

# Good Morning Toronto

**Shuja Rasheed**

**R**ocking through the misty sea my dream boat had just arrived to the majestic kingdom when the monstrous witch screamed me out of my sweet sleep into the unusually harsh reality of daybreak. Terrified that the noise would interrupt the Queen and four-year-old prince, I sprung out mightily and slapped it shut. Quarter to eight. Summer sun seemed to beam from somewhere in the mid sky. When bedtime is usually well past midnight this feels like dawn. While forcing the glued eye lashes to open, I felt my way to the washroom. Another quickie while I release. Not used to wetting my body in the mornings, I brushed in a vain attempt to glitter my sparsely lined naturally yellow teeth, managed to put myself into a pair of trousers and a shirt, next the feet wrapped in socks and shoes, I grabbed my cheap black bag and stumbled out of our apartment to the corridor.

A heavy voice startled me. I remembered the middle-aged gentleman. He lived just a few apartments away. He stayed with his son. He came not very long ago. Often, I find him pacing across the long corridor. Every time we met he greeted me enthusiastically. I assumed he had nobody to talk to. His son and daughter in law both worked. They left pretty early to beat the traffic. Though I didn't consider myself much of a social person under best condition I could hold up a conversation for a little while but this wasn't the moment. Especially in the morning I hated to talk. I tried to reward him with my best smile and slip through but that wasn't to be. He grabbed me by the soldier. I had to stop.

"Went to the doctor yesterday. Low blood pressure. He told me not to worry. Ha...ha...ha... Benefits of walking. What did

I tell you?"

His English was poor. He spoke mostly in Hindi. I understand quite a bit but can't speak at all. Yet in situation like this I somehow manage. I mumbled something inelligible and stepped away. I worked downtown Toronto. I commuted in public transportation. The trip was never less than one and half hour. I could drive to work but considering the packed roads during the office hours it would probably take even longer. I had little patience for traffic. And there was rocketing parking costs in the city. The additional car insurance for driving to work added salt to the wound. Public transportation worked perfectly for me. They called it TTC. Anyway, Time was in essence. There was no time to indulge this gentleman.

My journey consisted of a bus trip followed by three different trains. Today I noticed there was a long line for the bus. Every day was different. No amount of observation helped me come up with a pattern that worked on regular basis. As the bus arrived the crowd rushed in. Oh well, being polite was good thing but a nudge here and a shove there to occupy an empty seat wasn't totally out of question. Inside the bus was packed with people. Black and white, pink and brown. Right ahead me stood a towering black man with his shaved head pushing the roof. Under his arms sat a guitar. Looking around I saw people of various races, sizes and ages gathered in this small space, a true junction. I felt good. Such observation of internationality was bound to awake the versatile humanity in anybody. I felt proud to be part of this community.

Our bus pushed through the heavy stop-and-go rush hour traffic. Next station. More people; pushed closer; hot; sweating. Even in this crowd Salim didn't fail to see me. He pushed through the crowd to my side.

"How'z going brother? Going to office, huh? You did well. Look at me? I am a complete failure."

Salim came from Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. He held a high position in a computer section of an established

company. He was young. I didn't know what had motivated him to come all the way to Canada. But since he came here his luck didn't offer much. He worked in a store in Scarborough center. It was hard not to feel guilty. I had immigrated long ago and went through long and painful times to get where I was, which was not that far, but I didn't want to tell that to this young intelligent man.

Salim bitterly said, "Brother, you didn't do anything for me."

I wish I could explain to him how limited my ability was. We climb out of the bus at the same station. Our ways departed. I hurried up on the stairs to catch the RT. This train would carry me to Kennedy station from where I would be able to catch the underground train – the subway.

Once in Kennedy I bolted down the stairs to catch the next train. Hoping inside the train right before the doors closed I felt my lips cracking into a happy smile. Seconds later the train left the brightly lit station and rushed into the dark tunnel. As I gazed inside the well-lit compartment I noticed calm and patient office goers – well dressed, well mannered! Merging into the crowd I desperately looked for a handle to stabilize myself. The drivers often applied brakes pretty hard, catching inattentive people into sudden stumble. After accidentally crashing into several attractive women I had to be careful about it. I didn't want anybody to get wrong ideas.

Very often I ran into acquaintances in the subway trains. One of the cons of changing work too often was that you knew a lot of people but very few actually became close friends. I worked as a IT contractor. A handful of my contracts went beyond a year. Anyway, bad luck hit me today. I ran into Rajan. He was younger than me, had immigrated to Canada long ago, was street smart. His only problem was he asked the darn questions. Today he abruptly asked, "how much do you make?"

