

school. The night before the exams began I stayed up studying until three o'clock in the morning and reread an entire textbook.

The first paper, on Monday, 8 October, was physics. I love physics because it is about truth, a world determined by principles and laws – no messing around or twisting things like in politics, particularly those in my country. As we waited for the signal to start the exam, I recited holy verses to myself. I completed the paper but I knew I'd made a mistake filling in the blanks. I was so cross with myself I almost cried. It was just one question worth only one mark, but it made me feel that something devastating was going to happen.

When I got home that afternoon I was sleepy, but the next day was Pakistan Studies, a difficult paper for me. I was worried about losing even more marks so I made myself coffee with milk to drive away the devils of sleep. When my mother came she tried it and liked it and drank the rest. I could not tell her, '*Bhabi*, please stop it, that's my coffee.' But there was no more coffee left in the cupboard. Once again I stayed up late, memorising the textbook about the history of our independence.

In the morning my parents came to my room as usual and woke me up. I don't remember a single school day on which I woke up early by myself. My mother made our usual breakfast of sugary tea, chapatis and fried egg. We all had breakfast together – me, my mother, my father, Khushal and Atal. It was a big day for my mother as she was going to start lessons that afternoon to learn to read and write with Miss Ulfat, my old teacher from kindergarten.

My father started teasing Atal, who was eight by then and cheekier than ever. 'Look, Atal, when Malala is prime minister, you will be her secretary,' he said.

Atal got very cross. 'No, no, no!' he said. 'I'm no less than Malala. I will be prime minister and she will be my secretary.' All the banter meant I ended up being so late I only had time to eat half my egg and no time to clear up.

The Pakistan Studies paper went better than I thought it would. There were questions about how Jinnah had created our country as the first Muslim homeland and also about the national tragedy of how Bangladesh came into being. It was strange to think that Bangladesh was once part of Pakistan despite being a thousand miles away. I answered all the questions and was confident I'd done well. I was happy when the exam was over, chatting and gossiping with my friends as we waited for Sher Mohammad Baba, a school assistant, to call for us when the bus arrived.

The bus did two trips every day, and that day we took the second one. We liked staying on at school and Moniba said, 'As we're tired after the exam, let's stay and chat before going home.' I was relieved that the Pakistan Studies exam had gone well so I agreed. I had no worries that day. I was hungry but because we were fifteen we could no longer go outside to the street, so I got one of the small girls to buy me a corn cob. I ate a little bit of it then gave it to another girl to finish.

At twelve o'clock Baba called us over the loudspeaker. We all ran down the steps. The other girls all covered their faces before emerging from the door and climbed into the back of the bus. I wore my scarf over my head but never over my face.

I asked Usman Bhai Jan to tell us a joke while we were waiting for two teachers to arrive. He has a collection of extremely funny stories. That day instead of a story he did a magic trick to make a pebble disappear. 'Show us how you did it!' we all clamoured, but he wouldn't.

When everyone was ready he took Miss Rubi and a couple of small children in the front cab with him. Another little girl cried, saying she wanted to ride there too. Usman Bhai Jan said no, there was no room; she would have to stay in the back with us. But I felt sorry for her and persuaded him to let