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## I AM MALALA

The Girl Who Stood Up for Education  
and was Shot by the Taliban

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with Christina Lamb

Weidenfeld & Nicolson

LONDON



To all the girls who have faced injustice and been silenced.

Together we will be heard.

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[Prologue: The Day my World Changed](#)

**I COME FROM** a country which was created at midnight. When I almost died

it was just after midday.

One year ago I left my home for school and never returned. I was shot by a Taliban bullet and was flown out of Pakistan unconscious. Some people say I will never return home but I believe firmly in my heart that I will. To be torn from the country that you love is not something to wish on anyone.

Now, every morning when I open my eyes, I long to see my old room full of my things, my clothes all over the floor and my school prizes on the shelves. Instead I am in a country which is five hours behind my beloved homeland Pakistan and my home in the Swat Valley. But my country is centuries behind this one. Here there is any convenience you can imagine.

Water running from every tap, hot or cold as you wish; lights at the flick of a switch, day and night, no need for oil lamps; ovens to cook on that don't need anyone to go and fetch gas cylinders from the bazaar. Here everything is so modern one can even find food ready cooked in packets.

When I stand in front of my window and look out, I see tall buildings, long roads full of vehicles moving in orderly lines, neat green hedges and lawns, and tidy pavements to walk on. I close my eyes and for a moment I am back in my valley – the high snow-topped mountains, green waving fields and fresh blue rivers – and my heart smiles when it looks at the

people of Swat. My mind transports me back to my school and there I am reunited with my friends and teachers. I meet my best friend Moniba and we sit together, talking and joking as if I had never left.

Then I remember I am in Birmingham, England.

The day when everything changed was Tuesday, 9 October 2012. It wasn't the best of days to start with as it was the middle of school exams, though as a bookish girl I didn't mind them as much as some of my classmates.

That morning we arrived in the narrow mud lane off Haji Baba Road in our usual procession of brightly painted rickshaws, sputtering diesel fumes, each one crammed with five or six girls. Since the time of the Taliban our school has had no sign and the ornamented brass door in a white wall across from the woodcutter's yard gives no hint of what lies beyond.

For us girls that doorway was like a magical entrance to our own special world. As we skipped through, we cast off our head-scarves like winds puffing away clouds to make way for the sun then ran helter-skelter up the steps. At the top of the steps was an open courtyard with doors to all the classrooms. We dumped our backpacks in our rooms then gathered for morning assembly under the sky, our backs to the mountains as we stood to attention. One girl commanded, ' *Assaan bash!* ' or 'Stand at ease!' and we clicked our heels and responded, ' *Allah.*' Then she said, ' *Hoo she yar!*' or

‘Attention!’ and we clicked our heels again. ‘*Allah.*’

The school was founded by my father before I was born, and on the wall above us KHUSHAL SCHOOL was painted proudly in red and white letters. We

went to school six mornings a week and as a fifteen-year-old in Year 9 my classes were spent chanting chemical equations or studying Urdu grammar; writing stories in English with morals like ‘Haste makes waste’ or drawing diagrams of blood circulation – most of my classmates wanted to be doctors. It’s hard to imagine that anyone would see that as a threat. Yet, outside the door to the school lay not only the noise and craziness of Mingora, the main city of Swat, but also those like the Taliban who think girls should not go to school.

That morning had begun like any other, though a little later than usual. It was exam time so school started at nine instead of eight, which was good as I don’t like getting up and can sleep through the crows of the cocks and the prayer calls of the muezzin. First my father would try to rouse me. ‘Time to get up, *Jani mun,*’ he would say. This means ‘soulmate’ in Persian, and he always called me that at the start of the day. ‘A few more minutes, *Aba,* please,’ I’d beg, then burrow deeper under the quilt. Then my mother would come. ‘*Pisho,*’ she would call. This means ‘cat’ and is her name for me. At this point I’d realise the time and shout, ‘*Bhabi,* I’m late!’ In our culture,



every man is your ‘brother’ and every woman your ‘sister’. That’s how we think of each other. When my father first brought his wife to school, all the teachers referred to her as ‘my brother’s wife’ or *Bhabhi*. That’s how it stayed from then on. We all call her *Bhabhi* now.

I slept in the long room at the front of our house, and the only furniture was a bed and a cabinet which I had bought with some of the money I had been given as an award for campaigning for peace in our valley and the right for girls to go to school. On some shelves were all the gold-coloured plastic cups and trophies I had won for coming first in my class. Only twice had I not come top – both times when I was beaten by my class rival Malka e-Noor. I was determined it would not happen again.

The school was not far from my home and I used to walk, but since the start of last year I had been going with other girls in a rickshaw and coming home by bus. It was a journey of just five minutes along the stinky stream, past the giant billboard for Dr Humayun’s Hair Transplant Institute where we joked that one of our bald male teachers must have gone when he suddenly started to sprout hair. I liked the bus because I didn’t get as sweaty as when I walked, and I could chat with my friends and gossip with Usman Ali, the driver, who we called *Bhai Jan*, or ‘Brother’. He made us all laugh with his crazy stories.

