

‘They have snatched her smile’

THE DAY MY parents flew to Birmingham I was moved out of intensive care and into room 4, ward 519, which had windows so I could look out and see England for the first time. ‘Where are the mountains?’ I asked. It was misty and rainy so I thought maybe they were hidden. I didn’t know then that this was a land of little sun. All I could see were houses and streets. The houses were red brick and all looked exactly the same. Everything looked very calm and organised, and it was odd to see people’s lives going on as if nothing had happened.

Dr Javid told me my parents were coming and tilted my bed so that I was sitting up to greet them when they arrived. I was so excited. In the sixteen days since that morning when I had run out of our house in Mingora shouting goodbye, I had been in four hospitals and travelled thousands of miles. It felt like sixteen years. Then the door opened and there were the familiar voices saying ‘*Jani*’ and ‘*Pisho*’, and they were there, kissing my hands as they were frightened to touch me.

I couldn’t control myself and wept as loudly as I could. All that time alone in hospital I hadn’t cried even when I had all those injections in my neck or the staples removed from my head. But now I could not stop. My father and mother were also weeping. It was as if all the weight had been lifted from my heart. I felt that everything would be fine now. I was even happy to see my brother Khushal, as I needed someone to fight with. ‘We missed you Malala’, said my brothers, though they were soon more interested in all the teddies and gifts. And Khushal and I were soon fighting again when he took my laptop to play games on.

I was shocked by my parents’ appearance. They were tired from the long flight from Pakistan but that wasn’t all – they looked older and I could see they both had grey hairs. They tried to hide it, but I could see they were also disturbed by how I looked. Before they came in, Dr Javid had warned them, ‘The girl you will see is only ten per cent recovered; there is still ninety per cent to go.’ But they had no idea that half my face was not working and that I couldn’t smile. My left eye bulged, half my hair was gone and my mouth tilted to one side as if it had been pulled down so when I tried to smile it looked more like a grimace. It was as if my brain had forgotten it had a left face. I also couldn’t hear from one side, and I spoke in baby language as if I was a small child.

My parents were put in a hostel in the university among all the students. The people in charge of the hospital thought it might be difficult for them to stay at the hospital because they would be besieged by journalists, and they wanted to protect us at this critical stage in my recovery. My parents had very little with them except the clothes they were wearing and what Shiza’s mother Sonia had given them because when they left Swat on 9 October they had no idea they wouldn’t be going back. When they returned to the hostel room, they cried like children. I had always been such a happy child. My father would boast to people about ‘my heavenly smile and heavenly laughter’. Now he lamented to my mother, ‘That beautiful symmetrical face, that bright shining face has gone; she has lost her smile and laughter. The Taliban are very cruel – they have snatched her smile,’ he added. ‘You can give someone eyes or lungs but you cannot restore their smile.’

The problem was a facial nerve. The doctors were not sure at that point if it was damaged and might repair itself, or if it was cut. I reassured my mother that it didn’t matter to me if my face was not