

My Father the Falcon

I ALWAYS KNEW my father had trouble with words. Sometimes they would get stuck and he would repeat the same syllable over and over like a record caught in a groove as we all waited for the next syllable to suddenly pop out. He said it felt like a wall came down in his throat. M's, p's and k's were all enemies lying in wait. I teased him that one of the reasons he called me *Jani* was because he found it easier to say than Malala. A stutter was a terrible thing for a man who so loved words and poetry. On each side of the family he had an uncle with the same affliction. But it was almost certainly made worse by his father, whose own voice was a soaring instrument that could make words thunder and dance.

‘Spit it out, son!’ he’d roar whenever my father got stuck in the middle of a sentence. My grandfather’s name was Rohul Amin, which means ‘honest spirit’ and is the holy name of the Angel Gabriel. He was so proud of the name that he would introduce himself to people with a famous verse in which his name appears. He was an impatient man at the best of times and would fly into a rage over the smallest thing – like a hen going astray or a cup getting broken. His face would redden and he would throw kettles and pots around. I never knew my grandmother, but my father says she used to joke with my grandfather, ‘By God, just as you greet us only with a frown, when I die may God give you a wife who never smiles.’

My grandmother was so worried about my father’s stutter that when he was still a young boy she took him to see a holy man. It was a long journey by bus, then an hour’s walk up the hill to where he lived. Her nephew Fazli Hakim had to carry my father on his shoulders. The holy man was called Lewano Pir, Saint of the Mad, because he was said to be able to calm lunatics. When they were taken in to see the *pir*, he instructed my father to open his mouth and then spat into it. Then he took some *gur*, dark molasses made from sugar cane, and rolled it around his mouth to moisten it with spit. He then took out the lump and presented it to my grandmother to give to my father, a little each day. The treatment did not cure the stutter. Actually some people thought it got worse. So when my father was thirteen and told my grandfather he was entering a public speaking competition he was stunned. ‘How can you?’ Rohul Amin asked, laughing. ‘You take one or two minutes to utter just one sentence.’

‘Don’t worry,’ replied my father. ‘You write the speech and I will learn it.’

My grandfather was famous for his speeches. He taught theology in the government high school in the village of Shahpur. He was also an imam at the local mosque. He was a mesmerising speaker. His sermons at Friday prayers were so popular that people would come down from the mountains by donkey or on foot to hear him.

My father comes from a large family. He had one much older brother, Saeed Ramzan who I call Uncle *Khan dada*, and five sisters. Their village of Barkana was very primitive and they lived crammed together in a one-storey ramshackle house with a mud roof which leaked whenever it rained or snowed. As in most families, the girls stayed at home while the boys went to school. ‘They were just waiting to be married,’ says my father.

School wasn’t the only thing my aunts missed out on. In the morning when my father was given cream or milk, his sisters were given tea with no milk. If there were eggs, they would only be for the