I had started taking the bus because my mother was scared of me walking on my own. We had been getting threats all year. Some were in the newspapers, some were notes or messages passed on by people. My mother was worried about me, but the Taliban had never come for a girl and I was more concerned they would target my father as he was always speaking out against them. His close friend and fellow campaigner Zahid Khan had been shot in the face in August on his way to prayers and I knew everyone was telling my father, 'Take care, you'll be next.'

Our street could not be reached by car, so coming home I would get off the bus on the road below by the stream and go through a barred iron gate and up a flight of steps. I thought if anyone attacked me it would be on those steps. Like my father I've always been a daydreamer, and sometimes in lessons my mind would drift and I'd imagine that on the way home a terrorist might jump out and shoot me on those steps. I wondered what I would do. Maybe I'd take off my shoes and hit him, but then I'd think if I did that there would be no difference between me and a terrorist. It would be better to plead, 'OK, shoot me, but first listen to me. What you are doing is wrong. I'm not against you personally, I just want every girl to go to school.'

I wasn't scared but I had started making sure the gate was locked at night

and asking God what happens when you die. I told my best friend Moniba everything. We'd lived on the same street when we were little and been friends since primary school and we shared everything, Justin Bieber songs and Twilight movies, the best face-lightening creams. Her dream was to be a fashion designer although she knew her family would never agree to it, so she told everyone she wanted to be a doctor. It's hard for girls in our society to be anything other than teachers or doctors if they can work at all. I was different – I never hid my desire when I changed from wanting to be a doctor to wanting to be an inventor or a politician. Moniba always knew if something was wrong. 'Don't worry,' I told her. 'The Taliban have never come for a small girl.'

When our bus was called, we ran down the steps. The other girls all covered their heads before emerging from the door and climbing up into the back. The bus was actually what we call a *dyna*, a white Toyota TownAce truck with three parallel benches, one along either side and one in the middle. It was cramped with twenty girls and three teachers. I was sitting on the left between Moniba and a girl from the year below called Shazia Ramzan, holding our exam folders to our chests and our school bags under our feet.

After that it is all a bit hazy. I remember that inside the *dyna* it was hot

and sticky. The cooler days were late coming and only the faraway mountains of the Hindu Kush had a frosting of snow. The back where we sat had no windows, just thick plastic sheeting at the sides which flapped and was too yellowed and dusty to see through. All we could see was a little stamp of open sky out of the back and glimpses of the sun, at that time of day a yellow orb floating in the dust that streamed over everything.

I remember that the bus turned right off the main road at the army checkpoint as always and rounded the corner past the deserted cricket ground. I don't remember any more.

In my dreams about the shooting my father is also in the bus and he is shot with me, and then there are men everywhere and I am searching for my father.

In reality what happened was we suddenly stopped. On our left was the tomb of Sher Mohammad Khan, the finance minister of the first ruler of Swat, all overgrown with grass, and on our right the snack factory. We must have been less than 200 metres from the checkpoint.

We couldn't see in front, but a young bearded man in light-coloured clothes had stepped into the road and waved the van down.

'Is this the Khushal School bus?' he asked our driver. Usman Bhai Jan thought this was a stupid question as the name was painted on the side.

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘I need information about some children,’ said the man.

‘You should go to the office,’ said Usman Bhai Jan.

As he was speaking another young man in white approached the back of the van. ‘Look, it’s one of those journalists coming to ask for an interview,’ said Moniba. Since I’d started speaking at events with my father to campaign for girls’ education and against those like the Taliban who want to hide us away, journalists often came, even foreigners, though not like this in the road.

The man was wearing a peaked cap and had a handkerchief over his nose and mouth as if he had flu. He looked like a college student. Then he swung himself onto the tailboard at the back and leaned in right over us.

‘Who is Malala?’ he demanded.

No one said anything, but several of the girls looked at me. I was the only girl with my face not covered.

That’s when he lifted up a black pistol. I later learned it was a Colt 45.

Some of the girls screamed. Moniba tells me I squeezed her hand.

My friends say he fired three shots, one after another. The first went through my left eye socket and out under my left shoulder. I slumped forward onto Moniba, blood coming from my left ear, so the other two

bullets hit the girls next to me. One bullet went into Shazia's left hand. The third went through her left shoulder and into the upper right arm of Kainat Riaz.

My friends later told me the gunman's hand was shaking as he fired.

By the time we got to the hospital my long hair and Moniba's lap were full of blood.

