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The Village

IN OUR TRADITION on the seventh day of a child's life we have a celebration called *Woma* (which means 'seventh') for family, friends and neighbours to come and admire the newborn. My parents had not held one for me because they could not afford the goat and rice needed to feed the guests, and my grandfather would not help them out because I was not a boy. When my brothers came along and *Baba* wanted to pay, my father refused as he hadn't done this for me. But *Baba* was the only grandfather I had as my mother's father had died before I was born and we became close. My parents say I have qualities of both grandfathers – humorous and wise like my mother's father and vocal like my father's father! *Baba* had grown soft and white-bearded in his old age and I loved going to visit him in the village.

Whenever he saw me he would greet me with a song as he was still concerned about the sad meaning of my name and wanted to lend some happiness to it: '*Malala Maiwand wala da. Pa tool jehan ke da khushala da*,' he sang. 'Malala is of Maiwand and she's the happiest person in the whole world.'

We always went to the village for the Eid holidays. We would dress in our finest clothes and pile into the Flying Coach, a minibus with brightly painted panels and jangling chains, and drive north to Barkana, our family village in Shangla. Eid happens twice a year – Eid ul-Fitr or 'Small Eid' marks the end of the Ramadan fasting month, and Eid ul-Azha or 'Big Eid' commemorates the Prophet Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son Ismail to God. The dates of the feasts are announced by a special panel of clerics who watch for the appearance of the crescent moon. As soon as we heard the broadcast on the radio, we set off.

The night before we hardly slept because we were so excited. The journey usually took about five hours as long as the road had not been washed away by rains or landslides, and the Flying Coach left early in the morning. We struggled to Mingora bus station, our bags laden with gifts for our family – embroidered shawls and boxes of rose and pistachio sweets as well as medicine they could not get in the village. Some people took sacks of sugar and flour, and most of the baggage was tied to the top of the bus in a towering pile. Then we crammed in, fighting over the window seats even though the panes were so encrusted with dirt it was hard to see out of them. The sides of Swat buses are painted with scenes of bright pink and yellow flowers, neon-orange tigers and snowy mountains. My brothers liked it if we got one with F-16 fighter jets or nuclear missiles, though my father said if our politicians hadn't spent so much money on building an atomic bomb we might have had enough for schools.

We drove out of the bazaar, past the grinning red mouth signs for dentists, the carts stacked with wooden cages crammed with beady-eyed white chickens with scarlet beaks, and jewellery stores with windows full of gold wedding bangles. The last few shops as we headed north out of Mingora were wooden shacks that seemed to lean on each other, in front of which were piles of reconditioned tyres for the bad roads ahead. Then we were on the main road built by the last wali, which follows the wide Swat River on the left and hugs the cliffs to the right with their emerald mines. Overlooking the river were tourist restaurants with big glass windows we had never been to. On the road we passed dusty-faced children bent double with huge bundles of grass on their backs and men leading