

AS SOON AS Usman Bhai Jan realised what had happened he drove the *dyna* to Swat Central Hospital at top speed.

The other girls were screaming and crying. I was lying on Moniba’s lap, bleeding from my head and left ear. We had only gone a short way when a policeman stopped the van and started asking questions, wasting precious time. One girl felt my neck for a pulse. ‘She’s alive!’ she shouted. ‘We must get her to hospital. Leave us alone and catch the man who did this!’

Mingora seemed like a big town to us but it’s really a small place and the news spread quickly. My father was at the Swat Press Club for a meeting of the Association of Private Schools and had just gone on stage to give a speech when his mobile rang. He recognised the number as the Khushal School and passed the phone to his friend Ahmad Shah to answer. ‘Your school bus has been fired on,’ he whispered urgently to my father.

The colour drained from my father’s face. He immediately thought, *Malala could be on that bus!* Then he tried to reassure himself, thinking it might be a boy, a jealous lover who had fired a pistol in the air to shame his beloved. He was at an important gathering of about 400 principals who had come from all over Swat to protest against plans by the government to impose a central regulatory authority. As president of their association, my father felt he couldn’t let all those people down so he delivered his speech as planned. But there were beads of sweat on his forehead and for once there was no need for anyone to signal to him to wind it up.

As soon as he had finished, my father did not wait to take questions from the audience and instead rushed off to the hospital with Ahmad Shah and another friend, Riaz, who had a car. The hospital was only five minutes away. They arrived to find crowds gathered outside and photographers and TV cameras. Then he knew for certain that I was there. My father’s heart sank. He pushed through the people and ran through the camera flashes into the hospital. Inside I was lying on a trolley, a bandage over my head, my eyes closed, my hair spread out.

‘My daughter, you are my brave daughter, my beautiful daughter,’ he said over and over, kissing my forehead and cheeks and nose. He didn’t know why he was speaking to me in English. I think somehow I knew he was there even though my eyes were closed. My father said later, ‘I can’t explain it. I felt she responded.’ Someone said I had smiled. But to my father it was not a smile, just a small beautiful moment because he knew he had not lost me for ever. Seeing me like that was the worst thing that had ever happened to him. All children are special to their parents, but to my father I was his universe. I had been his comrade in arms for so long, first secretly as Gul Makai, then quite openly as Malala. He had always believed that if the Taliban came for anyone, it would be for him, not me. He said he felt as if he had been hit by a thunderbolt. ‘They wanted to kill two birds with one stone. Kill Malala and silence me for ever.’

He was very afraid but he didn’t cry. There were people everywhere. All the principals from the meeting had arrived at the hospital and there were scores of media and activists; it seemed the whole town was there. ‘Pray for Malala,’ he told them. The doctors reassured him that they had done a CT scan which showed that the bullet had not gone near my brain. They cleaned and bandaged the wound.