submerged in lights: traffic lights, street lights and neon lights. At other times, the light was non-existent. Right now, the street was like a skeleton, stripped of its flesh long ago by the crickets that swarmed. And the sky was like a black blanket married to a poetry of stars. But the streets didn’t stay silent for long. As I then trudged through the vivid and vibrant streets of Manhattan, I could hear the faint noise of a ringing siren. The noise was getting closer and closer. And in an instant, every heart on the street skipped a beat as the ambulance shot through the traffic, red lights ablaze. To my shock, it had been there for another nameless, faceless, homeless person whom I had seen sometimes in the early hours of night, begging for change to buy booze so he could slip into oblivion. That had been an unfortunate night for him, and he had slipped into a deeper, more comatose state or probably gotten into a fight. Fights on the streets were notorious for exchanging human life and integrity of body parts for a few cheap bottles of liquor. I saw the paramedics trying to breathe life into him but in vain. He was then transported away. It was quite a common occurrence for homeless individuals to die or become paralysed for life on the streets due to drugs, alcohol, violence and theft, but this one shocked me to my core.

I stood there frozen deeply affected by a very usual sight on a city as ruthless as downtown Manhattan. Maybe I was affected so much because the lad was hardly even twenty. Robbed of health, happiness, money, safety, family he had probably breathed his last on this cold concrete. He never had a choice to be one of the productive business executives who walked in purposeful strides, emerging from glossy buildings and fancy dinners in that cold heavy night. And then it dawned on me, maybe he did, maybe his choices were limited, his potential restricted but the choice was still there. That made me look at myself as if I was seeing this thin, frail, hungry, ungroomed woman for the first time. A series of tragedies had put me there, but I did not have to end there. I had a choice, I could move on. From the never-ending throes of self-pity, emerged a flicker of hope. It was as if I saw a light at the end of this tunnel. For the first time I felt, I could have been on the other side of this sidewalk, just a few inches wide but dividing the world on its entirety between people who made the right choices in this questionnaire of life and those who did not. I sigh and let myself carried away by this sudden burst of motivation that had washed my whole being.

I stood weeping silently, the beautiful glittering lights in the city a witness to my misery and my newly awakened hope. My whole life flashed in front of my eyes, each segment riddled with pain, tears, loneliness and resignation to my fate. This resignation had suddenly changed. I refused to be merely a product of my circumstances which had let me down, I now wanted to be a result of my efforts and choices, of my sweat and tears which will one day shape me into one of those that I was envying from the sidewalk. For that change, I wanted to feel the agony for this last time, to register and mourn this life that had been mine from eighteen years. All the walls of regret and denial and anger at the unfairness of this world that were holding me up collapse and are nothing but debris. I fall to my feeble knees. I felt a weight of sorrow press me into the hard concrete. I felt clogged with pain, anger, hurt, regret and fear. But this time I want to move on, to make use of the uncertain number of years that all of us have in our lives, to make my time count for something. It’s sad. But the saddest thing is when you are feeling down, you look around and realise that there is no shoulder for you to cry on. And then the sky starts crying. Rain and tears mix on my face, salty tracks blending into fresh sky-fallen trickles.

Only the redness of my eyes gives any clues to my sadness and in this city, who will look closely enough to tell? I take the part of me that is broken and make it a ghost that fades away and becomes nothing so a new reality can be shaped which may have many obstacles, troubles and rejections in store for me, but I promised to myself never to give up this newfound hope again. Even if I have nothing, I will cling on to this tiny flickering flame of hope and this one promise to myself that I will never give up slaving and toiling for my dreams. A quote heard ages ago whispered into my mind, “Ifyou can't fly then run if you can't run then walk if youcan't walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.” I slowly lift myself. After all, getting up and getting on is the only way to survive. The darkness of one the busiest streets in the world was giving away to dawn, and I looked at the first rays of sun rising from beyond the skyscrapers of Manhattan, feeling like daytime had come for the first time in my life too, not only this city.