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MALALA

My story of standing up for girls' rights

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Prologue

I Am Malala

When I close my eyes, I can see my bedroom. The bed is unmade because I've rushed out for school, late for an exam. On my desk, my school schedule is open to the page dated 9 October 2012.

I can hear the neighbourhood kids playing in the alley behind our home. I can hear my little brothers fighting over the TV remote. I can smell rice cooking as my mother works in the kitchen. Then I hear my father's deep

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voice, calling out my nickname.

"***Jani***," he says, which is Persian for "dear one."

I left my beloved home in Pakistan that morning – planning to dive back into bed when I returned from school – and ended up a world away.

When I open my eyes, I am in my new bedroom. It is in a sturdy brick house in a damp and chilly place called Birmingham, England. Here, there is hardly a sound: no children laughing and yelling. No women downstairs chopping vegetables and gossiping with my mother. Through the thick walls between us, I hear someone in my family crying for home.

Then my father bursts through the front door, his voice booming. "*Jani!*" he says.

But there is worry in his voice, as if he fears I won't be there to reply. That is because it was not so long ago that somebody tried to hurt me – simply because

I was speaking out about my right to go to school.

• • • •

That day in October 2012 was an ordinary day. I was fifteen, in Year Ten, and I had overslept because I'd stayed up far too late the night before, studying for my exam.

My mother gently shook my shoulder. "Wake up, ***pisho***," she said, calling me *kitten* in ***Pashto***, the language spoken by my family's tribe, the Pashtun. "It's seven thirty, and you're late for school!"

I said a quick prayer to God. *If it is your will, **Allah**, may I please come in first on the exam? Oh, and thank you for all my success so far!*

I gulped down my breakfast while my youngest brother, Atal, whined. I was getting too much extra attention for speaking publicly about girls and boys having the same right to go to school, he complained.

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"When Malala is prime minister some day, you can be her secretary," joked my father.

"No!" cried Atal, the little clown in the family. "She will be *my* secretary!"

I raced out the door and down the lane just in time to see the school bus crammed with other girls on their way to school.

I never saw my home again.

• • • •

That afternoon, my classmates and I stared down at our tests, trying to think over the honking horns and factory noises of our home-town of Mingora. By the end of the day, I was tired but happy. I knew I had done well.

I asked my best friend, Moniba, to wait with me for the late bus, so we could talk longer.

We told jokes and laughed until we stepped into the ***dyna***, the open-backed white truck that was our Khushal

School "bus".

As usual, our bus driver, Usman Bhai Jan, had a magic trick to show us. That day, he made a pebble disappear. No matter how hard we tried, we couldn't figure out his secret.

Nineteen girls, two teachers, and I bounced along Haji Baba Road: a mix of brightly coloured rickshaws, women in flowing robes, men on scooters, honking and zigzagging through the traffic. Our bus had no windows – just a yellowed plastic sheet that flapped against the side.

We were not more than three minutes from my house when the truck stopped suddenly. It was oddly quiet outside.

"It's so calm today," I said to Moniba. "Where are all the people?"

I don't remember anything after that.

Here's the story that's been told to me:

Two young men in white robes stepped in front of our truck. One of them jumped onto the back and leaned under the plastic sheet.

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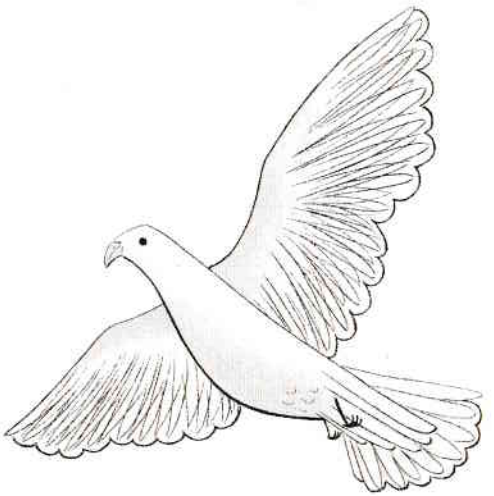
"Who is Malala?" he asked.

No one said a word, but a few girls looked in my direction. The man raised his arm and pointed at me. Some of the girls screamed, and I squeezed Moniba's hand.

Who is Malala? I am Malala, and this is my story.

PART ONE

Before the Danger



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1

As Free as a Bird

I am Malala Yousafzai, a girl like any other – although I do have my special talents.

I can crack the knuckles of my fingers and my toes whenever I want. I can beat someone twice my age at arm wrestling.

I like cupcakes but not sweets. And I don't think dark chocolate should be called chocolate at all.

I don't care for make-up and jewellery,

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and I'm not a girly girl. But my favourite colour is pink.

I say that if you check a boy's rucksack, it will always be a mess. If you check his uniform, it will be dirty. This is not my opinion. This is just a fact.

I am a Pashtun, a member of a proud tribe of people spread across Afghanistan and Pakistan. My father, Ziauddin, and my mother, Toor Pekai, are from mountain villages. After they married, they moved to Mingora, the largest city in the Swat Valley, which is in the northwest of my beloved country Pakistan.



I was born in 1997 in the Swat Valley, which is known for its beauty: its tall mountains, green hills, and crystal clear rivers.

I am named for a brave young Pashtun girl named Malalai of Maiwind in Afghanistan. In a battle hundreds of years ago, Malalai inspired warriors with her courage. But I don't believe in fighting.

I say that even though I argue with my brother Khushal all the time. He is two years younger than me. We argue over who's the better student. Over who ate the last of the Wotsits. Over whatever you can think of.

My other brother, Atal, annoys me less. He is six years younger than me. He is quite good at chasing down the cricket ball when we kick it out-of-bounds. But he also makes up his own rules sometimes.

When I was younger, and these brothers came along, I had a little talk with God. *God*, I said, *you did not check with*