REMOLINO DE SUEÑOS (A Whirlwind of Dreams)

ENGLISH TRANSLATION SAMPLE

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Chapter One

CHAPTER ONE

Lost and breathless, Latifah wandered aimlessly towards the outskirts of the camp, to a place that could only be reached by passing abandoned houses inhabited by rats and rubbish, where the streets smelt of shit and neglect. She desperately sought a moment's respite from the misery of the camp and from the grief of being orphaned, both of which had engulfed her since she arrived a week earlier. A short distance away, despite the fierce afternoon sunlight, she saw the blurred outline of a girl sitting on the ground, holding a smaller child in her arms. As Latifah drew closer, a heartbroken wail pierced her ears and a tightness closed around her throat. She removed her burqa so that she could breathe more easily, even as the dust swirled around her. Slowly and carefully, she sat beside the girl. When she saw the pain in the eyes of that filthy, foul-smelling child, tears slipped from her own. She looked around anxiously, but there was no one there. Then she turned her attention to the other child, cradled in those young arms. He was almost a baby and appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Latifah quickly thrust a hand into one of her pockets and clutched the rag doll she always carried with her. She did not realise that, a short distance away, they were being watched through the cracks of houses cobbled together from cardboard and battered sheets of metal, where a pack of forgotten children lay hidden.

She looked at the girl, and a painful knot formed in her throat as she sensed her desolation, the same desolation that had engulfed Latifah when she learnt that her parents were dead. The girl was sitting on the uneven, dusty ground, beyond the last shacks and alleyways. This was the edge of the camp, the boundary separating the Afghans from the Pakistanis. The soft rays of sunlight fell across her face and that of the little boy, who seemed to be asleep. Rubble and stones lay scattered around them. In the distance, beyond a road, a group of men were playing football, oblivious to the girl with the smaller child in her arms and to the woman sitting beside her.

Latifah did not want to frighten her or make her run away. She searched for words, and each time she tried to speak, her lips opened and closed as she tasted the dryness of her mouth. At that moment, she felt an overwhelming need to embrace the girl, cover her with kisses and protect her. Yet, sitting beside her, she could not move.

The knot in her throat, her ragged breathing, the pressure in her chest and the sweat on her palms would not let her think clearly. She tried to catch the girl's eye, but the child kept crying, her gaze fixed on the horizon, towards the men running after a ball. Latifah was crying too, still unable to touch her. Meanwhile, the wind eddied around them, coating them in dust. Trying once more, Latifah reached out to stroke the girl's coarse hair. With great effort, she forced the tightness in her throat to loosen enough for a whisper.

'I'm here. You're not alone.'

She caressed the girl's rough, parched face and tried to wipe away her tears. Then she touched the boy's head, and a dreadful chill ran through her body. He was not asleep. He was dead.

The pack emerged from hiding and appeared behind them. They were orphaned children, ragged, hungry and reeking. Bound and comforted by a silence they shared, they approached the girl, unconcerned

by Latifah's presence. Only the evening wind could break that stillness, wrapping them in spirals of dust, while shouts of 'Goal!' could be heard in the distance.

The sight of the group unsettled Latifah so deeply that she did not know what to do.

Where did so many filthy, undernourished children come from?

She could not stop herself from breaking into muffled sobs at what she saw. The harsh reality of life for Afghan refugees was painful enough, but seeing those children abandoned and forgotten by their own people left her stricken with anguish. Her uncertainty, mingled with the heat and the distress of not knowing what to do with them, continued to mount. She was sweating beneath her new clothes, and her vision was growing increasingly blurred.

She embraced the girl fearfully, afraid that she might run away or refuse her, but the child allowed herself to be held, and at last Latifah released the sobs trapped inside her chest. Almost immediately, a whirlwind of sand rose before them. In the distance, the football pitch was now deserted. Suddenly, Latifah saw a man who seemed to emerge from the whirlwind and begin walking slowly towards her. Frightened, she pressed the girl against her body. In vain, she blinked several times, trying to lift the veil clouding her sight.

Although she could not understand why, the man's approach brought her a sense of calm. What she felt was no longer fear, but relief and curiosity. She knew that she alone could see him, for the children showed no reaction. Then she heard a familiar, comforting voice.

'Latifah, Latifah, compassion and love are nothing without health and education.'

It was her father's voice, coming from the figure of a man she could no longer remember. So many years had passed since she had last seen him alive that she no longer recognised his bearing or his face. But she would never forget his voice.

