

her in the cab.

Atal had been told by my mother to ride on the bus with me, so he walked over from the primary school. He liked to hang off the tailboard at the back, which made Usman Bhai Jan cross as it was dangerous. That day Usman Bhai Jan had had enough and refused to let him. ‘Sit inside, Atal Khan, or I won’t take you!’ he said. Atal had a tantrum and refused so he walked home in a huff with some of his friends.

Usman Bhai Jan started the *dyna* and we were off. I was talking to Moniba, my wise, nice friend. Some girls were singing, I was drumming rhythms with my fingers on the seat.

Moniba and I liked to sit near the open back so we could see out. At that time of day Haji Baba Road was always a jumble of coloured rickshaws, people on foot and men on scooters, all zigzagging and honking. An ice-cream boy on a red tricycle painted with red and white nuclear missiles rode up behind waving at us, until a teacher shooed him away. A man was chopping off chickens’ heads, the blood dripping onto the street. I drummed my fingers. Chop, chop, chop. Drip, drip, drip. Funny, when I was little we always said Swatis were so peace-loving it was hard to find a man to slaughter a chicken.

The air smelt of diesel, bread and kebab mixed with the stink from the stream where people still dumped their rubbish and were never going to stop despite all my father’s campaigning. But we were used to it. Besides, soon the winter would be here, bringing the snow, which would cleanse and quieten everything.

The bus turned right off the main road at the army checkpoint. On a kiosk was a poster of crazy-eyed men with beards and caps or turbans under big letters saying wanted terrorists. The picture at the top of a man with a black turban and beard was Fazlullah. More than three years had passed since the military operation to drive the Taliban out of Swat had begun. We were grateful to the army but couldn’t understand why they were still everywhere, in machine-gun nests on roofs and manning checkpoints. Even to enter our valley people needed official permission.

The road up the small hill is usually busy as it is a short cut but that day it was strangely quiet. ‘Where are all the people?’ I asked Moniba. All the girls were singing and chatting and our voices bounced around inside the bus.

Around that time my mother was probably just going through the doorway into our school for her first lesson since she had left school at age six.

I didn’t see the two young men step out into the road and bring the van to a sudden halt. I didn’t get a chance to answer their question, ‘Who is Malala?’ or I would have explained to them why they should let us girls go to school as well as their own sisters and daughters.

The last thing I remember is that I was thinking about the revision I needed to do for the next day. The sounds in my head were not the *crack, crack, crack* of three bullets, but the *chop, chop, chop, drip, drip, drip* of the man severing the heads of chickens, and them dropping into the dirty street, one by one.