

'I Am Malala': Excerpt of the Prologue

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 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?"

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.