

‘O Ziauddin! What have they done?’ Madam Maryam burst through the doors. She had not been at school that day but at home nursing her baby when she received a phone call from her brother-in-law checking she was safe. Alarmed, she switched on the TV and saw the headline that there had been a shooting on the Khushal School bus. As soon as she heard I had been shot she called her husband. He brought her to the hospital on the back of his motorbike, something very rare for a respectable Pashtun woman. ‘Malala, Malala. Do you hear me?’ she called.

I grunted.

Maryam tried to find out more about what was going on. A doctor she knew told her the bullet had passed through my forehead, not my brain, and that I was safe. She also saw the two other Khushal girls who had been shot. Shazia had been hit twice, in the left collarbone and palm, and had been brought to the hospital with me. Kainat had not realised she was hurt to start with and had gone home, then discovered she had been grazed by a bullet at the top of her right arm so her family had brought her in.

My father knew he should go and check on them but did not want to leave my bedside for a minute. His phone kept ringing. The chief minister of KPK was the first person who called. ‘Don’t worry, we will sort everything out,’ he said. ‘Lady Reading Hospital in Peshawar is expecting you.’ But it was the army who took charge. At 3 p.m. the local commander arrived and announced they were sending an army helicopter to take me and my father to Peshawar. There wasn’t time to fetch my mother so Maryam insisted she would go too as I might need a woman’s help. Maryam’s family was not happy about this as she was still nursing her baby boy, who had recently undergone a small operation. But she is like my second mother.

When I was put in the ambulance my father was afraid the Taliban would attack again. It seemed to him that everyone must know who was inside. The helipad was only a mile away, a five-minute drive, but he was scared the whole way. When we got there the helicopter had not arrived, and we waited for what to him felt like hours inside the ambulance. Finally it landed and I was taken on board with my father, my cousin Khanjee, Ahmad Shah and Maryam. None of them had ever been on a helicopter. As it took off we flew over an army sports gala with patriotic music pounding from speakers. To hear them singing about their love of country gave my father a bad taste. He normally liked singing along, but a patriotic song hardly seemed appropriate when here was a fifteen-year-old girl shot in the head, an almost dead daughter.

Down below, my mother was watching from the roof of our house. When she heard that I had been hurt she was having her reading lesson with Miss Ulfat and struggling to learn words like ‘book’ and ‘apple’. The news at first was muddled and she initially believed I’d been in an accident and had injured my foot. She rushed home and told my grandmother, who was staying with us at the time. She begged my grandmother to start praying immediately. We believe Allah listens more closely to the white-haired. My mother then noticed my half-eaten egg from breakfast. There were pictures of me everywhere receiving the awards she had disapproved of. She sobbed as she looked at them. All around was Malala, Malala.

Soon the house was full of women. In our culture, if someone dies women come to the home of the deceased and the men to the *hujra* – not just family and close friends but everyone from the neighbourhood.

My mother was astonished to see all the people. She sat on a prayer mat and recited from the Quran. She told the women, ‘Don’t cry – pray!’ Then my brothers rushed into the room. Atal, who had