

in the upper Swat called Shangla and would see each other when my father went to his uncle's house to study, which was next door to that of my mother's aunt. They glimpsed enough of each other to know they liked one another, but for us it is taboo to express such things. Instead he sent her poems she could not read.

‘I admired his mind,’ she says.

‘And me, her beauty,’ he laughs.

There was one big problem. My two grandfathers did not get on. So when my father announced his desire to ask for the hand of my mother, Tor Pekai, it was clear neither side would welcome the marriage. His own father said it was up to him and agreed to send a barber as a messenger, which is the traditional way we Pashtuns do this. Malik Janser Khan refused the proposal, but my father is a stubborn man and persuaded my grandfather to send the barber again. Janser Khan's *hujra* was a gathering place for people to talk politics, and my father was often there, so they had got to know each other. He made him wait nine months but finally agreed.

My mother comes from a family of strong women as well as influential men. Her grandmother – my great-grandmother – was widowed when her children were young, and her eldest son Janser Khan was locked up because of a tribal feud with another family when he was only nine. To get him released she walked forty miles alone over mountains to appeal to a powerful cousin. I think my mother would do the same for us. Though she cannot read or write, my father shares everything with her, telling her about his day, the good and the bad. She teases him a lot and gives him advice about who she thinks is a genuine friend and who is not, and my father says she is always right. Most Pashtun men never do this, as sharing problems with women is seen as weak. ‘He even asks his wife!’ they say as an insult. I see my parents happy and laughing a lot. People would see us and say we are a sweet family.

My mother is very pious and prays five times a day, though not in the mosque as that is only for the men. She disapproves of dancing because she says God would not like it, but she loves to decorate herself with pretty things, embroidered clothes and golden necklaces and bangles. I think I am a bit of a disappointment to her as I am so like my father and don't bother with clothes and jewels. I get bored going to the bazaar but I love to dance behind closed doors with my school friends.

Growing up, we children spent most of our time with our mother. My father was out a lot as he was busy, not just with his school, but also with literary societies and *jirgas*, as well as trying to save the environment, trying to save our valley. My father came from a backward village yet through education and force of personality he made a good living for us and a name for himself.

People liked to hear him talk, and I loved the evenings when guests visited. We would sit on the floor around a long plastic sheet which my mother laid with food, and eat with our right hand as is our custom, balling together rice and meat. As darkness fell we sat by the light of oil lamps, batting away the flies as our silhouettes made dancing shadows on the walls. In the summer months there would often be thunder and lightning crashing outside and I would crawl closer to my father's knee.

I would listen rapt as he told stories of warring tribes, Pashtun leaders and saints, often through poems that he read in a melodious voice, crying sometimes as he read. Like most people in Swat we are from the Yousafzai tribe. We Yousafzai (which some people spell Yusufzai or Yousufzai) are originally from Kandahar and are one of the biggest Pashtun tribes, spread across Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Our ancestors came to Swat in the sixteenth century from Kabul, where they had helped a Timurid