not, their parents won't allow it. I have a father who isn't scared, who stands by me. He said, 'You are a child and it's your right to speak.' The more interviews I gave, the stronger I felt and the more support we received. I was only eleven but I looked older, and the media seemed to like hearing from a young girl. One journalist called me *takra jenai* – a 'bright shining young lady' and another said you are 'pakha jenai' – you are wise beyond your years. In my heart was the belief that God would protect me. If I am speaking for my rights, for the rights of girls, I am not doing anything wrong. It's my duty to do so. God wants to see how we behave in such situations. There is a saying in the Quran, 'The falsehood has to go and the truth will prevail.' *If one man, Fazlullah, can destroy everything, why can't one girl change it?* I wondered. I prayed to God every night to give me strength.

The media in Swat were under pressure to give positive coverage to the Taliban – some even respectfully called the Taliban spokesman Muslim Khan 'School *dada'*, when in reality he was destroying schools. But many local journalists were unhappy about what was happening to their valley and they gave us a powerful platform as we would say things they didn't dare to.

We didn't have a car so we went by rickshaw, or one of my father's friends would take us to the interviews. One day my father and I went to Peshawar to appear on a BBC Urdu talk show hosted by a famous columnist called Wasatullah Khan. We went with my father's friend Fazal Maula and his daughter. Two fathers and two daughters. To represent the Taliban they had Muslim Khan, who wasn't in the studio. I was a bit nervous but I knew it was important as many people all over Pakistan would be listening. 'How dare the Taliban take away my basic right to education?' I said. There was no response from Muslim Khan because his phone interview had been pre-recorded. How can a recording respond to live questions?

Afterwards people congratulated me. My father laughed and said I should go into politics. 'Even as a toddler you talked like a politician,' he teased. But I never listened to my interviews. I knew these were very small steps.

Our words were like the eucalyptus blossoms of spring tossed away on the wind. The destruction of schools continued. On the night of 7 October 2008 we heard a series of faraway blasts. The next morning we learned that masked militants had entered the Sangota Convent School for girls and the Excelsior College for boys and blown them up using improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The teachers had already been evacuated as they had received threats earlier. These were famous schools, particularly Sangota, which dated from the time of the last wali and was well known for academic excellence. They were also big – Excelsior had over 2,000 pupils and Sangota had 1,000. My father went there after the bombings and found the buildings completely razed to the ground. He gave interviews to TV reporters amid broken bricks and burned books and returned home horrified. 'It's all just rubble,' he said.

Yet my father remained hopeful and believed there would be a day when there was an end to the destruction. What really depressed him was the looting of the destroyed schools – the furniture, the books, the computers were all stolen by local people. He cried when he heard this, 'They are vultures jumping on a dead body.'

The next day he went on a live show on the Voice of America and angrily condemned the attacks. Muslim Khan, the Taliban spokesman, was on the phone. 'What was so wrong with these two schools that you should bomb them?' my father asked him.

Muslim Khan said that Sangota was a convent school teaching Christianity and that Excelsior was co-educational, teaching girls and boys together. 'Both things are false!' replied my father. 'Sangota