

Our garden in Islamabad was about thirty metres square, a lawn edged with flower beds on three sides and the house - two stories, white, with floor to ceiling windows, plantation style shutters and a verandah - on the fourth. At the back of the house was a yard where the birds lived. Around the garden was a high wall with spikes on the top; the driveway met the wall at a solid metal gate, which was opened twice a day by the *chowkidar* – the gate keeper - as my husband's armoured Toyota Landcruiser left for and then returned from a day at the Embassy. It was the summer of 2007 and the Taliban were creeping towards the city from the North-West Frontier.

I lived within those walls, within that garden, with the birds and the flowers. The front of the house was covered with untameable clashing purple and red bougainvillea, full of sparrows who squabbled from the Fajr prayer at dawn until their last frenzied chatter at dusk, just as the Muezzin's call to Maghreb prayer filled the sky. When my husband came home from work we sat on the veranda in the early evening and drank *nimbu pani* – fresh lime with sugar water – which we made ourselves from the lime trees which grew beside the house. The tiny, green limes with an intense flavour felt like such a treat; picking them ourselves from the impossibly fine branches drooping with the weight of the fruit was as though we had discovered a special secret.

Our gardener, the *Mali*, was Majid. Early in the morning he swept fallen leaves from the driveway using a stick broom and watered the rows of terracotta pots around the door with a leaky hose, leaving small rivers of water which dried off within an hour. He watered the rose beds, where the baked clay soil had been shaped into little bowl-reservoirs to hold the water around the roots. I would sit out after breakfast, before it got too hot, and read the newspapers telling of the Pakistani Army's battles in Waziristan, or a tribal Jirga which had been blown up by a suicide bomber killing all the village elders. I would watch the hoopoe's nodding crested head as it stalked and prodded the grass. I thought of a distant Yorkshire farmhouse, where one Easter a hoopoe's disastrous navigation errors took it far too far north and it stood, disconcerted, outside my Mother's window for a week before taking off again. It seemed much happier in Pakistan. It would walk to the edge of the lawn where

the long bed bordering the driveway was planted with amaryllis bulbs whose red trumpets flowered in a swathe every spring. I thought of Christmas holidays in a Yorkshire farmhouse, my mother's bulbs in a pot on the windowsill.

A sweeping jacaranda tree overhung the garden, dripping purple flowers. I loved the sound of it: the ja-ca-randa. I had a ja-ca-randa. It was so exotic and colourful. A pair of parakeets who had nested in the trunk of a tall old sheesham tree flew through it, squawking, like darts, direct and faithful. Bright green and purple against the blue sky, which was full of their urgent calls. And high overhead were the forked tails of circling predatory kites, their keening an eerie echoing constant backdrop.

In the yard at the back Allahdad, the birdkeeper, kept our partridges and Shirazi doves in an aviary in the shade of a mango tree. I had bought them from Mr Qureshi the butchers, who kept them in small cages outside his shop, on a pavement covered in dried blood. It was difficult not to be anxious going to the market; everyone was watchful, looking out for danger, staring at the white woman with blonde hair, and it was a relief to get home safely. Allahdad always wore a white spotless *shalwar kameez* and he loved birds. He fed them fresh flat bread which he made before sunrise every day, and chopped up the dry earth with his mattock to find worms for them. We had one white goose, Lucky, who had the run of the garden. I don't know where she came from; Lucky because she survived. She was followed everywhere by three white ducks in a little procession. Every year Lucky laid one egg in the yard, a lonely statement. A friend gave me a white peahen to keep her company, but she was kidnapped in Rawalpindi by a gang of boys and that – apart from a ransom demand – was the last we heard of her.

Pakistan has always been the land of the gardens. Of cool running water slipping through channels designed with Mogul symmetry; of roses and exotic maidens. In 1641 the Emperor Shah Jahan built the Shalimar Gardens in Lahore to show an earthly paradise where humans coexist perfectly with nature, a refuge from heat and uncertainty. I had been surprised when I first arrived how jungly Islamabad was: even though the earth was hard and dry the air was humid and we often had wild thunderstorms where the sky suddenly turned a

bruised purple, and a strong wind whooshed in a deluge which finished as sharply as it had begun. It kept everything green.

We didn't have a great variety of plants in our garden but we planted annual seeds in January, so odd for an Englishwoman afraid of the frost. We grew sweet peas and cosmos and love-in-a-mist, and marigolds of course in the pots. And we did have a lot of roses, looking so different from English roses, with such joyous bright pink flowers, Victorian English park pink but also Asian pink, happy in the humid air with Majid tending them daily. When he got home from work my husband would often pace around the perimeter of the lawn among the rose beds, holding before him a novel, or short stories by Chekov. He liked to read standing up, to take his daily exercise by walking slowly and methodically around the confined space because it was not safe to walk on the street outside.

When a bomb goes off, you can't see beyond the walls but you can hear the thud - not a bang, not even really the boom that people describe - and you can feel the physical impact even if you are not that close. You know but don't know what has happened, and the Embassy emergency radios never work. Sometimes some of the windows shatter. You can hear sirens, but you don't know how close it was, or whether it's an ongoing attack or a one off - whether the danger has passed. So you wait for news. Usually it was brought to me by Allahdad, who would listen to hysterical Urdu reporters on a crackly battery radio held up to his ear. My husband was always away when a bomb went off. He was away too during the siege of the Red Mosque, the *Lal Masjid*, which was only a block away from our garden. The Imam had stirred up armed demonstrations to call for the overthrow of the government and imposition of Sharia Law. The roads were blocked for weeks with angry crowds carrying giant bamboo batons. The women held separate protests, clad in burkas, chanting shrilly. I couldn't go to the market. That July, they kidnapped some Chinese healthcare workers and a siege began; the militants inside the mosque complex and the Pakistani Army outside. I sat within the walls of my garden and thought of the rebel mood inside the walls of the *Lal Masjid* down the road. The Pakistani special forces finally stormed the complex early in the morning of the eighth day - I could hear the mortars landing inside the mosque and the ratt-a-tatt-tatt of the machine gun fire from both sides as the fighting went on, so close, but

invisible. Stray bullets flew around the city, but none landed near me. 154 people were killed. I didn't go out for some time.

That was thirteen years ago now. This summer I am sitting locked-down in my English garden, where I grow amaryllis in the beds around the house despite the frost, where I have made small earth reservoirs around my roses to hold the water, where my husband still makes *nimbu pani* for me but with limes we buy from the Co-op, where a wild greylag goose visits us sometimes. I don't venture beyond the gate at the end of the driveway. I think often of that other kind of lockdown, the peace and security I had in my garden within the walls and the constant fear of the city beyond, the danger from the bombers and the kidnappers and the bandits. And know that here, like there, one day it will be possible to go beyond the walls and that it will be safe.