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

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سوري سوري په گولو راشي د بي ننگي آواز د رame شه مینه

## PART ONE

### Before the Taliban

*Sorey sorey pa golo rashey*

*Da be nangai awaz de ra ma sha mayena*

Rather I receive your bullet-riddled body with honour

Than news of your cowardice on the battlefield

(Traditional Pashto couplet)

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## 1

### A Daughter Is Born

**WHEN I WAS** born, people in our village commiserated with my mother and

nobody congratulated my father. I arrived at dawn as the last star blinked out. We Pashtuns see this as an auspicious sign. My father didn't have any money for the hospital or for a midwife so a neighbour helped at my birth.

My parents' first child was stillborn but I popped out kicking and screaming. I was a girl in a land where rifles are fired in celebration of a son, while daughters are hidden away behind a curtain, their role in life simply to prepare food and give birth to children.

For most Pashtuns it's a gloomy day when a daughter is born. My father's cousin Jehan Sher Khan Yousafzai was one of the few who came to celebrate my birth and even gave a handsome gift of money. Yet, he brought with him a vast family tree of our clan, the Dalokhel Yousafzai, going right back to my great-great-grandfather and showing only the male line. My father, Ziauddin, is different from most Pashtun men. He took the tree, drew a line like a lollipop from his name and at the end of it he wrote, 'Malala'.

His cousin laughed in astonishment. My father didn't care. He says he looked into my eyes after I was born and fell in love. He told people, 'I know there is something different about this child.' He even asked friends to throw dried fruits, sweets and coins into my cradle, something we usually only do for boys.

I was named after Malalai of Maiwand, the greatest heroine of Afghanistan. Pashtuns are a proud people of many tribes split between Pakistan and Afghanistan. We live as we have for centuries by a code called *Pashtunwali*, which obliges us to give hospitality to all guests and in which the most important value is *nang* or honour. The worst thing that can happen to a Pashtun is loss of face. Shame is a very terrible thing for a Pashtun man. We have a saying, ‘Without honour, the world counts for nothing.’ We fight and feud among ourselves so much that our word for cousin – *tarbur* – is the same as our word for enemy. But we always come together against outsiders who try to conquer our lands. All Pashtun children grow up with the story of how Malalai inspired the Afghan army to defeat the British in 1880 in one of the biggest battles of the Second Anglo-Afghan War.

Malalai was the daughter of a shepherd in Maiwand, a small town on the dusty plains west of Kandahar. When she was a teenager, both her father and the man she was supposed to marry were among thousands of Afghans fighting against the British occupation of their country. Malalai went to the battlefield with other women from the village to tend the wounded and take them water. She saw their men were losing, and when the flag-bearer fell she lifted her white veil up high and marched onto the battlefield in front of



the troops.

‘Young love!’ she shouted. ‘If you do not fall in the battle of Maiwand then, by God, someone is saving you as a symbol of shame.’

Malalai was killed under fire, but her words and bravery inspired the men to turn the battle around. They destroyed an entire brigade, one of the worst defeats in the history of the British army. The Afghans were so proud that the last Afghan king built a Maiwand victory monument in the centre of Kabul. In high school I read some Sherlock Holmes and laughed to see that this was the same battle where Dr Watson was wounded before becoming partner to the great detective. In Malalai we Pashtuns have our very own Joan of Arc. Many girls’ schools in Afghanistan are named after her. But my grandfather, who was a religious scholar and village cleric, didn’t like my father giving me that name. ‘It’s a sad name,’ he said. ‘It means grief-stricken.’

When I was a baby my father used to sing me a song written by the famous poet Rahmat Shah Sayel of Peshawar. The last verse ends,  
O Malalai of Maiwand,  
Rise once more to make Pashtuns understand the song of honour,  
Your poetic words turn worlds around,  
I beg you, rise again

My father told the story of Malalai to anyone who came to our house. I loved hearing the story and the songs my father sang to me, and the way my name floated on the wind when people called it.

We lived in the most beautiful place in all the world. My valley, the Swat Valley, is a heavenly kingdom of mountains, gushing waterfalls and crystal-clear lakes. WELCOME TO PARADISE, it says on a sign as you enter the valley.

In olden times Swat was called Uddyana, which means ‘garden’. We have fields of wild flowers, orchards of delicious fruit, emerald mines and rivers full of trout. People often call Swat the Switzerland of the East – we even had Pakistan’s first ski resort. The rich people of Pakistan came on holiday to enjoy our clean air and scenery and our Sufi festivals of music and dancing. And so did many foreigners, all of whom we called *angrezan* – ‘English’ – wherever they came from. Even the Queen of England came, and stayed in the White Palace that was built from the same marble as the Taj Mahal by our king, the first wali of Swat.

