

## The Bloody Square

THE BODIES WOULD be dumped in the square at night so that everyone would see them the next morning on their way to work. There was usually a note pinned to them saying something like, ‘This is what happens to an army agent’, or ‘Do not touch this body until 11 a.m. or you will be next.’ On some of the nights of the killings there would also be earthquakes, which made people even more scared as we connect every natural disaster with a human disaster.

They killed Shabana on a bitterly cold night in January 2009. She lived in Banr Bazaar, a narrow street in our town of Mingora which is famous for its dancers and musicians. Shabana’s father said a group of men had knocked at her door and asked her to dance for them. She went to put on her dancing clothes, and when she returned to dance for them, they pulled out their guns and threatened to slit her throat. This happened after the 9 p.m. curfew and people heard her screaming, ‘I promise I’ll stop! I promise I won’t sing and dance again. Leave me, for God’s sake! I am a woman, a Muslim. Don’t kill me!’ Then shots rang out and her bullet-ridden body was dragged to Green Chowk. So many bodies had been left there that people started calling it the Bloody Square.

We heard about Shabana’s death the next morning. On Mullah FM, Fazlullah said she deserved to die for her immoral character and any other girls found performing in Banr Bazaar would be killed one by one. We used to be proud of our music and art in Swat, but now most of the dancers fled to Lahore or to Dubai. Musicians took out adverts in the papers saying they had stopped playing and were pledging to live pious lives to appease the Taliban.

People used to talk about Shabana’s bad character, but our men both wished to see her dance and also despised her because she was a dancer. A khan’s daughter can’t marry a barber’s son and a barber’s daughter can’t marry a khan’s son. We Pashtuns love shoes but don’t love the cobbler; we love our scarves and blankets but do not respect the weaver. Manual workers made a great contribution to our society but received no recognition, and this is the reason so many of them joined the Taliban – to finally achieve status and power.

So people loved to see Shabana dance but didn’t respect her, and when she was murdered they said nothing. Some even agreed with her killing, out of fear of the Taliban or because they were in favour of them. ‘Shabana was not a Muslim,’ they said. ‘She was bad, and it was right that she was killed.’

I can’t say that was the worst day. Around the time of Shabana’s murder every day seemed like the worst day; every moment was the worst. The bad news was everywhere: this person’s place bombed, this school blown up, public whippings. The stories were endless and overwhelming. A couple of weeks after Shabana’s murder, a teacher in Matta was killed when he refused to pull his shalwar above the ankle the way the Taliban wore theirs. He told them that nowhere in Islam is this required. They hung him and then they shot his father.

I couldn’t understand what the Taliban were trying to do. ‘They are abusing our religion,’ I said in interviews. ‘How will you accept Islam if I put a gun to your head and say Islam is the true religion? If they want every person in the world to be Muslim why don’t they show themselves to be good Muslims first?’

Regularly my father would come home shaken up due to the terrible things he had witnessed and