

the Taliban were non-governmental organisations or NGOs, which they said were anti-Islam. When the NGOs received threatening letters from the Taliban and went to the DC to ask for his help, he wouldn't even listen to them. Once in a meeting my father challenged him: 'Whose orders are you representing? Fazlullah's or the government's?' We say in Arabic, 'People follow their king.' When the highest authority in your district joins the Taliban, then Talibanisation becomes normal.

We like conspiracy theories in Pakistan and we had many. Some believed the authorities were deliberately encouraging the Taliban. They said the army wanted the Taliban in Swat because the Americans wanted to use an airbase there to launch their drones. With the Taliban in the valley, our government could say to the Americans we can't help you because we have our own problems. It was also a way to answer growing American criticism that our military was helping the Taliban rather than trying to stop them. Now our government could respond, 'You say we are taking your money and aiding these terrorists, but if that's the case why are they attacking us too?'

'The Taliban obviously have the support of unseen forces,' said my father. 'But what's happening is not simple, and the more you want to understand the more complex it becomes.'

That year, 2008, the government even released Sufi Mohammad, the founder of the TNSM, from prison. He was said to be more moderate than his son-in-law Fazlullah, and there was hope that he would make a peace deal with the government to impose sharia law in Swat and release us from Taliban violence. My father was in favour of this. We knew this would not be the end, but my father argued that if we had *shariat* the Taliban would have nothing more to fight for. They should then put down their arms and live like ordinary men. If they did not, he said, this would expose them for what they really were.

The army still had their guns trained on the mountains overlooking Mingora. We would lie in bed listening to them *boom boom* all night. They would stop for five, ten or fifteen minutes and then start again the moment we drifted off to sleep. Sometimes we covered our ears or buried our heads under pillows, but the guns were close by and the noise was too loud to block out. Then the morning after, on TV, we would hear of more Taliban killings and wonder what the army was doing with all its booming cannons and why they could not even stop the daily broadcasts on Mullah FM.

Both the army and the Taliban were powerful. Sometimes their roadblocks were less than a kilometre apart on the same main roads. They would stop us but seemed unaware of each other's presence. It was unbelievable. No one understood why we were not being defended. People would say they were two sides of the same coin. My father said we common people were like chaff caught between the two stones of a water mill. But he still wasn't afraid. He said we should continue to speak out.

I am only human, and when I heard the guns my heart used to beat very fast. Sometimes I was very afraid but I said nothing, and it didn't mean I would stop going to school. But fear is very powerful and in the end it was this fear that had made people turn against Shabana. Terror had made people cruel. The Taliban bulldozed both our Pashtun values and the values of Islam.

I tried to distract myself by reading Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, which answered big questions such as how the universe began and whether time could run backwards. I was only eleven years old and already I wished it could.

We Pashtuns know the stone of revenge never decays, and when you do something wrong you will face the music. *But when would that be?* we continually asked ourselves.