We have a special history too. Today Swat is part of the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, or KPK, as many Pakistanis call it, but Swat used to be separate from the rest of Pakistan. We were once a princely state, one of three with the neighbouring lands of Chitral and Dir. In colonial times our kings owed allegiance to the British but ruled their own land. When the

British gave India independence in 1947 and divided it, we went with the newly created Pakistan but stayed autonomous. We used the Pakistani rupee, but the government of Pakistan could only intervene on foreign policy. The wali administered justice, kept the peace between warring tribes and collected *ushur* – a tax of ten per cent of income – with which he built roads, hospitals and schools.

We were only a hundred miles from Pakistan's capital Islamabad as the crow flies but it felt as if it was in another country. The journey took at least five hours by road over the Malakand Pass, a vast bowl of mountains where long ago our ancestors led by a preacher called Mullah Saidullah (known by the British as the Mad Fakir) battled British forces among the craggy peaks. Among them was Winston Churchill, who wrote a book about it, and we still call one of the peaks Churchill's Picket even though he was not very complimentary about our people. At the end of the pass is a green-domed shrine where people throw coins to give thanks for their safe arrival.

No one I knew had been to Islamabad. Before the troubles came, most people, like my mother, had never been outside Swat.

We lived in Mingora, the biggest town in the valley, in fact the only city. It used to be a small place but many people had moved in from surrounding villages, making it dirty and crowded. It has hotels, colleges, a golf course

and a famous bazaar for buying our traditional embroidery, gemstones and anything you can think of. The Marghazar stream loops through it, milky brown from the plastic bags and rubbish thrown into it. It is not clear like the streams in the hilly areas or like the wide River Swat just outside town, where people fished for trout and which we visited on holidays. Our house was in Gulkada, which means ‘place of flowers’, but it used to be called Butkara, or ‘place of the Buddhist statues’. Near our home was a field scattered with mysterious ruins – statues of lions on their haunches, broken columns, headless figures and, oddest of all, hundreds of stone umbrellas. Islam came to our valley in the eleventh century when Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni invaded from Afghanistan and became our ruler, but in ancient times Swat was a Buddhist kingdom. The Buddhists had arrived here in the second century and their kings ruled the valley for more than 500 years. Chinese explorers wrote stories of how there were 1,400 Buddhist monasteries along the banks of the River Swat, and the magical sound of temple bells would ring out across the valley. The temples are long gone, but almost anywhere you go in Swat, amid all the primroses and other wild flowers, you find their remains. We would often picnic among rock carvings of a smiling fat Buddha sitting cross-legged on a lotus flower. There are many stories that Lord Buddha himself came here because it is a

place of such peace, and some of his ashes are said to be buried in the valley in a giant stupa.

Our Butkara ruins were a magical place to play hide and seek. Once some foreign archaeologists arrived to do some work there and told us that in times gone by it was a place of pilgrimage, full of beautiful temples domed with gold where Buddhist kings lay buried. My father wrote a poem, ‘The Relics of Butkara’, which summed up perfectly how temple and mosque could exist side by side: ‘When the voice of truth rises from the minarets,/ The Buddha smiles,/ And the broken chain of history reconnects.’

We lived in the shadow of the Hindu Kush mountains, where the men went to shoot ibex and golden cockerels. Our house was one storey and proper concrete. On the left were steps up to a flat roof big enough for us children to play cricket on. It was our playground. At dusk my father and his friends often gathered to sit and drink tea there. Sometimes I sat on the roof too, watching the smoke rise from the cooking fires all around and listening to the nightly racket of the crickets.

Our valley is full of fruit trees on which grow the sweetest figs and pomegranates and peaches, and in our garden we had grapes, guavas and persimmons. There was a plum tree in our front yard which gave the most

delicious fruit. It was always a race between us and the birds to get to them.

The birds loved that tree. Even the woodpeckers.

For as long as I can remember my mother has talked to birds. At the back of the house was a veranda where the women gathered. We knew what it was like to be hungry so my mother always cooked extra and gave food to poor families. If there was any left she fed it to the birds. In Pashto we love to sing *tapey*, two-line poems, and as she scattered the rice she would sing one: ‘Don’t kill doves in the garden./ You kill one and the others won’t come.’

I liked to sit on the roof and watch the mountains and dream. The highest mountain of all is the pyramid-shaped Mount Elum. To us it’s a sacred mountain and so high that it always wears a necklace of fleecy clouds. Even in summer it’s frosted with snow. At school we learned that in 327 BC, even

before the Buddhists came to Swat, Alexander the Great swept into the valley with thousands of elephants and soldiers on his way from

Afghanistan to the Indus. The Swati people fled up the mountain, believing they would be protected by their gods because it was so high. But

Alexander was a determined and patient leader. He built a wooden ramp from which his catapults and arrows could reach the top of the mountain.

Then he climbed up so he could catch hold of the star of Jupiter as a symbol

of his power.

