

My mother used to tell me to hide my face when I spoke to the media because at my age I should be in purdah and she was afraid for my safety. But she never banned me from doing anything. It was a time of horror and fear. People often said the Taliban might kill my father but not me. ‘Malala is a child,’ they would say, ‘and even the Taliban don’t kill children.’

But my grandmother wasn’t so sure. Whenever my grandmother saw me speaking on television, or leaving the house she would pray, ‘Please God make Malala like Benazir Bhutto but do not give her Benazir’s short life.’

After my school closed down I continued to write the blog. Four days after the ban on girls’ schools, five more were destroyed. ‘I am quite surprised,’ I wrote, ‘because these schools had closed so why did they also need to be destroyed? No one has gone to school following the Taliban’s deadline. The army is doing nothing about it. They are sitting in their bunkers on top of the hills. They slaughter goats and eat with pleasure.’ I also wrote about people going to watch the floggings announced on Mullah FM, and the fact that the police were nowhere to be seen.

One day we got a call from America, from a student at Stanford University. Her name was Shiza Shahid and she came from Islamabad. She had seen the *New York Times* documentary *Class Dismissed in Swat Valley* and tracked us down. We saw then the power of the media and she became a great support to us. My father was almost bursting with pride at how I came across on the documentary. ‘Look at her,’ he told Adam Ellick. ‘Don’t you think she is meant for the skies?’ Fathers can be very embarrassing.

Adam took us to Islamabad. It was the first time I had ever visited. Islamabad was a beautiful place with nice white bungalows and broad roads, though it has none of the natural beauty of Swat. We saw the Red Mosque where the siege had taken place, the wide, wide Constitution Avenue leading to the white-colonnaded buildings of the Parliament House and the Presidency, where Zardari now lived. General Musharraf was in exile in London.

We went to shops where I bought school books and Adam bought me DVDs of American TV programmes like *Ugly Betty*, which was about a girl with big braces and a big heart. I loved it and dreamed of one day going to New York and working on a magazine like her. We visited the Lok Virsa museum, and it was a joy to celebrate our national heritage once again. Our own museum in Swat had closed. On the steps outside an old man was selling popcorn. He was a Pashtun like us, and when my father asked if he was from Islamabad he replied, ‘Do you think Islamabad can ever belong to us Pashtuns?’ He said he came from Mohmand, one of the tribal areas, but had to flee because of a military operation. I saw tears in my parents’ eyes.

Lots of buildings were surrounded by concrete blocks, and there were checkpoints for incoming vehicles to guard against suicide bombs. When our bus hit a pothole on the way back my brother Khushal, who had been asleep, jerked awake. ‘Was that a bomb blast?’ he asked. This was the fear that filled our daily lives. Any small disturbance or noise could be a bomb or gunfire.

On our short trips we forgot our troubles in Swat. But we returned to the threats and danger as we entered our valley once again. Even so, Swat was our home and we were not ready to leave it.

Back in Mingora the first thing I saw when I opened my wardrobe was my uniform, school bag and geometry set. I felt so sad. The visit to Islamabad had been a lovely break, but this was my reality now.