

family thought people would gossip about us and say we were not properly following *Pashtunwali*.

I am very proud to be a Pashtun but sometimes I think our code of conduct has a lot to answer for, particularly where the treatment of women is concerned. A woman named Shahida who worked for us and had three small daughters, told me that when she was only ten years old her father had sold her to an old man who already had a wife but wanted a younger one. When girls disappeared it was not always because they had been married off. There was a beautiful fifteen-year-old girl called Seema. Everyone knew she was in love with a boy, and sometimes he would pass by and she would look at him from under her long dark lashes, which all the girls envied. In our society for a girl to flirt with any man brings shame on the family, though it's all right for the man. We were told she had committed suicide, but we later discovered her own family had poisoned her.

We have a custom called *swara* by which a girl can be given to another tribe to resolve a feud. It is officially banned but still continues. In our village there was a widow called Soraya who married a widower from another clan which had a feud with her family. Nobody can marry a widow without the permission of her family. When Soraya's family found out about the union they were furious. They threatened the widower's family until a *jirga* was called of village elders to resolve the dispute. The *jirga* decided that the widower's family should be punished by handing over their most beautiful girl to be married to the least eligible man of the rival clan. The boy was a good-for-nothing, so poor that the girl's father had to pay all their expenses. Why should a girl's life be ruined to settle a dispute she had nothing to do with?

When I complained about these things to my father he told me that life was harder for women in Afghanistan. The year before I was born a group called the Taliban led by a one-eyed mullah had taken over the country and was burning girls' schools. They were forcing men to grow beards as long as a lantern and women to wear burqas. Wearing a burqa is like walking inside big fabric shuttlecock with only a grille to see through and on hot days it's like an oven. At least I didn't have to wear one. He said that the Taliban had even banned women from laughing out loud or wearing white shoes as white was 'a colour that belonged to men'. Women were being locked up and beaten just for wearing nail varnish. I shivered when he told me such things.

I read my books like *Anna Karenina* and the novels of Jane Austen and trusted in my father's words: 'Malala is free as a bird.' When I heard stories of the atrocities in Afghanistan I felt proud to be in Swat. 'Here a girl can go to school,' I used to say. But the Taliban were just around the corner and were Pashtuns like us. For me the valley was a sunny place and I couldn't see the clouds gathering behind the mountains. My father used to say, 'I will protect your freedom, Malala. Carry on with your dreams.'