



"I am Malala"
How One Girl Stood Up
for Education and Changed the World

Read the following passage and answer the questions that follow:

Even when I was only seven or eight, I was considered a sophisticated city girl, and sometimes my cousins teased me because I didn't like to go barefoot and I wore clothes bought at the bazaar, not homemade like theirs. I had a city accent and spoke city slang, so they thought I was modern. If only they knew. People from real cities like Peshawar or Islamabad would have thought *me* very backward.

When I was in the village, though, I lived the life of a country girl. In the morning, I got up when the rooster crowed or when I heard the clatter of dishes as the women downstairs made breakfast for the men. Then all the children spilled out of the houses to greet the day. We ate honey straight from the hive and green plums sprinkled with salt. None of us had any toys or books, so we played hopscotch and cricket in a gully.

In the afternoon the boys would go off fishing while we girls went down to a stream to play our favorite game: Wedding. We would choose a bride and then prepare her for the ceremony. We draped her in bangles and necklaces and painted her face with makeup and her hands with henna. Once she was ready to be given to the groom, she would pretend to cry, and we would stroke her hair and tell her not to worry. Sometimes we would fall down laughing.

But life for the women in the mountains was not easy. There were no proper shops, no universities, no hospitals or female doctors, no clean water or electricity from the government. Many of the men had left the villages to work on road crews and in mines far, far away, sending money home when they could. Sometimes the men never made it back.

The women of the village also had to hide their faces whenever they left their homes. And they

could not meet or speak to men who were not their close relatives. None of them could read. Even my own mother, who'd grown up in the village, couldn't read. It is not at all uncommon for women in my country to be illiterate, but to see my mother, a proud and intelligent woman, struggle to read the prices in the bazaar was an unspoken sadness for both of us, I think.

Many of the girls in the village—including most of my own cousins—didn't go to school. Some fathers don't even think of their daughters as valued members of their families, because they'll be married off at a young age to live with their husband's family. "Why send a daughter to school?" the men often say. "She doesn't need an education to run a house."

I would never talk back to my elders. In my culture, one must never disrespect one's elders—even if they are wrong.

But when I saw how hard these women's lives were, I was confused and sad. Why were women treated so poorly in our country?

I asked my father this, and he told me that life was even worse for women in Afghanistan, where a group called the Taliban had taken over the country. Schools for girls had been burned to the ground, and all women were forced to wear a severe form of *burqa*, a head-to-toe veil that had only a tiny fabric grille for their eyes. Women were banned from laughing out loud or wearing nail polish, and they were beaten or jailed for walking without a male family member.

I shuddered when he told me such things and thanked God that I lived in Pakistan, where a girl was free to go to school.

It was the first time I'd heard of the Taliban. What I didn't realize was that they weren't only in Afghanistan. There was another group in Pakistan, not far away in the tribal belt (known as the FATA). Some of them were Pashtuns, like us, and they would soon come to cast a dark shadow over my sunny childhood.

But my father told me not to worry. "I will protect your freedom, Malala," he said. "Carry on with your dreams."