From the rooftop I watched the mountains change with the seasons. In the autumn chill winds would come. In the winter everything was white snow, long icicles hanging from the roof like daggers, which we loved to snap off. We raced around, building snowmen and snow bears and trying to catch snowflakes. Spring was when Swat was at its greenest. Eucalyptus blossom blew into the house, coating everything white, and the wind carried the pungent smell of the rice fields. I was born in summer, which was perhaps why it was my favourite time of year, even though in Mingora summer was hot and dry and the stream stank where people dumped their garbage.

When I was born we were very poor. My father and a friend had founded their first school and we lived in a shabby shack of two rooms opposite the school. I slept with my mother and father in one room and the other was for guests. We had no bathroom or kitchen, and my mother cooked on a wood fire on the ground and washed our clothes at a tap in the school. Our home was always full of people visiting from the village. Hospitality is an important part of Pashtun culture.

Two years after I was born my brother Khushal arrived. Like me he was born at home as we still could not afford the hospital, and he was named

Khushal like my father's school, after the Pashtun hero Khushal Khan Khattak, a warrior who was also a poet. My mother had been waiting for a son and could not hide her joy when he was born. To me he seemed very thin and small, like a reed that could snap in the wind, but he was the apple of her eye, her *ladla*. It seemed to me that his every wish was her command. He wanted tea all the time, our traditional tea with milk and sugar and cardamom, but even my mother tired of this and eventually made some so bitter that he lost the taste for it. She wanted to buy a new cradle for him – when I was born my father couldn't afford one so they used an old wooden one from the neighbours which was already third or fourth hand – but my father refused. 'Malala swung in that cradle,' he said. 'So can he.' Then, nearly five years later, another boy was born – Atal, bright-eyed and inquisitive like a squirrel. After that, said my father, we were complete. Three children is a small family by Swati standards, where most people have seven or eight.

I played mostly with Khushal because he was just two years younger than me, but we fought all the time. He would go crying to my mother and I would go to my father. 'What's wrong, *Jani*?' he would ask. Like him I was born double-jointed and can bend my fingers right back on themselves. And my ankles click when I walk, which makes adults squirm.



My mother is very beautiful and my father adored her as if she were a fragile china vase, never laying a hand on her, unlike many of our men. Her name Tor Pekai means ‘raven tresses’ even though her hair is chestnut brown. My grandfather, Janser Khan, had been listening to Radio Afghanistan just before she was born and heard the name. I wished I had her white-lily skin, fine features and green eyes, but instead had inherited the sallow complexion, wide nose and brown eyes of my father. In our culture we all have nicknames – aside from *Pisho*, which my mother had called me since I was a baby, some of my cousins called me *Lachi*, which is Pashto for ‘cardamom’. Black-skinned people are often called white and short people tall. We have a funny sense of humour. My father was known in the family as *Khaista dada*, which means beautiful.

When I was around four years old I asked my father, ‘*Aba*, what colour are you?’ He replied, ‘I don’t know, a bit white, a bit black.’

‘It’s like when one mixes milk with tea,’ I said.

He laughed a lot, but as a boy he had been so self-conscious about being dark-skinned that he went to the fields to get buffalo milk to spread on his face, thinking it would make him lighter. It was only when he met my mother that he became comfortable in his own skin. Being loved by such a beautiful girl gave him confidence.

In our society marriages are usually arranged by families, but theirs was a love match. I could listen endlessly to the story of how they met. They came from neighbouring villages in a remote valley in the upper Swat called Shangla and would see each other when my father went to his uncle's house to study, which was next door to that of my mother's aunt. They glimpsed enough of each other to know they liked one another, but for us it is taboo to express such things. Instead he sent her poems she could not read.

'I admired his mind,' she says.

'And me, her beauty,' he laughs.

There was one big problem. My two grandfathers did not get on. So when my father announced his desire to ask for the hand of my mother, Tor Pekai, it was clear neither side would welcome the marriage. His own father said it was up to him and agreed to send a barber as a messenger, which is the traditional way we Pashtuns do this. Malik Janser Khan refused the proposal, but my father is a stubborn man and persuaded my grandfather to send the barber again. Janser Khan's *hujra* was a gathering place for people to talk politics, and my father was often there, so they had got to know each other. He made him wait nine months but finally agreed.

My mother comes from a family of strong women as well as influential

men. Her grandmother – my great-grandmother – was widowed when her children were young, and her eldest son Janser Khan was locked up because of a tribal feud with another family when he was only nine. To get him released she walked forty miles alone over mountains to appeal to a powerful cousin. I think my mother would do the same for us. Though she cannot read or write, my father shares everything with her, telling her about his day, the good and the bad. She teases him a lot and gives him advice about who she thinks is a genuine friend and who is not, and my father says she is always right. Most Pashtun men never do this, as sharing problems with women is seen as weak. ‘He even asks his wife!’ they say as an insult. I see my parents happy and laughing a lot. People would see us and say we are a sweet family.

