

intelligence agents came and asked, 'What are you doing? Who brought these outfits?'

On 12 July I turned fourteen, which in Islam means you are an adult. With my birthday came the news that the Taliban had killed the owner of the Swat Continental Hotel, who was on a peace committee. He was on his way from home to his hotel in Mingora Bazaar when they ambushed him in a field.

Once again people started worrying that the Taliban were creeping back. But whereas in 2008–9 there were many threats to all sorts of people, this time the threats were specific to those who spoke against militants or the high-handed behaviour of the army.

'The Taliban is not an organised force like we imagine,' said my father's friend Hidayatullah when they discussed it. 'It's a mentality, and this mentality is everywhere in Pakistan. Someone who is against America, against the Pakistan establishment, against English law, he has been infected by the Taliban.'

It was late in the evening of 3 August when my father received an alarming phone call from a Geo TV correspondent called Mehboob. He was the nephew of my father's friend Zahid Khan, the hotel owner who had been attacked in 2009. People used to say both Zahid Khan and my father were on the Taliban radar and both would be killed; the only thing they didn't know was which would be killed first. Mehboob told us that his uncle had been on his way to *isha* prayers, the last prayers of the day, at the mosque on the street near his house when he was shot in the face.

When he heard the news my father said the earth fell away from his feet. 'It was as if I had been shot,' he said. 'I was sure it was my turn next.'

We pleaded with my father not to go to the hospital as it was very late and the people who had attacked Zahid Khan might be waiting for him. But he said not to go would be cowardly. He was offered an escort by some fellow political activists but he thought that it would be too late to go if he waited for them. So he called my cousin to take him. My mother began to pray.

When he got to the hospital only one other member of the *jirga* committee was there. Zahid Khan was bleeding so much it was as if his white beard was bathed in red. But he had been lucky. A man had fired at him three times from close range with a pistol, but Zahid Khan had managed to grab his hand so only the first bullet struck. Strangely it went through his neck and out through his nose. Later he said he remembered a small clean-shaven man just standing there smiling, not even wearing a mask. Then darkness overcame him as if he had fallen into a black hole. The irony was that Zahid Khan had only recently started to walk to the mosque again because he thought it was safe.

After praying for his friend, my father talked to the media. 'We don't understand why he's been attacked when they claim there's peace,' he said. 'It's a big question for the army and administration.'

People warned my father to leave the hospital. 'Ziauddin, it's midnight and you're here! Don't be stupid!' they said. 'You are as vulnerable and as wanted a target as he is. Don't take any more risks!'

Finally Zahid Khan was transferred to Peshawar to be operated on and my father came home. I had not gone to sleep because I was so worried. After that I double-checked all the locks every night.

At home our phone did not stop ringing with people calling to warn my father he could be the next target. Hidayatullah was one of the first to call. 'For God's sake be careful,' he warned. 'It could have been you. They are shooting *jirga* members one by one. You are the spokesman – how can they possibly let you live?'

My father was convinced the Taliban would hunt him down and kill him, but he again refused security from the police. 'If you go around with a lot of security the Taliban will use Kalashnikovs or suicide bombers and more people will be killed,' he said. 'At least I'll be killed alone.' Nor would