

Radio Mullah

I WAS TEN when the Taliban came to our valley. Moniba and I had been reading the Twilight books and longed to be vampires. It seemed to us that the Taliban arrived in the night just like vampires. They appeared in groups, armed with knives and Kalashnikovs, and first emerged in Upper Swat, in the hilly areas of Matta. They didn't call themselves Taliban to start with and didn't look like the Afghan Taliban we'd seen in pictures with their turbans and black-rimmed eyes.

These were strange-looking men with long straggly hair and beards and camouflage vests over their shalwar kamiz, which they wore with the trousers well above the ankle. They had jogging shoes or cheap plastic sandals on their feet, and sometimes stockings over their heads with holes for their eyes, and they blew their noses dirtily into the ends of their turbans. They wore black badges which said SHARIAT YA SHAHADAT – SHARIA LAW OR MARTYRDOM – and sometimes black turbans, so people called them Tor Patki or the Black-Turbaned Brigade. They looked so dark and dirty that my father's friend described them as 'people deprived of baths and barbers'.

Their leader was Maulana Fazlullah, a 28-year-old who used to operate the pulley chair to cross the Swat River and whose right leg dragged because of childhood polio. He had studied in the madrasa of Maulana Sufi Mohammad, the founder of the TNSM, and married his daughter. When Sufi Mohammad was imprisoned in a round-up of militant leaders in 2002, Fazlullah had taken over the movement's leadership. It was shortly before the earthquake that Fazlullah had appeared in Imam Deri, a small village just a few miles outside Mingora on the other side of the Swat River, and set up his illegal radio station.

In our valley we received most of our information from the radio because so many had no TV or are illiterate. Soon everyone seemed to be talking about the radio station. It became known as Mullah FM and Fazlullah as the Radio Mullah. It broadcast every night from eight to ten and again in the morning from seven to nine.

In the beginning Fazlullah was very wise. He introduced himself as an Islamic reformer and an interpreter of the Quran. My mother is very devout, and to start with she liked Fazlullah. He used his station to encourage people to adopt good habits and abandon practices he said were bad. He said men should keep their beards but give up smoking and using the tobacco they liked to chew. He said people should stop using heroin, and *chars*, which is our word for hashish. He told people the correct way to do their ablutions for prayers – which body part to wash first. He even told people how they should wash their private parts.

Sometimes his voice was reasonable, like when adults are trying to persuade you to do something you don't want to, and sometimes it was scary and full of fire. Often he would weep as he spoke of his love for Islam. Usually he spoke for a while, then his deputy Shah Douran came on air, a man who used to sell snacks from a tricycle in the bazaar. They warned people to stop listening to music, watching movies and dancing. Sinful acts like these had caused the earthquake, Fazlullah thundered, and if people didn't stop they would again invite the wrath of God. Mullahs often misinterpret the Quran and Hadith when they teach them in our country as few people understand the original Arabic. Fazlullah exploited this ignorance.