

country so this was a way to invite people's wrath] and is a centre of vulgarity and obscenity. It is a Hadith of the Holy Prophet that if you see something bad or evil you should stop it with your own hand. If you are unable to do that then you should tell others about it, and if you can't do that you should think about how bad it is in your heart. I have no personal quarrel with the principal but I am telling you what Islam says. This school is a centre of vulgarity and obscenity and they take girls for picnics to different resorts. If you don't stop it you will have to answer to God on Doomsday. Go and ask the manager of the White Palace Hotel and he will tell you what these girls did . . .

He put down the piece of paper. 'It has no signature. Anonymous.'

We sat stunned.

'They know no one will ask the manager,' said my father. 'People will just imagine something terrible went on.'

'We know what happened there. The girls did nothing bad,' my mother reassured him.

My father called my cousin Khanjee to find out how widely the letters had been distributed. He called back with bad news – they had been left everywhere, though most shopkeepers had ignored them and thrown them away. There were also giant posters pasted on the front of the mosque with the same accusations.

At school my classmates were terrified. 'Sir, they are saying very bad things about our school,' they said to my father. 'What will our parents say?'

My father gathered all the girls into the courtyard. 'Why are you afraid?' he asked. 'Did you do anything against Islam? Did you do anything immoral? No. You just splashed water and took pictures, so don't be scared. This is the propaganda of the followers of Mullah Fazlullah. Down with them! You have the right to enjoy greenery and waterfalls and landscape just as boys do.'

My father spoke like a lion, but I could see in his heart he was worried and scared. Only one person came and withdrew his sister from the school, but we knew that was not the end of it. Shortly after that we were told a man who had completed a peace walk from Dera Ismail Khan was coming through Mingora and we wanted to welcome him. I was on the way to meet him with my parents when we were approached by a short man who was frantically talking on two different phones. 'Don't go that way,' he urged. 'There is a suicide bomber over there!' We'd promised to meet the peace walker, so we went by a different route, placed a garland round his neck, then left quickly for home.

All through that spring and summer odd things kept happening. Strangers came to the house asking questions about my family. My father said they were from the intelligence services. The visits became more frequent after my father and the Swat Qaumi Jirga held a meeting in our school to protest against army plans for the people of Mingora and our community defence committees to conduct night patrols. 'The army say there is peace,' said my father. 'So why do we need flag marches and night patrols?'

Then our school hosted a painting competition for the children of Mingora sponsored by my father's friend who ran an NGO for women's rights. The pictures were supposed to show the equality of the sexes or highlight discrimination against women. That morning two men from the intelligence services came to our school to see my father. 'What is going on in your school?' they demanded.

'This is a school,' he replied. 'There's a painting competition just as we have debating competitions, cookery competitions and essay contests.' The men got very angry and so did my father. 'Everyone knows me and what I do!' he said. 'Why don't you do your real work and find Fazlullah and those whose hands are red with the blood of Swat?'

That Ramadan a friend of my father's in Karachi called Wakeel Khan sent clothes for the poor, which he wanted us to distribute. We went to a big hall to hand them out. Before we had even started,