That was when Latifah found the answer she had been seeking. She turned to look at the children and understood that none of them had chosen their fate, and that she could change it. Yes, this was Allah finally answering her question. Her only mission would be to bring education to the children of the camp. Education had given her so much: it had changed her life, given her confidence, status and the ability to make her own decisions. As she understood all this, her heart leapt with joy amid the pain. She did not yet know how, but among the suffering and abandonment of those children, she discovered her purpose in life.

They could not remain there. The sun would soon set, and the little boy had to be buried. Latifah remembered that she had never witnessed a Muslim burial, not even that of her parents. Her years in the West had distanced her from her customs. She had arrived in Munda[1] only a week earlier, hoping to reconnect with her roots.

She rose carefully and told the girl that they had to return to the camp. She would carry the little boy back so that he could be buried according to tradition. Looking towards the shacks and makeshift huts, she trusted her memory to lead them back. She gathered the child's body into one arm and took the girl's hand. The girl seemed to know the way.

How many times had she been close to her own people without any of them noticing her?

She looked back at the children. They walked behind them in silence, a close-knit flock, while the wind began to subside.

The image of her father emerging from the cloud of dust stayed with her on the way back. Her desire to help the children in the camp was taking shape in her mind, growing stronger with every step.

My father is right. I know I can do it.

She looked tenderly at the girl, abandoned and devastated by the baby's death.

Was he her brother? What will become of her now that she has no reason to carry on? Who will watch over her? How do refugees bury their dead? Will they follow tradition? But who is this little boy? Who are his parents? Who will wash and purify his tiny body?

The girl had stopped crying. Still holding Latifah's hand, she led them all back towards the shelter.

Latifah could feel the arm carrying the lifeless body beginning to go numb. People emerged from their precarious homes and stared in astonishment and curiosity at the foul-smelling procession.

'Latifah! Latifah!' cried Sakina, a young former English teacher who had been delighted by her arrival at the camp, as she ran towards them.

'Sakina, help me! This child is dead, and I don't know who his parents are.'

'Where did you find him? Who are all these children? Where have they come from?' she asked, staring at them with her eyes wide open. Then she took the child's lifeless body into her arms. 'We have to call a mullah. Abdul, run and fetch Mustafa. Quickly!'

Once Abdul had gone, Sakina looked up at the sky to make certain that night had fallen.

'Let's go to my house,' she urged.

Latifah followed Sakina without releasing the girl's hand. The children forgotten by their own people went with them. No one knew them, or no one wanted to acknowledge them.

Sakina and Latifah sat with the other women once the confusion caused by the arrival of the camp's eldest men had subsided. The men had come to decide what should be done about the dead child. Until then, no one had known or even suspected that those children existed. Seeing them enter, filthy, barefoot and more destitute than anyone else, was a painful sight. It wounded not only their pride, but also their hearts.

'Mohamed Mustafa is the oldest mullah in Munda. He was among the first to reach the camp after fleeing the Soviet invasion,' Sakina whispered into Latifah's ear.

The oldest men, and therefore the wisest, gradually arrived at the former English teacher's house. Leaving their homes after nightfall required enormous effort, as many had difficulty seeing in the dark. There was also the fear of covert attacks. Yet an Afghan man's sense of duty prevailed over any circumstance. When the oldest of the elders were finally assembled, they decided that the first matter to discuss was the washing of the dead child's body.

Mustafa approached the girl and asked whether she had a family, whether her parents were Afghan and whether she lived in the camp. They were too many questions for a frightened child who stared at the floor, her shoulders hunched as she pressed herself against Dr Latifah's skirt. Latifah stretched out her arms to protect all the children in the pack, who would not move away from the girl for even a moment.

Seeing how defenceless she was, Latifah finally paused to study her. She had large eyes and very long lashes crusted with dried discharge. Her lips were cracked and parched by the sun, her dress was torn and filthy, and she smelt of dust and urine. Latifah thought her hair must be long beneath that tangle. Once again, anguish made her draw the girl into her arms. Without realising it, love for that child had begun to take root in her heart.

Before giving up, Mustafa turned towards the other children and repeated his questions to each of them. Not one answered. They stood shoulder to shoulder with their heads bowed, frightened by the closeness of the bearded man carrying a staff.

When the time came for the purification, only the eldest men were allowed to remain. They could not decide who should perform the washing. Some believed that the girl was the dead boy's older sister and therefore his only relative. The task should fall to her. They dismissed the idea immediately. Only someone of the same sex as the deceased should cleanse his body.