My mother is very pious and prays five times a day, though not in the mosque as that is only for the men. She disapproves of dancing because she says God would not like it, but she loves to decorate herself with pretty things, embroidered clothes and golden necklaces and bangles. I think I am a bit of a disappointment to her as I am so like my father and don’t bother with clothes and jewels. I get bored going to the bazaar but I love to dance behind closed doors with my school friends.

Growing up, we children spent most of our time with our mother. My

father was out a lot as he was busy, not just with his school, but also with literary societies and *jirgas*, as well as trying to save the environment, trying to save our valley. My father came from a backward village yet through education and force of personality he made a good living for us and a name for himself.

People liked to hear him talk, and I loved the evenings when guests visited. We would sit on the floor around a long plastic sheet which my mother laid with food, and eat with our right hand as is our custom, balling together rice and meat. As darkness fell we sat by the light of oil lamps, batting away the flies as our silhouettes made dancing shadows on the walls. In the summer months there would often be thunder and lightning crashing outside and I would crawl closer to my father's knee.

I would listen rapt as he told stories of warring tribes, Pashtun leaders and saints, often through poems that he read in a melodious voice, crying sometimes as he read. Like most people in Swat we are from the Yousafzai tribe. We Yousafzai (which some people spell Yusufzai or Yousufzai) are originally from Kandahar and are one of the biggest Pashtun tribes, spread across Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Our ancestors came to Swat in the sixteenth century from Kabul, where they had helped a Timurid emperor win back his throne after his own tribe

removed him. The emperor rewarded them with important positions in the court and army, but his friends and relatives warned him that the Yousafzai were becoming so powerful they would overthrow him. So one night he invited all the chiefs to a banquet and set his men on them while they were eating. Around 600 chiefs were massacred. Only two escaped, and they fled to Peshawar along with their tribesmen. After some time they went to visit some tribes in Swat to win their support so they could return to Afghanistan. But they were so captivated by the beauty of Swat they instead decided to stay there and forced the other tribes out.

The Yousafzai divided up all the land among the male members of the tribe. It was a peculiar system called *wesh* under which every five or ten years all the families would swap villages and redistribute the land of the new village among the men so that everyone had the chance to work on good as well as bad land. It was thought this would then keep rival clans from fighting. Villages were ruled by khans, and the common people, craftsmen and labourers, were their tenants. They had to pay them rent in kind, usually a share of their crop. They also had to help the khans form a militia by providing an armed man for every small plot of land. Each khan kept hundreds of armed men both for feuds and to raid and loot other villages.

As the Yousafzai in Swat had no ruler, there were constant feuds between the khans and even within their own families. Our men all have rifles, though these days they don't walk around with them like they do in other Pashtun areas, and my great-grandfather used to tell stories of gun battles when he was a boy. In the early part of the last century they became worried about being taken over by the British, who by then controlled most of the surrounding lands. They were also tired of the endless bloodshed. So they decided to try and find an impartial man to rule the whole area and resolve their disputes.

After a couple of rulers who did not work out, in 1917 the chiefs settled on a man called Miangul Abdul Wadood as their king. We know him affectionately as Badshah Sahib, and though he was completely illiterate, he managed to bring peace to the valley. Taking a rifle away from a Pashtun is like taking away his life, so he could not disarm the tribes. Instead he built forts on mountains all across Swat and created an army. He was recognised by the British as the head of state in 1926 and installed as wali, which is our word for ruler. He set up the first telephone system and built the first primary school and ended the *wesh* system because the constant moving between villages meant no one could sell land or had any incentive to build better houses or plant fruit trees.

In 1949, two years after the creation of Pakistan, he abdicated in favour of his elder son Miangul Abdul Haq Jehanzeb. My father always says, ‘While Badshah Sahib brought peace, his son brought prosperity.’ We think of Jehanzeb’s reign as a golden period in our history. He had studied in a British school in Peshawar, and perhaps because his own father was illiterate he was passionate about schools and built many, as well as hospitals and roads. In the 1950s he ended the system where people paid taxes to the khans. But there was no freedom of expression, and if anyone criticised the wali, they could be expelled from the valley. In 1969, the year my father was born, the wali gave up power and we became part of Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province, which a few years ago changed its name to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

So I was born a proud daughter of Pakistan, though like all Swatis I thought of myself first as Swati and then Pashtun, before Pakistani.

Near us on our street there was a family with a girl my age called Safina and two boys similar in age to my brothers, Babar and Basit. We all played cricket on the street or rooftops together, but I knew as we got older the girls would be expected to stay inside. We’d be expected to cook and serve our brothers and fathers. While boys and men could roam freely about town, my mother and I could not go out without a male relative to

accompany us, even if it was a five-year-old boy! This was the tradition. I had decided very early I would not be like that. My father always said, ‘Malala will be free as a bird.’ I dreamed of going to the top of Mount Elum like Alexander the Great to touch Jupiter and even beyond the valley. But, as I watched my brothers running across the roof, flying their kites and skilfully flicking the strings back and forth to cut each other’s down, I wondered how free a daughter could ever be.

