

with him in case he was targeted by the Taliban. As he and my father drove back, Dr Afzal nervously asked him, ‘What names shall we give if they stop us?’

‘You are Dr Afzal and I am Ziauddin Yousafzai,’ replied my father. ‘These bloody people. We haven’t done anything wrong. Why should we change our names – that’s what criminals do.’

Fortunately the Taliban had disappeared. We all breathed a big sigh of relief when my father phoned to say they were safe.

I didn’t want to give in either. But the Taliban’s deadline was drawing closer: girls had to stop going to school. How could they stop more than 50,000 girls from going to school in the twenty-first century? I kept hoping something would happen and the schools would remain open. But finally the deadline was upon us. We were determined that the Khushal School bell would be the last to stop ringing. Madam Maryam had even got married so she could stay in Swat. Her family had moved to Karachi to get away from the conflict and, as a woman, she could not live alone.

Wednesday 14 January was the day my school closed, and when I woke up that morning I saw TV cameras in my bedroom. A Pakistani journalist called Irfan Ashraf was following me around, even as I said my prayers and brushed my teeth.

I could tell my father was in a bad mood. One of his friends had persuaded him to participate in a documentary for the *New York Times* website to show the world what was happening to us. A few weeks before, we had met the American video journalist Adam Ellick in Peshawar. It was a funny meeting as he conducted a long interview with my father in English and I didn’t say a word. Then he asked if he could talk to me and began asking questions using Irfan as an interpreter. After about ten minutes of this he realised from my facial expressions that I could understand him perfectly. ‘You speak English?’ he asked me.

‘Yes, I was just saying there is a fear in my heart,’ I replied.

Adam was astonished. ‘What’s wrong with you people?’ he asked Irfan and my father. ‘She speaks better English than the rest of you and you’re translating for her!’ We all laughed.

The original idea for the documentary had been to follow my father on the last day of school, but at the end of the meeting Irfan asked me, ‘What would you do if there comes a day when you can’t go back to your valley and school?’ I said this wouldn’t happen. Then he insisted and I started to weep. I think it was then that Adam decided he should focus on me.

Adam could not come to Swat because it was too dangerous for foreigners. When Irfan and a cameraman arrived in Mingora, our uncle, who was staying with us, said over and over that it was too risky to have cameras in our house. My father also kept telling them to hide the cameras. But they had come a long way and it’s hard for us as Pashtuns to refuse hospitality. Besides, my father knew this could be our megaphone to the outside world. His friend had told him it would make far more impact than him roaming from pillar to post.

I had done a lot of television interviews and enjoyed speaking into the microphone so much that my friends would tease me. But I had never done anything like this. ‘Be natural,’ Irfan told me. That wasn’t easy with a camera trained on me everywhere I went even as I brushed my teeth. I showed them the uniform I couldn’t wear and told them I was scared that if the Taliban caught me going to school they would throw acid in my face as they had done to girls in Afghanistan.

We had a special assembly that final morning but it was hard to hear with the noise of helicopters overhead. Some of us spoke out against what was happening in our valley. The bell rang for the very last time, and then Madam Maryam announced it was the winter holidays. But unlike in other years no