

second day we were late. I was shocked when the teacher hit my hand with a stick to punish me, but then decided that at least it meant they were accepting me and not treating me differently. My uncle even gave me pocket money to buy snacks at school – they sold cucumber and watermelon not sweets and crisps like in Mingora.

One day at school there was a parents' day and prize-giving ceremony, and all the boys were encouraged to make speeches. Some of the girls also took part, but not in public. Instead we spoke into a microphone in our classrooms and our voices were then projected into the main hall. But I was used to speaking in public so I came out and in front of all the boys I recited one *naat*, a poem in which I praised the Prophet. Then I asked the teacher if I could read some more poetry. I read a poem about working hard to achieve your heart's desires. 'A diamond must be cut many times before it yields even a tiny jewel,' I said. After that I spoke of my namesake, Malalai of Maiwand, who had strength and power equal to hundreds and thousands of brave men because her few lines of poetry changed everything so the British were defeated.

People in the audience seemed surprised and I wondered whether they thought I was showing off or whether they were asking themselves why I wasn't wearing a veil.

It was nice being with my cousins but I missed my books. I kept thinking of my school bag at home with copies of *Oliver Twist* and *Romeo and Juliet* waiting to be read and the *Ugly Betty* DVDs on the shelf. But now we were living our own drama. We had been so happy, then something very bad had come into our lives and we were now waiting for our happy ending. When I complained about my books my brothers whined about their chickens.

We'd heard on the radio that the army had started the battle for Mingora. They had parachuted in soldiers and there had been hand-to-hand fighting in the streets. The Taliban were using hotels and government buildings as bunkers. After four days the military took three squares including Green Chowk, where the Taliban used to display the beheaded bodies of their victims. Then they captured the airport and in a week they had taken back the city.

We continued to worry about my father. In Shangla it was hard to find a mobile phone signal. We had to climb onto a huge boulder in a field, and even then we rarely had more than one bar of reception so we hardly ever spoke to him. But after we had been in Shangla for about six weeks, my father said we could travel to Peshawar, where he had been staying in one room with three friends.

It was very emotional to see him again. Then, a complete family once more, we travelled down to Islamabad, where we stayed with the family of Shiza, the lady who had called us from Stanford. While we were there we heard that Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, the American envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, was holding a meeting in the Serena Hotel about the conflict, and my father and I managed to get inside.

We almost missed it as I hadn't set the alarm properly so my father was barely speaking to me. Holbrooke was a big gruff man with a red face but people said he had helped bring peace to Bosnia. I sat next to him and he asked me how old I was. 'I am twelve,' I replied, trying to look as tall as possible. 'Respected Ambassador, I request you, please help us girls to get an education,' I said.

He laughed. 'You already have lots of problems and we are doing lots for you,' he replied. 'We have pledged billions of dollars in economic aid; we are working with your government on providing electricity, gas . . . but your country faces a lot of problems.'

I did an interview with a radio station called Power 99. They liked it very much and told us they had a guesthouse in Abbottabad where we could all go. We stayed there for a week and to my joy I