

### One Child, One Teacher, One Book, One Pen . . .

*Birmingham, August 2013*

IN MARCH WE moved from the apartment to a rented house on a leafy street, but it feels as if we are camping in it. All our belongings are still in Swat. Everywhere there are cardboard boxes full of the kind letters and cards that people send, and in one room stands a piano none of us can play. My mother complains about the murals of Greek gods on the walls and carved cherubs on the ceilings watching her.

Our house feels big and empty. It sits behind an electric iron gate and it sometimes seems as if we are in what we in Pakistan call a sub-jail, a kind of luxury house arrest. At the back there is a large garden with lots of trees and a green lawn for me and my brothers to play cricket on. But there are no rooftops to play on, no children fighting with kites in the streets, no neighbours coming in to borrow a plate of rice or for us to ask for three tomatoes. We are just a wall's distance from the next house but it feels miles away.

If I look out, I see my mother wandering around the garden, her head covered by a shawl, feeding the birds. She looks as if she is singing, maybe that *tapa* she likes: 'Don't kill doves in the garden./ You kill one and the others won't come.' She is giving the birds the remains of our dinner from the night before and there are tears in her eyes. We eat much the same here as we did back home – rice and meat for lunch and dinner, while breakfast is fried eggs, chapatis and sometimes also honey, a tradition started by my little brother Atal, though his favourite Birmingham discovery is Nutella sandwiches. But there are always leftovers. My mother is sad about the waste of food. I know she is remembering all the children we fed in our house, so they would not go to school on empty stomachs, and wondering how they are faring now.

When I came home from school in Mingora I never found my house without people in it; now I can't believe that I used to plead for a day of peace and some privacy to do my school work. Here the only sound is of the birds and Khushal's Xbox. I sit alone in my room doing a jigsaw puzzle and long for guests.

We didn't have much money and my parents knew what it was like to be hungry. My mother never turned anyone away. Once a poor woman came, hot, hungry and thirsty, to our door. My mother let her in and gave her food and the woman was so happy. 'I touched every door in the *mohalla* and this was the only one open,' she said. 'May God always keep your door open, wherever you are.'

I know my mother is lonely. She was very sociable – all the women of the neighbourhood used to gather in the afternoons on our back porch and women who worked in other houses came to rest. Now she is always on the phone to everyone back home. It's hard for her here as she does not speak any English. Our house has all these facilities, but when she arrived they were all mysteries to her and someone had to show us how to use the oven, washing machine and the TV.

As usual my father doesn't help in the kitchen. I tease him, '*Aba*, you talk of women's rights, but my mother manages everything! You don't even clear the tea things.'

There are buses and trains but we are unsure about using them. My mother misses going shopping in Cheena Bazaar. She is happier since my cousin Shah came to stay. He has a car and takes her