

The Valley of Sorrows

IT ALL SEEMED like a bad dream. We had been away from our valley for almost three months and as we drove back past

Churchill's Picket, past the ancient ruins on the hill and the giant Buddhist stupa, we saw the wide Swat River and my father began to weep. Swat seemed to be under complete military control. The vehicle we were in even had to pass through an explosives check before we could head up the Malakand Pass. Once we got over the other side and down into the valley it seemed there were army checkpoints everywhere and soldiers had made nests for their machine guns on so many of the rooftops.

As we drove through villages we saw buildings in ruins and burned-out vehicles. It made me think of old war movies or the video games my brother Khushal loves to play. When we reached Mingora we were shocked. The army and Taliban had fought street to street and almost every wall was pockmarked with bullet holes. There was the rubble of blown-up buildings which the Taliban had used as hideouts, and piles of wreckage, twisted metal and smashed-up signs. Most of the shops had heavy metal shutters; those that didn't had been looted. The city was silent and emptied of people and traffic as if a plague had descended. The strangest sight of all was the bus station. Usually it's a complete confusion of Flying Coaches and rickshaws, but now it was completely deserted. We even saw plants growing up through the cracks in the paving. We had never seen our city like this.

At least there was no sign of the Taliban.

It was 24 July 2009, a week after our prime minister had announced that the Taliban had been cleared out. He promised that the gas supply had been restored and that the banks were reopening, and called on the people of Swat to return. In the end as many as half of its 1.8 million population had left our valley. From what we could see, most of them weren't convinced it was safe to return.

As we drew close to home we all fell silent, even my little brother, Atal the chatterbox. Our home was near Circuit House, the army headquarters, so we were worried it might have been destroyed in the shelling. We'd also heard that many homes had been looted. We held our breath as my father unlocked the gate. The first thing we saw was that in the three months we'd been away the garden had become a jungle.

My brothers immediately rushed off to check on their pet chickens. They came back crying. All that remained of the chickens was a pile of feathers and the bones of their small bodies entangled as if they had died in an embrace. They had starved to death.

I felt so sad for my brothers but I had to check on something of my own. To my joy I found my school bag still packed with my books, and I gave thanks that my prayers had been answered and that they were safe. I took out my books one by one and just stared at them. Maths, physics, Urdu, English, Pashto, chemistry, biology, *Islamiyat*, Pakistan studies. Finally I would be able to return to school without fear.

Then I went and sat on my bed. I was overwhelmed.

We were lucky our house had not been broken into. Four or five of the houses on our street had been looted and TVs and gold jewellery had been taken. Safina's mother next door had deposited her