

# I Am Malala

How One Girl Stood Up  
for Education and  
Changed the World

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## PROLOGUE

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When I close my eyes, I can see my bedroom. The bed is unmade, my fluffy blanket in a heap, because I've rushed out for school, late for an exam. My school schedule is open on my desk to a page dated 9 October 2012. And my school uniform—my white *shalwar* and blue *kamiz*—is on a peg on the wall, waiting for me.

I can hear the neighborhood kids playing cricket in the alley behind our home. I can hear the hum of the bazaar not far away. And if I listen very closely, I can hear Safina, my friend next door, tapping on the wall we share so she can tell me a secret.

I smell rice cooking as my mother works in the kitchen. I hear my little brothers fighting over the remote—the TV switching between *WWE SmackDown* and cartoons. Soon I'll hear my father's deep voice as he calls out my nickname.

“*Jani*,” he’ll say, which is Persian for “dear one.” “How was the school running today?” He was asking how things were at the Khushal School for Girls, which he founded and I attended, but I always took the opportunity to answer the question literally.

“*Aba*,” I’d joke. “The school is walking, not running!” This was my way of telling him I thought things could be better.

I left that beloved home in Pakistan one morning—planning to dive back under the covers as soon as school let out—and ended up a world away.

Some people say it is too dangerous for me to go back there now. That I’ll never be able to return. And so, from time to time, I go there in my mind.

But now another family lives in that home, another girl sleeps in that bedroom—while I am thousands of miles away. I don’t care much about the other things in my room, but I do worry about the school trophies on my bookcase. I even dream about them sometimes. There’s a runners-up award from the first speaking contest I ever entered. And more than forty-five golden cups and medals for being first in my class in exams, debates, and competitions. To someone else, they might seem mere trinkets made of plastic. To someone else, they may simply look like prizes for good grades. But to me, they are reminders of the life I loved and the girl I was—before I left home that fateful day.

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

## PROLOGUE

Birmingham, England. Here there is water running from every tap, hot or cold as you like. No need to carry cans of gas from the market to heat the water. Here there are large rooms with shiny wood floors, filled with large furniture and a large, large TV.

There is hardly a sound in this calm, leafy suburb. No children laughing and yelling. No women downstairs chopping vegetables and gossiping with my mother. No men smoking cigarettes and debating politics. Sometimes, though, even with these thick walls between us, I can hear someone in my family crying for home. But then my father will burst through the front door, his voice booming. “*Jani!*” he’ll say. “How was school today?”

Now there’s no play on words. He’s not asking about the school he runs and I attend. But there’s a note of worry in his voice, as if he fears I won’t be there to reply. Because it was not so long ago that I was nearly killed—simply because I was speaking out about my right to go to school.

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It was the most ordinary of days. I was fifteen, in grade nine, and I’d stayed up far too late the night before, studying for an exam.

I’d already heard the rooster crow at dawn but had fallen back to sleep. I’d heard the morning call to prayer from the mosque nearby but managed to hide under my quilt. And I’d

pretended not to hear my father come to wake me.

Then my mother came and gently shook my shoulder. “Wake up, *pisho*,” she said, calling me *kitten* in Pashto, the language of the Pashtun people. “It’s seven thirty and you’re late for school!”

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

I gulped down a bit of fried egg and chapati with my tea. My youngest brother, Atal, was in an especially cheeky mood that morning. He was complaining about all the attention I’d received for speaking out about girls getting the same education as boys, and my father teased him a little at the breakfast table.

“When Malala is prime minister someday, you can be her secretary,” he said.

Atal, the little clown in the family, pretended to be cross. “No!” he cried. “She will be *my* secretary!”

All this banter nearly made me late, and I raced out the door, my half-eaten breakfast still on the table. I ran down the lane just in time to see the school bus crammed with other girls on their way to school. I jumped in that Tuesday morning and never looked back at my home.

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The ride to school was quick, just five minutes up the road and along the river. I arrived on time, and exam day passed as

## PROLOGUE

it always did. The chaos of Mingora city surrounded us with its honking horns and factory noises while we worked silently, bent over our papers in hushed concentration. By day's end I was tired but happy; I knew I'd done well on my test.

"Let's stay on for the second trip," said Moniba, my best friend. "That way we can chat a little longer." We always liked to stay on for the late pickup.

For days I'd had a strange, gnawing feeling that something bad was going to happen. One night I'd found myself wondering about death. *What is being dead really like?* I wanted to know. I was alone in my room, so I turned toward Mecca and asked God. "What happens when you die?" I said. "How would it feel?"

If I died, I wanted to be able to tell people what it felt like. "Malala, you silly girl," I said to myself then, "you'd be dead and you couldn't tell people what it was like."

Before I went to bed, I asked God for one more thing. *Can I die a little bit and come back, so I can tell people about it?*

But the next day had dawned bright and sunny, and so had the next one and the one after that. And now I knew I'd done well on my exam. Whatever cloud had been hanging over my head had begun to clear away. So Moniba and I did what we always did: We had a good gossip. What face cream was she using? Had one of the male teachers gone for a baldness cure? And, now that the first exam was over, how difficult would the next one be?

When our bus was called, we ran down the steps. As usual,

Moniba and the other girls covered their heads and faces before we stepped outside the gate and got into the waiting *dyna*, the white truck that was our Khushal School “bus.” And, as usual, our driver was ready with a magic trick to amuse us. That day, he made a pebble disappear. No matter how hard we tried, we couldn’t figure out his secret.

We piled inside, twenty girls and two teachers crammed into the three rows of benches stretching down the length of the *dyna*. It was hot and sticky, and there were no windows, just a yellowed plastic sheet that flapped against the side as we bounced along Mingora’s crowded rush-hour streets.

Haji Baba Road was a jumble of brightly colored rickshaws, women in flowing robes, men on scooters, honking and zigzagging through the traffic. We passed a shopkeeper butchering chickens. A boy selling ice-cream cones. A billboard for Dr. Humayun’s Hair Transplant Institute. Moniba and I were deep in conversation. I had many friends, but she was the friend of my heart, the one with whom I shared everything. That day, when we were talking about who would get the highest marks this term, one of the other girls started a song, and the rest of us joined in.

Just after we passed the Little Giants snack factory and the bend in the road not more than three minutes from my house, the van slowed to a halt. It was oddly quiet outside.

“It’s so calm today,” I said to Moniba. “Where are all the people?”

## PROLOGUE

I don't remember anything after that, but here's the story that's been told to me:

Two young men in white robes stepped in front of our truck.

"Is this the Khushal School bus?" one of them asked.

The driver laughed. The name of the school was painted in black letters on the side.

The other young man jumped onto the tailboard and leaned into the back, where we were all sitting.

"Who is Malala?" he asked.

No one said a word, but a few girls looked in my direction. He 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.

The author and the publisher have made every effort to ensure that the information in this book is correct. The events, locales, and conversations are based on the author's memories of them. Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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Map by John Gilkes

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