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## 2

### My Father the Falcon

I ALWAYS KNEW my father had trouble with words. Sometimes they would get stuck and he would repeat the same syllable over and over like a record caught in a groove as we all waited for the next syllable to suddenly pop out. He said it felt like a wall came down in his throat. M’s, p’s and k’s were all enemies lying in wait. I teased him that one of the reasons he called me *Jani* was because he found it easier to say than Malala. A stutter was a terrible thing for a man who so loved words and poetry. On each side of the family he had an uncle with the same affliction. But it was almost certainly made worse by his father, whose own voice was a soaring instrument that could make words thunder and dance.



‘Spit it out, son!’ he’d roar whenever my father got stuck in the middle of a sentence. My grandfather’s name was Rohul Amin, which means ‘honest spirit’ and is the holy name of the Angel Gabriel. He was so proud of the name that he would introduce himself to people with a famous verse in which his name appears. He was an impatient man at the best of times and would fly into a rage over the smallest thing – like a hen going astray or a cup getting broken. His face would redden and he would throw kettles and pots around. I never knew my grandmother, but my father says she used to joke with my grandfather, ‘By God, just as you greet us only with a frown, when I die may God give you a wife who never smiles.’

My grandmother was so worried about my father’s stutter that when he was still a young boy she took him to see a holy man. It was a long journey by bus, then an hour’s walk up the hill to where he lived. Her nephew Fazli Hakim had to carry my father on his shoulders. The holy man was called Lewano Pir, Saint of the Mad, because he was said to be able to calm lunatics. When they were taken in to see the *pir*, he instructed my father to open his mouth and then spat into it. Then he took some *gur*, dark molasses made from sugar cane, and rolled it around his mouth to moisten it with spit. He then took out the lump and presented it to my grandmother to give to my father, a little each day. The treatment did not cure the stutter.

Actually some people thought it got worse. So when my father was thirteen and told my grandfather he was entering a public speaking competition he was stunned. ‘How can you?’ Rohul Amin asked, laughing. ‘You take one or two minutes to utter just one sentence.’

‘Don’t worry,’ replied my father. ‘You write the speech and I will learn it.’

My grandfather was famous for his speeches. He taught theology in the government high school in the village of Shahpur. He was also an imam at the local mosque. He was a mesmerising speaker. His sermons at Friday prayers were so popular that people would come down from the mountains by donkey or on foot to hear him.

My father comes from a large family. He had one much older brother, Saeed Ramzan who I call Uncle *Khan dada*, and five sisters. Their village of Barkana was very primitive and they lived crammed together in a one-storey ramshackle house with a mud roof which leaked whenever it rained or snowed. As in most families, the girls stayed at home while the boys went to school. ‘They were just waiting to be married,’ says my father. School wasn’t the only thing my aunts missed out on. In the morning when my father was given cream or milk, his sisters were given tea with no milk. If there were eggs, they would only be for the boys. When a chicken

was slaughtered for dinner, the girls would get the wings and the neck while the luscious breast meat was enjoyed by my father, his brother and my grandfather. 'From early on I could feel I was different from my sisters,' my father says.

There was little to do in my father's village. It was too narrow even for a cricket pitch and only one family had a television. On Fridays the brothers would creep into the mosque and watch in wonder as my grandfather stood in the pulpit and preached to the congregation for an hour or so, waiting for the moment when his voice would rise and practically shake the rafters.

My grandfather had studied in India, where he had seen great speakers and leaders including Mohammad Ali Jinnah (the founder of Pakistan), Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, our great Pashtun leader who campaigned for independence. *Baba*, as I called him, had even witnessed the moment of freedom from the British colonialists at midnight on 14 August 1947. He had an old radio set my uncle still has, on which he loved to listen to the news. His sermons were often illustrated by world events or historical happenings as well as stories from the Quran and the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet. He also liked to talk about politics. Swat became part of Pakistan in 1969, the year my father was born. Many Swatis were unhappy about this, complaining about

the Pakistani justice system, which they said was much slower and less effective than their old tribal ways. My grandfather would rail against the class system, the continuing power of the khans and the gap between the haves and have-nots.

My country may not be very old but unfortunately it already has a history of military coups, and when my father was eight a general called Zia ul-Haq seized power. There are still many pictures of him around. He was a scary man with dark panda shadows around his eyes, large teeth that seemed to stand to attention and hair pomaded flat on his head. He arrested our elected prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and had him tried for treason then hanged from a scaffold in Rawalpindi jail. Even today people talk of Mr Bhutto as a man of great charisma. They say he was the first Pakistani leader to stand up for the common people, though he himself was a feudal lord with vast estates of mango fields. His execution shocked everybody and made Pakistan look bad all around the world. The Americans cut off aid.

