3

Growing up in a School

MY MOTHER STARTED school when she was six and stopped the same term. She was unusual in the village as she had a father and brothers who encouraged her to go to school. She was the only girl in a class of boys. She carried her bag of books proudly into school and claims she was brighter than the boys. But every day she would leave behind her girl cousins playing at home and she envied them. There seemed no point in going to school just to end up cooking, cleaning and bringing up children, so one day she sold her books for nine annas, spent the money on boiled sweets and never went back. Her father said nothing. She says he didn't even notice, as he would set off early every morning after a breakfast of cornbread and cream, his German pistol strapped under his arm, and spend his days busy with local politics or resolving feuds. Besides he had seven other children to think about.

It was only when she met my father that she felt regret. Here was a man who had read so many books, who wrote her poems she could not read, and whose ambition was to have his own school. As his wife, she wanted to help him achieve that. For as long as my father could remember it had been his dream to open a school, but with no family contacts or money it was extremely hard for him to realise this dream. He thought there was nothing more important than knowledge. He remembered how mystified he had been by the river in his village, wondering where the water came from and went to, until he learned about the water cycle from the rain to the sea.

His own village school had been just a small building. Many of his classes were taught under a tree on the bare ground. There were no toilets and the pupils went to the fields to answer the call of nature. Yet he says he was actually lucky. His sisters – my aunts – did not go to school at all, just like millions of girls in my country. Education had been a great gift for him. He believed that lack of education was the root of all Pakistan's problems. Ignorance allowed politicians to fool people and bad administrators to be re-elected. He believed schooling should be available for all, rich and poor, boys and girls. The school that my father dreamed of would have desks and a library, computers, bright posters on the walls and, most important, washrooms.

My grandfather had a different dream for his youngest son – he longed for him to be a doctor – and as one of just two sons, he expected him to contribute to the household budget. My father's elder brother Saeed Ramzan had worked for years as a teacher at a local school. He and his family lived with my grandfather, and whenever he saved up enough of his salary, they built a small concrete *hujra* at the side of the house for guests. He brought logs back from the mountains for firewood, and after teaching he would work in the fields where our family had a few buffaloes. He also helped *Baba* with heavy tasks like clearing snow from the roof.

When my father was offered a place for his A Levels at Jehanzeb College, which is the best further education institution in Swat, my grandfather refused to pay for his living expenses. His own education in Delhi had been free – he had lived like a *talib* in the mosques, and local people had provided the students with food and clothes. Tuition at Jehanzeb was free but my father needed money to live on. Pakistan doesn't have student loans and he had never even set foot in a bank. The college was in Saidu Sharif, the twin town of Mingora, and he had no family there with whom he could stay. There was no other college in Shangla, and if he didn't go to college, he would never be able to move