

flocks of shaggy goats that wandered hither and thither.

As we drove on, the landscape changed to paddy fields of deep lush green that smelt so fresh and orchards of apricot and fig trees. Occasionally we passed small marble works over streams which ran milky white with the discharge of chemicals. This made my father cross. 'Look at what these criminals are doing to pollute our beautiful valley,' he always said. The road left the river and wound up through narrow passes over steep fir-clad heights, higher and higher, until our ears popped. On top of some of the peaks were ruins where vultures circled, the remains of forts built by the first wali. The bus strained and laboured, the driver cursing as trucks overtook us on blind bends with steep drops below. My brothers loved this, and they would taunt me and my mother by pointing out the wreckage of vehicles on the mountainside.

Finally we made it up onto Sky Turn, the gateway to Shangla Top, a mountain pass which feels as if it's on top of the world. Up there we were higher than the rocky peaks all around us. In the far distance we could see the snows of Malam Jabba, our ski resort. By the roadside were fresh springs and waterfalls, and when we stopped for a break and to drink some tea, the air was clean and fragrant with cedar and pine. We breathed it into our lungs greedily. Shangla is all mountain, mountain, mountain and just a small sky. After this the road winds back down for a while then follows the Ghwurban River and peters out into a rocky track. The only way to cross the river is by rope bridges or on a pulley system by which people swing themselves across in a metal box. Foreigners call them suicide bridges but we loved them.

If you look at a map of Swat you'll see it is one long valley with little valleys we call *darae* off to the sides like the branches of a tree. Our village lies about halfway along on the east. It's in the Kana *dara*, which is enclosed by craggy mountain walls and so narrow there is not even room for a cricket ground. We call our village Shahpur, but really there is a necklace of three villages along the bottom of the valley – Shahpur, the biggest; Barkana, where my father grew up; and Karshat, which is where my mother lived. At either end is a huge mountain – Tor Ghar, the Black Mountain to the south, and Spin Ghar, the White Mountain, to the north.

We usually stayed in Barkana at my grandfather's house, where my father grew up. Like almost all the houses in the area, it was flat-roofed and made of stone and mud. I preferred staying in Karshat with my cousins on my maternal side because they had a concrete house with a bathroom and there were lots of children to play with. My mother and I stayed in the women's quarters downstairs. The women spent their days looking after the children and preparing food to serve to the men in their *hujra* upstairs. I slept with my cousins Aneesa and Sumbul in a room which had a clock in the shape of a mosque and a cabinet on the wall containing a rifle and some packets of hair dye.

In the village the day started early and even I, who liked to sleep late, woke with the sound of cocks crowing and the clatter of dishes as the women prepared breakfast for the men. In the morning the sun reflected off the top of Tor Ghar; when we got up for the *fajr* prayers, the first of our five daily prayers, we would look left and see the golden peak of Spin Ghar lit with the first rays of the sun like a white lady wearing a *jumar tika* – a gold chain on her forehead.

Often rain would then come to wash everything clean, and the clouds would linger on the green terraces of the hills where people grew radishes and walnut trees. Dotted around were hives of bees. I loved the gloopy honey, which we ate with walnuts. Down on the river at the Karshat end were water buffaloes. There was also a shed with a wooden waterwheel providing power to turn huge millstones to grind wheat and maize into flour, which young boys would then pour into sacks. Next to