To try to get people at home to support him, General Zia launched a campaign of Islamisation to make us a proper Muslim country with the army as the defenders of our country's ideological as well as geographical frontiers. He told our people it was their duty to obey his government

because it was pursuing Islamic principles. Zia even wanted to dictate how we should pray, and set up *salat* or prayer committees in every district, even in our remote village, and appointed 100,000 prayer inspectors. Before then mullahs had almost been figures of fun – my father said at wedding parties they would just hang around in a corner and leave early – but under Zia they became influential and were called to Islamabad for guidance on sermons. Even my grandfather went.

Under Zia's regime life for women in Pakistan became much more restricted. Jinnah said, 'No struggle can ever succeed without women participating side by side with men. There are two powers in the world; one is the sword and the other is the pen. There is a third power stronger than both, that of women.' But General Zia brought in Islamic laws which reduced a woman's evidence in court to count for only half that of a man's. Soon our prisons were full of cases like that of a thirteen-year-old girl who was raped and become pregnant and was then sent to prison for adultery because she couldn't produce four male witnesses to prove it was a crime. A woman couldn't even open a bank account without a man's permission. As a nation we have always been good at hockey, but Zia made our female hockey players wear baggy trousers instead of shorts, and stopped women playing some sports altogether.

Many of our madrasas or religious schools were opened at that time, and in all schools religious studies, what we call *deeniyat*, was replaced by *Islamiyat*, or Islamic studies, which children in Pakistan still have to do today. Our history textbooks were rewritten to describe Pakistan as a ‘fortress of Islam’, which made it seem as if we had existed far longer than since 1947, and denounced Hindus and Jews. Anyone reading them might think we won the three wars we have fought and lost against our great enemy India.

Everything changed when my father was ten. Just after Christmas 1979 the Russians invaded our neighbour Afghanistan. Millions of Afghans fled across the border and General Zia gave them refuge. Vast camps of white tents sprang up mostly around Peshawar, some of which are still there today. Our biggest intelligence service belongs to the military and is called the ISI. It started a massive programme to train Afghan refugees recruited from the camps as resistance fighters or mujahideen. Though Afghans are renowned fighters, Colonel Imam, the officer heading the programme, complained that trying to organise them was ‘like weighing frogs’.

The Russian invasion transformed Zia from an international pariah to the great defender of freedom in the Cold War. The Americans became friends with us once again, as in those days Russia was their main enemy. Next

door to us the Shah of Iran had been overthrown in a revolution a few months earlier so the CIA had lost their main base in the region. Pakistan took its place. Billions of dollars flowed into our exchequer from the United States and other Western countries, as well as weapons to help the ISI train the Afghans to fight the communist Red Army. General Zia was invited to meet President Ronald Reagan at the White House and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher at 10 Downing Street. They lavished praise on him. Prime Minister Zulfikar Bhutto had appointed Zia as his army chief because he thought he was not very intelligent and would not be a threat. He called him his 'monkey'. But Zia turned out to be a very wily man. He made Afghanistan a rallying point not only for the West, which wanted to stop the spread of communism from the Soviet Union, but also for Muslims from Sudan to Tajikistan, who saw it as a fellow Islamic country under attack from infidels. Money poured in from all over the Arab world, particularly Saudi Arabia, which matched whatever the US sent, and volunteer fighters too, including a Saudi millionaire called Osama bin Laden.

We Pashtuns are split between Pakistan and Afghanistan and don't really recognise the border that the British drew more than 100 years ago. So our blood boiled over the Soviet invasion for both religious and nationalist

reasons. The clerics of the mosques would often talk about the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in their sermons, condemning the Russians as infidels and urging people to join the jihad, saying it was their duty as good Muslims. It was as if under Zia jihad had become the sixth pillar of our religion on top of the five we grow up to learn – the belief in one God, *namaz* or prayers five times a day, giving *zakat* or alms, *roza* – fasting from dawn till sunset during the month of Ramadan – and *haj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, which every able-bodied Muslim should do once in their lifetime. My father says that in our part of the world this idea of jihad was very much encouraged by the CIA. Children in the refugee camps were even given school textbooks produced by an American university which taught basic arithmetic through fighting. They had examples like, ‘If out of 10 Russian infidels, 5 are killed by one Muslim, 5 would be left’ or ‘15 bullets – 10 bullets = 5 bullets’.

Some boys from my father’s district went off to fight in Afghanistan. My father remembers that one day a *maulana* called Sufi Mohammad came to the village and asked young men to join him to fight the Russians in the name of Islam. Many did, and they set off, armed with old rifles or just axes and bazookas. Little did we know that years later the same *maulana*’s organisation would become the Swat Taliban. At that time my father was