

heard about such as policemen beheaded, their heads paraded through the town. Even those who had defended Fazlullah at the start, believing his men were the real standard-bearers of Islam, and given him their gold, began to turn against him. My father told me about a woman who had donated generously to the Taliban while her husband was working abroad. When he came back and found out she had given away her gold he was furious. One night there was a small explosion in their village and the wife cried. ‘Don’t cry,’ said her husband. ‘That is the sound of your earrings and nose studs. Now listen to the sound of your lockets and bangles.’

Yet still so few people spoke out. My father’s old rival in college politics Ihsan ul-Haq Haqqani had become a journalist in Islamabad and organised a conference on the situation in Swat. None of the lawyers and academics he invited from Swat to speak turned up. Only my father and some journalists went. It seemed that people had decided the Taliban were here to stay and they had better get along with them. ‘When you are in the Taliban you have 100 per cent life security,’ people would say. That’s why they volunteered their young men. The Taliban would come to peoples’ houses, demanding money to buy Kalashnikovs, or they would ask them to hand over their sons to fight with them. Many of the rich fled. The poor had no choice but to stay and survive the best they could. So many of our men had gone to the mines or to the Gulf to work, leaving their families fatherless, the sons were easy prey.

The threats began to come closer to home. One day Ahmad Shah received a warning from unknown people that they would kill him, so for a while he left for Islamabad to try to raise awareness there of what was happening to our valley. One of the worst things about that period was when we started to doubt one another. Fingers were even pointed at my father. ‘Our people are being killed, but this Ziauddin is so outspoken and he’s still alive! He must be a secret agent!’ Actually he had been threatened too but hadn’t told us. He had given a press conference in Peshawar demanding that the military act against the Taliban and go after their commanders. Afterwards people told him his name was heard on Mullah FM in a threat from Shah Douran.

My father brushed it off. But I was worried. He was outspoken and involved in so many groups and committees that he often wouldn’t come home till midnight. He started to sleep at one of his friend’s houses to protect us in case the Taliban came for him. He couldn’t bear the thought of being killed in front of us. I could not sleep until he returned and I could lock the gate. When he was at home my mother would place a ladder in the back yard up to the outside wall so he could get down to the street below if he was in sudden danger. He laughed at the idea. ‘Maybe Atal the squirrel could make it but not me!’

My mother was always trying to think up plans for what she would do if the Taliban came. She thought of sleeping with a knife under her pillow. I said I could sneak into the toilet and call the police. My brothers and I thought of digging a tunnel. Once again I prayed for a magic wand to make the Taliban disappear.

One day I saw my little brother Atal digging furiously in the garden. ‘What are you doing?’ I asked him. ‘Making a grave,’ he said. Our news bulletins were full of killings and death so it was natural for Atal to think of coffins and graves. Instead of hide and seek and cops and robbers, children were now playing Army vs Taliban. They made rockets from branches and used sticks for Kalashnikovs; these were their sports of terror.

There was no one to protect us. Our own deputy commissioner, Syed Javid, was going to Taliban meetings, praying in their mosque and leading their meetings. He became a perfect *talib*. One target of