'A girl cannot wash a boy. She has no experience. Besides, she is female and she is filthy,' one of the elders shouted.

'But we do not know who they are. We cannot even be certain that they are Afghan. Why has that woman brought them into the camp?' another grumbled.

'And they stink. They are filthy. They cannot stay! Who will look after them? We already have families of our own, and every one of them is hungry,' some complained.

At last, Mustafa rose to his feet.

'He is a child of Allah. I will wash his body.'

Mustafa was not only the oldest of Munda's mullahs, but also one of the oldest elders. Only the elders were authorised to make decisions affecting all the camp's inhabitants. When the men heard their mullah speak with calm determination, they fell silent. They held him in great respect. Whatever Mustafa said was done.

So much misery has made us forget compassion.

He picked up the container of rosewater with which he would wash the baby's body. He immediately asked Latifah to leave and take the children out of the room. No one else could be present during the purification. With some effort, Sakina and Latifah led the girl into the adjoining room. The other children followed her.

Several of the women managed to gather cotton and white cloth for the shrouding of the body. Like most refugee homes, Sakina's house had two rooms. In the larger one, the women mourned the dead child. In the smaller room, the men sat beside his shrouded body.

Sakina sat next to Dr Latifah, whispering to her who each person was. Latifah put her burqa back on and wondered whether one of the women might be the child's mother. It was not common in the Middle East for parents to abandon their children, but poverty and insecurity could make people behave in unimaginable ways. In Baltimore, where Latifah lived and worked, she had often seen destitute immigrant mothers leave their sick children in a hospital and abandon them to their fate.

She studied the women, trying to discover whether any of them felt genuine grief. Then her eyes met those of Fatima, a short woman with large, protruding eyes and thin lips. She wore no burqa, but covered her hair with a *hijab*[2]. She was neither crying nor looking down as a sign of respect. Latifah recognised her immediately. Almost every woman moved away from Latifah when they passed her in the streets. Fatima was the only one who did not.

It was already deep into the night when silence settled over the house, broken only by the sound of winds blowing in from the desert and the snores of the men who had been unable to stay awake. Latifah could not sleep. She recalled every detail her siblings had told her about their parents' burial.

She had mourned for weeks, despite her religion's teaching that one should not weep for the dead. It still pained her that she had not seen her parents since leaving Afghanistan to study in the West. She had never been able to return. First, the Russians had invaded her country; then came the internal struggles for power; now, an armed insurgent group was seizing control of vast regions and imposing a merciless *sharia*.

She prayed to Allah for the souls of her parents, then looked at the girl she had found on the open ground and at the other children, who seemed to be sleeping comfortably among the cushions Sakina had laid out for them.

Of course. It must be better than sleeping outside on the hard ground.

Latifah was tired too, but she could never sleep sitting up. The other women sat opposite her, all dressed in black. Some were asleep, some stared at the floor, while others whispered rapidly to avoid being overheard. At times, she thought she caught their eyes through the mesh panels of their burqas. Only Sakina and two women from Kabul sat beside her.

Despite the cool wind coming in beneath the door, Latifah could no longer bear being covered from head to toe. She was suffering from sudden hot flushes. She realised that she had not worn make-up since arriving at the camp. For the first time in many years, she had forgotten to apply the eyeliner that made her eyes appear larger and almond-shaped. Nor had she put gloss on her thin lips, which framed a perfect smile. Those features had made her very popular with the young men at the university where she studied medicine.

Although her eyes were lively, she had never liked her pointed nose and avoided looking at it whenever she stood before a mirror. But here, in this camp, in this little Afghanistan as she called it, there was neither time to look in mirrors nor any reason to wear make-up.

When she could no longer endure the heat, she removed her burqa and kept only the hijab covering her head and concealing her black hair. At last, she was free from the physical and emotional suffocation the garment caused her. She had never worn a burqa, not even when she lived in Afghanistan. She knew that its use had become compulsory after the insurgent group entered the country.

Why do these women still wear it in the camp? Perhaps they have nothing else to wear. How can they recognise one another in the street? And if one of their children becomes lost, how will the child recognise his mother? Could wearing it be compulsory in the camps as well? It cannot be. The insurgents have no reach in this area. Or do they?

The commotion of the children throwing themselves at the food like starving animals suddenly interrupted her thoughts. Before dawn, Fatima and two other women had managed to gather a few loaves of bread, some seeds and dried fruit. It was not much, but it was all the neighbours could donate without affecting their weekly rations.