I turned deaf. You don't ask the age of a woman and the salary of a man – even the most gullible person knew that, not

Rajan. It reminded me of an incident that happened at home a few days back. One morning my four-year-old son got very excited and frantically called me. I ran fearing some sort of emergency. At my sight the boy gloriously declared, "Dad, I have two balls. How many do you got?"

Rajan wasn't to be discouraged. He repeated his question as I put up a blank face. Helpless I mumbled something and moved on closer to the door. My station was next. I would have to take yet another train to my work. Run! Run! I stumbled down the stairs. As I struggled to regain my balance I heard somebody playing guitar. A man sang in deep, passionate voice. He was a familiar face around here, one of many musician panhandlers. Some played instruments, some sung, seldom they care about the quality. If the pedestrians liked the acts they threw in changes. Unfortunately, I was one of those frugals who wasn't much into giving handouts, with or without music. Regardless I had a lot of respect for these street musicians.

Another short trip brought me to a station with a majestic name – King station. I rushed out of the train, followed the crowd up the narrow stairs into the sunlit streets as streams of sweat tingled me under my shirt. One good thing about all that running around was that it sorts of worked as an alternative of planned work outs.

I worked in one of the buildings of Toronto Dominion Center located in the downtown. This was literally a hub for financial activities. Multistoried office buildings belonging to several of the major banks like Scotiabank, TD bank, CIBC and Bank of Montreal surrounded the vicinity. Swarms of well dressed people, man and women, marched busily in and out of the behemoths. And yet I knew so many others were left behind, especially the new immigrants, lacking neither in education not in experience they were left behind their only crime appeared to be not having any local experience. They were forced into odd jobs – working in the shops, stores, restaurants for a humble living. I couldn't help feeling guilty.

Yonge street was the magic wand of Toronto. I kept walking past a series of high rise office buildings. At my work a lonely desk and a chair waited for me. Nearby CN tower stood boldly spearing through the air into the blue sky. A mesmerizing view! Suddenly a rugged hat, upside down, popped up right in front of my face. Startled I took a step back but quickly realized it was just another homeless asking for hand outs. Yet another guy who made the streets his home. I had seen several just in this small area. Mostly whites some had companion dogs, large furry ones. A lonely homeless man with a large quiet dog – there could be a touch of poetic beauty in this scenario but it was far more heart breaking. I heard government in this country tried many ways to help the homeless, very little progress was being made, the proof of that was so evident everywhere. I never felt comfortable in giving away handouts. I had seen how such demeaning tradition eventually turned into a social disease back in my native country. The fear of watching similar corrosion in this society brought terrible feelings.

As I approached my workplace, a multistoried building, I saw another young homeless man lying flat on the sidewalk on a piece of rug enjoying the morning sun. The bright rays touched him gently. With his eyes closed and a smile holding static between his lips, he seemed to have learned the trick to ignore the restive world allowing it to pass by unnoticed. He had no conventional home, so the world became his only home. I felt a sudden rush of rebelliousness, an uncontrollable urge to jump out of my office dress and lie down next to him, right on the sidewalk. Wouldn't it be great, at least for once, to get out of my shell and morph into an entity devoid of any worldly belongings!

I quickly went past the man as always and walked into the specious lobby. A short wait for the elevator. My office was on the 25<sup>th</sup> floor. Well secured. The magical card called a badge did its magic and the doors opened up for the majesty, the waiting desk and the chair silently welcomed me. Staring at the computer monitor for a few brief moments I was suddenly

flooded with a feeling of abomination. This work, this office, this life everything felt like a burden, something that I carried diligently day after day, month after month, year after year. As a young boy I had so many plans, so many dreams. All that had come to an end, at some point of my journey, little I realized. A voice inside my mind screamed out announcing the worthlessness of my life!

At my right sat Sasa from Russia. At my left was Murali from India. Opposite to him sat Beth from China. After an argument with the manger she wrote a long two-page letter filled with objectionable statements about the manager and then mistakenly sent it to the manager. Once she realized her mistake a second email was sent quickly with the request to ignore the previous email. That issue didn't just go away for her, not before causing lot of administrative problems.

I had to get down to work, willing or not. I didn't have the luxury to hop into twisted adventures. I had a family and reminiscent of dreams. I needed to keep going, after all in this new land I was one of the fortunantes with a cushioned revolving chair at work and a company laptop. But somewhere deep inside me the rebel continued to knock its head on a cold wall of normalcy.

At 11 Am came the phone call from the prince. "Happy office dad!"