

The Woman and the Sea

AUNT NAJMA WAS in tears. She had never seen the sea before. My family and I sat on the rocks, gazing across the water, breathing in the salt tang of the Arabian Sea. It was such a big expanse, surely no one could know where it ended. At that moment I was very happy. ‘One day I want to cross this sea,’ I said.

‘What is she saying?’ asked my aunt as if I were talking about something impossible. I was still trying to get my head round the fact that she had been living in the seaside city of Karachi for thirty years and yet had never actually laid eyes on the ocean. Her husband would not take her to the beach, and even if she had somehow slipped out of the house, she would not have been able to follow the signs to the sea because she could not read.

I sat on the rocks and thought about the fact that across the water were lands where women were free. In Pakistan we had had a woman prime minister and in Islamabad I had met those impressive working women, yet the fact was that we were a country where almost all the women depend entirely on men. My headmistress Maryam was a strong, educated woman but in our society she could not live on her own and come to work. She had to be living with a husband, brother or parents.

In Pakistan when women say they want independence, people think this means we don’t want to obey our fathers, brothers or husbands. But it does not mean that. It means we want to make decisions for ourselves. We want to be free to go to school or to go to work. Nowhere is it written in the Quran that a woman should be dependent on a man. The word has not come down from the heavens to tell us that every woman should listen to a man.

‘You are a million miles away, *Jani*,’ said my father interrupting my thoughts. ‘What are you dreaming about?’

‘Just about crossing oceans, *Aba*,’ I replied.

‘Forget all that!’ shouted my brother Atal. ‘We’re at the beach and I want to go for a camel ride!’

It was January 2012 and we were in Karachi as guests of Geo TV after the Sindh government announced they were renaming a girls’ secondary school on Mission Road in my honour. My brother Khushal was now at school in Abbottabad, so it was just me, my parents and Atal. We flew to Karachi, and it was the first time any of us had ever been on a plane. The journey was just two hours, which I found incredible. It would have taken us at least two days by bus. On the plane we noticed that some people could not find their seats because they could not read letters and numbers. I had a window seat and could see the deserts and mountains of our land below me. As we headed south the land became more parched. I was already missing the green of Swat. I could see why, when our people go to Karachi to work, they always want to be buried in the cool of our valley.

Driving from the airport to the hostel, I was amazed by the number of people and houses and cars. Karachi is one of the biggest cities on earth. It was strange to think it was just a port of 300,000 people when Pakistan was created. Jinnah lived there and made it our first capital, and it was soon flooded by millions of Muslim refugees from India known as *mohajirs*, which means ‘immigrants’, who spoke Urdu. Today it has around twenty million people. It’s actually the largest Pashtun city in the world, even though it’s far from our lands; between five and seven million Pashtuns have gone