

Children of the Rubbish Mountain

AS THE KHUSHAL School started to attract more pupils, we moved again and finally had a television. My favourite programme was *Shaka Laka Boom Boom*, an Indian children's series about a boy called Sanju who has a magic pencil. Everything he drew became real. If he drew a vegetable or a policeman, the vegetable or policeman would magically appear. If he accidentally drew a snake he could erase it and the snake would disappear. He used his pencil to help people – he even saved his parents from gangsters – and I wanted that magic pencil more than anything else in the world.

At night I would pray, 'God, give me Sanju's pencil. I won't tell anyone. Just leave it in my cupboard. I will use it to make everyone happy.' As soon as I finished praying, I would check the drawer. The pencil was never there, but I knew who I would help first. Just along the street from our new house was an abandoned strip of land that people used as a rubbish dump – there is no rubbish collection in Swat. Quickly, it became a rubbish mountain. I didn't like walking near it as it smelt so bad. Sometimes we would spot rats running through it and crows would circle overhead.

One day my brothers were not home and my mother had asked me to throw away some potato peel and eggshells. I wrinkled my nose as I approached, swatting away flies and making sure I didn't step on anything in my nice shoes. As I threw the rubbish on the mountain of rotting food, I saw something move and I jumped. It was a girl about my age. Her hair was matted and her skin was covered in sores. She looked like I imagined Shashaka, the dirty woman they told us about in tales in the village to make us wash. The girl had a big sack and was sorting rubbish into piles, one for cans, one for bottle tops, another for glass and another for paper. Nearby there were boys fishing in the pile for metal using magnets on strings. I wanted to talk to the children but I was too scared.

That afternoon, when my father came home from school, I told him about the scavenger children and begged him to go with me to look. He tried to talk to them but they ran away. He explained that the children would sell what they had sorted to a garbage shop for a few rupees. The shop would then sell it on at a profit. On the way back home I noticed that he was in tears.

'Aba, you must give them free places at your school,' I begged. He laughed. My mother and I had already persuaded him to give free places to a number of girls.

Though my mother was not educated, she was the practical one in the family, the doer while my father was the talker. She was always out helping people. My father would get angry sometimes – he would arrive home at lunchtime and call out, 'Tor Pekai, I'm home!' only to find she was out and there was no lunch for him. Then he would find she was at the hospital visiting someone who was ill, or had gone to help a family, so he could not stay cross. Sometimes though she would be out because she was shopping for clothes in the Cheena Bazaar, and that would be a different matter.

Wherever we lived my mother filled our house with people. I shared my room with my cousin Aneesa from the village, who had come to live with us so she could go to school, and a girl called Shehnaz whose mother Sultana had once worked in our house. Shehnaz and her sister had also been sent out to collect garbage after their father had died leaving them very poor. One of her brothers was mentally ill and was always doing strange things like setting fire to their clothes or selling the electric fan we gave them to keep cool. Sultana was very short-tempered and my mother did not like having