

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 or 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. ! - Now → Pakistan is behind the times!

* 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. ? Why?

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 KHUSHAI 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