

A Private Talibanisation

‘LET’S PRETEND IT’S a Twilight movie and that we’re vampires in the forest,’ I said to Moniba. We were on a school trip to Marghazar, a beautiful green valley where the air is cool, and there is a tall mountain and a crystal-clear river where we were planning to have a picnic. Nearby was the White Palace Hotel, which used to be the wali’s summer residence.

It was April 2012, the month after our exams so we were all feeling relaxed. We were a group of about seventy girls. Our teachers and my parents were there too. My father had hired three Flying Coaches but we could not all fit in, so five of us – me, Moniba and three other girls – were in the *dyna*, the school van. It wasn’t very comfortable, especially because we also had giant pots of chicken and rice on the floor for the picnic, but it was only half an hour’s drive. We had fun, singing songs on the way there. Moniba was looking very beautiful, her skin porcelain-pale. ‘What skin cream are you using?’ I asked her.

‘The same one you’re using,’ she replied.

I knew that could not be true. ‘No. Look at my dark skin and look at yours!’

We visited the White Palace and saw where the Queen had slept and the gardens of beautiful flowers. Sadly we could not see the wali’s room as it had been damaged by the floods.

We ran around for a while in the green forest, then took some photographs and waded into the river and splashed each other with water. The drops sparkled in the sun. There was a waterfall down the cliff and for a while we sat on the rocks and listened to it. Then Moniba started splashing me again.

‘Don’t! I don’t want to get my clothes wet!’ I pleaded. I walked off with two other girls she didn’t like. The other girls stirred things up, what we call ‘putting masala on the situation’. It was a recipe for another argument between Moniba and me. That put me in a bad mood, but I cheered up when we got to the top of the cliff, where lunch was being prepared. Usman Bhai Jan, our driver, made us laugh as usual. Madam Maryam had brought her baby boy and Hannah, her two-year-old, who looked like a little doll but was full of mischief.

Lunch was a disaster. When the school assistants put the pans on the fire to heat up the chicken curry, they panicked that there was not enough food for so many girls and added water from the stream. We said it was ‘the worst lunch ever’. It was so watery that one girl said, ‘The sky could be seen in the soupy curry.’

Like on all our trips my father got us all to stand on a rock and talk about our impressions of the day before we left. This time all anyone talked about was how bad the food was. My father was embarrassed and for once, short of words.

The next morning a school worker came with milk, bread and eggs to our house for our breakfast. My father always answered the door as women must stay inside. The man told him the shopkeeper had given him a photocopied letter.

When my father read it, he went pale. ‘By God, this is terrible propaganda against our school!’ he told my mother. He read it out.

Dear Muslim brothers

There is a school, the Khushal School, which is run by an NGO [NGOs have a very bad reputation among religious people in our