

## A Funny Kind of Peace

WHEN MY BROTHERS' schools reopened after the winter break, Khushal said he would rather stay at home like me. I was cross. 'You don't realise how lucky you are!' I told him. It felt strange to have no school. We didn't even have a television set as someone had stolen ours while we were in Islamabad, using my father's 'getaway' ladder to get inside.

Someone gave me a copy of *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho, a fable about a shepherd boy who travels to the Pyramids in search of treasure when all the time it's at home. I loved that book and read it over and over again. 'When you want something all the universe conspires in helping you achieve it,' it says. I don't think that Paulo Coelho had come across the Taliban or our useless politicians.

What I didn't know was that Hai Kakar was holding secret talks with Fazlullah and his commanders. He had got to know them in interviews, and was urging them to rethink their ban on girls' education.

'Listen, Maulana,' he told Fazlullah. 'You killed people, you slaughtered people, you beheaded people, you destroyed schools and still there was no protest in Pakistan. But when you banned girls' education people spoke out. Even the Pakistan media, which has been so soft on you till now, is outraged.'

The pressure from the whole country worked, and Fazlullah agreed to lift the ban for girls up to ten years old – Year 4. I was in Year 5 and some of us pretended we were younger than we were. We started going to school again, dressed in ordinary clothes and hiding our books under our shawls. It was risky but it was the only ambition I had back then. We were lucky too that Madam Maryam was brave and resisted the pressure to stop working. She had known my father since she was ten and they trusted each other completely – she used to signal to him to wind up when he spoke for too long, which was often!

'The secret school is our silent protest,' she told us.

I didn't write anything about it in my diary. If they had caught us they would have flogged or even slaughtered us as they had Shabana. Some people are afraid of ghosts, some of spiders or snakes – in those days we were afraid of our fellow human beings.

On the way to school I sometimes saw the Taliban with their caps and long dirty hair. Most of the time they hid their faces. They were awkward, horrible-looking. The streets of Mingora were very empty as a third of the inhabitants had left the valley. My father said you couldn't really blame people for leaving as the government had no power. There were now 12,000 army troops in the region – four times as many as their estimates of the Taliban – along with tanks, helicopters and sophisticated weapons. Yet seventy per cent of Swat was under Taliban control.

About a week after we had returned to school, on 16 February 2009, we were woken one night by the sound of gunfire. Our people traditionally fire rifles in celebration of births and weddings but even that had stopped during the conflict. So at first we thought we were in danger. Then we heard the news. The gunfire was in celebration. A peace deal had been struck between the Taliban and the provincial government, which was now under the control of the ANP, not the mullahs. The government had agreed to impose sharia law throughout Swat and in return the militants would stop