snowflakes. Spring was when Swat was at its greenest. Eucalyptus blossom blew into the house, coating everything white, and the wind carried the pungent smell of the rice fields. I was born in summer, which was perhaps why it was my favourite time of year, even though in Mingora summer was hot and dry and the stream stank where people dumped their garbage.

When I was born we were very poor. My father and a friend had founded their first school and we lived in a shabby shack of two rooms opposite the school. I slept with my mother and father in one room and the other was for guests. We had no bathroom or kitchen, and my mother cooked on a wood fire on the ground and washed our clothes at a tap in the school. Our home was always full of people visiting from the village. Hospitality is an important part of Pashtun culture.

Two years after I was born my brother Khushal arrived. Like me he was born at home as we still could not afford the hospital, and he was named Khushal like my father's school, after the Pashtun hero Khushal Khan Khattak, a warrior who was also a poet. My mother had been waiting for a son and could not hide her joy when he was born. To me he seemed very thin and small, like a reed that could snap in the wind, but he was the apple of her eye, her *ladla*. It seemed to me that his every wish was her command. He wanted tea all the time, our traditional tea with milk and sugar and cardamom, but even my mother tired of this and eventually made some so bitter that he lost the taste for it. She wanted to buy a new cradle for him – when I was born my father couldn't afford one so they used an old wooden one from the neighbours which was already third or fourth hand – but my father refused. 'Malala swung in that cradle,' he said. 'So can he.' Then, nearly five years later, another boy was born – Atal, bright-eyed and inquisitive like a squirrel. After that, said my father, we were complete. Three children is a small family by Swati standards, where most people have seven or eight.

I played mostly with Khushal because he was just two years younger than me, but we fought all the time. He would go crying to my mother and I would go to my father. 'What's wrong, *Jani*?' he would ask. Like him I was born double-jointed and can bend my fingers right back on themselves. And my ankles click when I walk, which makes adults squirm.

My mother is very beautiful and my father adored her as if she were a fragile china vase, never laying a hand on her, unlike many of our men. Her name Tor Pekai means 'raven tresses' even though her hair is chestnut brown. My grandfather, Janser Khan, had been listening to Radio Afghanistan just before she was born and heard the name. I wished I had her white-lily skin, fine features and green eyes, but instead had inherited the sallow complexion, wide nose and brown eyes of my father. In our culture we all have nicknames – aside from *Pisho*, which my mother had called me since I was a baby, some of my cousins called me *Lachi*, which is Pashto for 'cardamom'. Black-skinned people are often called white and short people tall. We have a funny sense of humour. My father was known in the family as *Khaista dada*, which means beautiful.

When I was around four years old I asked my father, '*Aba*, what colour are you?' He replied, 'I don't know, a bit white, a bit black.'

'It's like when one mixes milk with tea,' I said.

He laughed a lot, but as a boy he had been so self-conscious about being dark-skinned that he went to the fields to get buffalo milk to spread on his face, thinking it would make him lighter. It was only when he met my mother that he became comfortable in his own skin. Being loved by such a beautiful girl gave him confidence.

In our society marriages are usually arranged by families, but theirs was a love match. I could listen endlessly to the story of how they met. They came from neighbouring villages in a remote valley