

## The Clever Class

IT WAS SCHOOL that kept me going in those dark days. When I was in the street it felt as though every man I passed might be a *talib*. We hid our school bags and our books in our shawls. My father always said that the most beautiful thing in a village in the morning is the sight of a child in a school uniform, but now we were afraid to wear them.

We had moved up to high school. Madam Maryam said no one wanted to teach our class as we asked so many questions. We liked to be known as the clever girls. When we decorated our hands with henna for holidays and weddings, we drew calculus and chemical formulae instead of flowers and butterflies. My rivalry with Malka-e-Noor continued, but after the shock of being beaten by her when she first joined our school, I worked hard and had managed to regain my position on the school honours board for first in class. She usually came second and Moniba third. The teachers told us examiners first looked at how much we had written, then presentation. Moniba had the most beautiful writing and presentation of the three of us, but I always told her she did not trust herself enough. She worked hard as she worried that if she got low marks her male relatives might use it as an excuse to stop her education. I was weakest in maths – once I got zero in a test – but I worked hard at it. My chemistry teacher Sir Obaidullah (we called all our teachers Sir or Miss) said I was a born politician because, at the start of oral exams, I would always say, ‘Sir, can I just say you are the best teacher and yours is my favourite class.’

Some parents complained that I was being favoured because my father owned the school, but people were always surprised that despite our rivalry we were all good friends and not jealous of each other. We also competed in what we call board exams. These would select the best students from private schools in the district, and one year Malka-e-Noor and I got exactly the same marks. We did another paper at school to see who would get the prize and again we got equal marks. So people wouldn’t think I was getting special treatment, my father arranged for us to do papers at another school, that of his friend Ahmad Shah. Again we got the same, so we both got the prize.

There was more to school than work. We liked performing plays. I wrote a sketch based on *Romeo and Juliet* about corruption. I played Romeo as a civil servant interviewing people for a job. The first candidate is a beautiful girl, and he asks her very easy questions such as, ‘How many wheels does a bicycle have?’ When she replies, ‘Two,’ he says, ‘You are so brilliant.’ The next candidate is a man so Romeo asks him impossible things like, ‘Without leaving your chair tell me the make of the fan in the room above us.’ ‘How could I possibly know?’ asks the candidate. ‘You’re telling me you have a PhD and you don’t know!’ replies Romeo. He decides to give the job to the girl.

The girl was played by Moniba, of course, and another classmate Attiya played the part of my assistant to add some salt, pepper and masala with her witty asides. Everyone laughed a lot. I like to mimic people, and in breaks my friends used to beg me to impersonate our teachers, particularly Sir Obaidullah. With all the bad stuff going on in those days, we needed small, small reasons to laugh.

The army action at the end of 2007 had not got rid of the Taliban. The army had stayed in Swat and were everywhere in the town, yet Fazlullah still broadcast every day on the radio and throughout 2008 the situation was even worse than before with bomb blasts and killings. All we talked about in