

I am Malala

Chapter 1: A Daughter is Born

By Malala Yousafzai

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 neighbor 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 crosslegged 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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