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Leaving the Valley

LEAVING THE VALLEY was harder than anything I had done before. I remembered the *tapa* my grandmother used to recite: 'No Pashtun leaves his land of his own sweet will./ Either he leaves from poverty or he leaves for love.' Now we were being driven out for a third reason the *tapa* writer had never imagined – the Taliban.

Leaving our home felt like having my heart ripped out. I stood on our roof looking at the mountains, the snow-topped Mount Elum where Alexander the Great had reached up and touched Jupiter. I looked at the trees all coming into leaf. The fruit of our apricot tree might be eaten by someone else this year. Everything was silent, pin-drop silent. There was no sound from the river or the wind; even the birds were not chirping.

I wanted to cry because I felt in my heart I might never see my home again. The documentary makers had asked me how I would feel if one day I left Swat and never came back. At the time I had thought it was a stupid question, but now I saw that everything I could not imagine happening had happened. I thought my school would not close and it had. I thought we would never leave Swat and we were just about to. I thought Swat would be free of the Taliban one day and we would rejoice, but now I realised that might not happen. I started to cry. It was as if everyone had been waiting for someone else to start. My cousin's wife, Honey, started weeping, then all of us were crying. But my mother was very composed and courageous.

I put all my books and notebooks in my school bag then packed another bag of clothes. I couldn't think straight. I took the trousers from one set and the top from another so I had a bag of things which didn't match. I didn't take any of my school awards or photos or personal belongings as we were travelling in someone else's car and there was little room. We didn't own anything expensive like a laptop or jewellery – our only valuable items had been our TV, a fridge and a washing machine. We didn't lead a life of luxury – we Pashtuns prefer to sit on floors rather than chairs. Our house has holes in the walls, and every plate and cup is cracked.

My father had resisted leaving till the end. But then some of my parents' friends had lost a relative in gunfire so they went to the house to offer prayers of condolences even though nobody was really venturing out. Seeing their grief made my mother determined to leave. She told my father, 'You don't have to come, but I am going and I will take the children to Shangla.' She knew he couldn't let her go alone. My mother had had enough of the gunfire and tension and called Dr Afzal and begged him to persuade my father to leave. He and his family were going so they offered us a lift. We didn't have a car so we were lucky that our neighbours, Safina and her family, were also leaving and could fit some of us in their car while the rest would go with Dr Afzal.

On 5 May 2009 we became IDPs. Internally displaced persons. It sounded like a disease.

There were a lot of us – not just us five but also my grandmother, my cousin, his wife, Honey, and their baby. My brothers also wanted to take their pet chickens – mine had died because I washed it in cold water on a winter's day. It wouldn't revive even when I put it in a shoebox in the house to keep it warm and got everyone in the neighbourhood to pray for it. My mother refused to let the chickens come. What if they make a mess in the car? she asked. Atal suggested we buy them nappies! In the end