

Praying to Be Tall

WHEN I WAS thirteen I stopped growing. I had always looked older than I was but suddenly all my friends were taller than me. I was one of the three shortest girls in my class of thirty. I felt embarrassed when I was with my friends. Every night I prayed to Allah to be taller. I measured myself on my bedroom wall with a ruler and a pencil. Every morning I would stand against it to check if I had grown. But the pencil mark stayed stubbornly at five feet. I even promised Allah that if I could grow just a tiny bit taller I would offer a hundred *raakat nafl*, extra voluntary prayers on top of the five daily ones.

I was speaking at a lot of events but because I was so short it wasn't easy to be authoritative. Sometimes I could hardly see over the lectern. I did not like high-heeled shoes but I started to wear them.

One of the girls in my class did not return to school that year. She had been married off as soon as she entered puberty. She was big for her age but was still only thirteen. A while later we heard that she had two children. In class, when we were reciting hydrocarbon formulae during our chemistry lessons, I would daydream about what it would be like to stop going to school and instead start looking after a husband.

We had begun to think about other things besides the Taliban, but it wasn't possible to forget completely. Our army, which already had a lot of strange side businesses, like factories making cornflakes and fertilisers, had started producing soap operas. People across Pakistan were glued to a series on prime-time TV called *Beyond the Call of Duty*, which was supposed to consist of real-life stories of soldiers battling militants in Swat.

Over a hundred soldiers had been killed in the military operation and 900 injured, and they wanted to show themselves as heroes. But though their sacrifice was supposed to have restored government control, we were still waiting for the rule of law. Most afternoons when I came home from school there were women at our house in tears. Hundreds of men had gone missing during the military campaign, presumably picked up by the army or ISI, but no one would say. The women could not get information; they didn't know if their husbands and sons were dead or alive. Some of them were in desperate situations as they had no way to support themselves. A woman can only remarry if her husband is declared dead, not missing.

My mother gave them tea and food but that wasn't why they came. They wanted my father's help. Because of his role as spokesman for the Swat Qaumi Jirga, he acted as a kind of liaison between the people and the army.

'I just want to know if my husband is dead or not,' pleaded one lady I met. 'If they killed him then I can put the children in an orphanage. But now I'm neither a widow nor a wife.' Another lady told me her son was missing. The women said the missing men had not collaborated with the Taliban; maybe they had given them a glass of water or some bread when they'd been ordered to do so. Yet these innocent men were being held while the Taliban leaders went free.

There was a teacher in our school who lived just a ten-minute walk from our house. Her brother had been picked up by the army, put in leg irons and tortured, and then kept in a fridge until he died.