

when he heard the news he came running. My mother was worried about telling him he had a daughter not a son, but he says he looked into my eyes and was delighted.

‘Malala was a lucky girl,’ says Hidayatullah. ‘When she was born our luck changed.’

But not immediately. On Pakistan’s fiftieth anniversary on 14 August 1997 there were parades and commemorations throughout the country. However, my father and his friends said there was nothing to celebrate as Swat had only suffered since it had merged with Pakistan. They wore black armbands to protest, saying the celebrations were for nothing, and were arrested. They had to pay a fine they could not afford.

A few months after I was born the three rooms above the school became vacant and we all moved in. The walls were concrete and there was running water so it was an improvement on our muddy shack, but we were still very cramped as we were sharing it with Hidayatullah and we almost always had guests. That first school was a mixed primary school and very small. By the time I was born it had five or six teachers and around a hundred pupils paying a hundred rupees a month. My father was teacher, accountant and principal. He also swept the floors, whitewashed the walls and cleaned the bathrooms. He used to climb up electricity poles to hang banners advertising the school, even though he was so afraid of heights that when he got to the top of the ladder his feet shook. If the water pump stopped working, he would go down the well to repair it himself. When I saw him disappear down there I would cry, thinking he wouldn’t come back. After paying the rent and salaries, there was little money left for food. We drank green tea as we could not afford milk for regular tea. But after a while the school started to break even and my father began to plan a second school, which he wanted to call the Malala Education Academy.

I had the run of the school as my playground. My father tells me even before I could talk I would toddle into classes and talk as if I was a teacher. Some of the female staff like Miss Ulfat would pick me up and put me on their lap as if I was their pet or even take me home with them for a while. When I was three or four I was placed in classes for much older children. I used to sit in wonder, listening to everything they were being taught. Sometimes I would mimic the teachers. You could say I grew up in a school.

As my father had found with Naeem, it is not easy to mix business and friendship. Eventually Hidayatullah left to start his own school and they divided the students, each taking two of the four years. They did not tell their pupils as they wanted people to think the school was expanding and had two buildings. Though Hidayatullah and my father were not speaking at that time, Hidayatullah missed me so much he used to visit me.

It was while he was visiting one afternoon in September 2001 that there was a great commotion and other people started arriving. They said there had been a big attack on a building in New York. Two planes had flown into it. I was only four and too young to understand. Even for the adults it was hard to imagine – the biggest buildings in Swat are the hospital and a hotel, which are two or three storeys. It seemed very far away. I had no idea what New York and America were. The school was my world and my world was the school. We did not realise then that 9/11 would change our world too, and would bring war into our valley.