No one dared touch anything on the trays. They allowed the children to eat until they were satisfied. From one corner of the room, Mustafa watched in disbelief as they devoured the bread and stuffed handfuls of seeds into their mouths.

How could we not have known these children existed? Where do they live? Who are their parents? What are we going to do with them? Why has that foreign woman brought them into the camp? Who is this woman who claims to be both a doctor and an Afghan? What are you trying to tell me, merciful Allah?

The others were beginning to wake when a woman's voice suddenly broke into his thoughts.

'Mustafa, Mullah, forgive me for interrupting your thoughts. May we speak?'

It was Latifah. The men in the room disapproved of the way she had addressed him. Some began to mutter, while the women said things she could not understand. To cross the room, address a mullah as if he were any other man and call him by his name. No Afghan woman would ever do such a thing.

Respect for a mullah, particularly an elderly one, was paramount. If a woman wished to speak to him, she should first seek the help of a male relative. If that was not possible, she should ask permission to address him directly. Latifah did not know this, or perhaps she had forgotten. The urgency she felt had made her act almost without thinking.

Despite her audacity, some of the women watched her with admiration. Fatima was among them.

That outsider has brought the ways of the West into the camp, and now she wants to infect us with her shameless behaviour.

They came from the remote regions of Afghanistan and had lived in absolute obedience and submission. To them, Latifah was nothing more than a foreigner.

'After the burial,' Mustafa replied without looking at her, his face like stone.

There were still several hours before the muezzin's first call to prayer. The men and women were already prepared to walk in procession to the cemetery.

'Where do they bury the dead, Sakina? In a Pakistani cemetery?' Latifah asked.

'No, that is not permitted. The first Afghans to reach Munda left a piece of land vacant at the far end of the camp. That is where we bury our dead. This is the first burial I have attended since coming here almost a year ago,' the young woman whispered.

They walked eastwards through the half-light for more than an hour, from the centre of the camp to the resting place of the dead. Covering twenty-one square kilometres, Munda was the largest Afghan refugee camp in Pakistan and was home to more than twelve thousand people.

Latifah walked among the women, behind the men. As they went, she noticed that some of the houses were built of brick, very different from those in the area where she lived with Sakina. Along the way, several younger mullahs approached Mustafa and greeted him with reverence. Others joined the procession.

Two volunteers carried a makeshift *charpayi*[4] on their shoulders, with the shrouded body resting upon it. When they reached the appointed place, two other volunteers dug a grave 1.8 metres deep. One of the mullahs measured it to ensure that it was neither too shallow nor too deep.

Latifah had never witnessed a Muslim burial. She was fascinated by the precision and strict observance of the customs. Once again, she thought of her parents, and sadness mingled with anger and helplessness flooded through her. She immediately slipped her hand into her pocket and squeezed the little rag doll she never went without.

The sky was beginning to clear when the men finished digging. They set their tools aside and turned their attention to the mullah.

'We come from Allah, and to Allah we return,' Mustafa proclaimed, beginning the prayer for the dead and the reading of the Qur'an.

The muezzin's call sounded in the distance just as the ceremony ended. The body, wrapped in white cloth, was lowered into the grave with the dead child's face turned towards Mecca. Latifah suddenly

remembered that Muslims did not place their dead in coffins as people did in the West. So many years spent living in another culture had made her forget details of her own.

Burial was a matter for men. Women and children were not permitted to attend, but these were exceptional circumstances, and the elders and the most conservative women had relaxed the rigidity of certain customs.

When the two volunteers had finished covering the body with earth and there was nothing more to be done, the girl released Latifah's hand. Without a word, she walked away, the pack following silently behind her. Latifah tried to stop them from leaving, but she could not.

Those children made their own decisions. They had been hardened by a life they had not chosen and had grown accustomed to begging for money along the roads, running freely, eating whenever food was available and sleeping wherever they could. Neither Latifah nor the others knew that many of them had been beaten and raped by drug traffickers who prowled the streets. Some had even lost the ability to speak because of the trauma they had suffered.

They did not trust adults and survived on whatever they could find. Their parents had died during the long journey from Afghanistan to Munda, or in attacks carried out by the armed group.

Latifah watched us walk away and believed she knew where to find us.

NOTES

1. Munda was the first camp established for Afghan refugees in northern Pakistan.
2. A veil worn by Muslim women that covers the head and chest.
3. Islamic religious law governing all aspects of public and private life, adherence to which is considered a path to salvation.
4. Also known as a charpai, a portable bed made of rope stretched across a wooden frame.