

Who is Malala?

ONE MORNING IN late summer when my father was getting ready to go to school he noticed that the painting of me looking at the sky which we had been given by the school in Karachi had shifted in the night. He loved that painting and had hung it over his bed. Seeing it crooked disturbed him. 'Please put it straight,' he asked my mother in an unusually sharp tone.

That same week our maths teacher Miss Shazia arrived at school in a hysterical state. She told my father that she'd had a nightmare in which I came to school with my leg badly burned and she had tried to protect it. She begged him to give some cooked rice to the poor, as we believe that if you give rice, even ants and birds will eat the bits that drop to the floor and will pray for us. My father gave money instead and she was distraught, saying that wasn't the same.

We laughed at Miss Shazia's premonition, but then I started having bad dreams too. I didn't say anything to my parents but whenever I went out I was afraid that Taliban with guns would leap out at me or throw acid in my face, as they had done to women in Afghanistan. I was particularly scared of the steps leading up to our street where the boys used to hang out. Sometimes I thought I heard footsteps behind me or imagined figures slipping into the shadows.

Unlike my father, I took precautions. At night I would wait until everyone was asleep – my mother, my father, my brothers, the other family in our house and any guests we had from our village – then I'd check every single door and window. I'd go outside and make sure the front gate was locked. Then I would check all the rooms, one by one. My room was at the front with lots of windows and I kept the curtains open. I wanted to be able to see everything, though my father told me not to. 'If they were going to kill me they would have done it in 2009,' I said. But I worried someone would put a ladder against the house, climb over the wall and break in through a window.

Then I'd pray. At night I used to pray a lot. The Taliban think we are not Muslims but we are. We believe in God more than they do and we trust him to protect us. I used to say the *Ayat al-Kursi*, the Verse of the Throne from the second *surah* of the Quran, the Chapter of the Cow. This is a very special verse and we believe that if you say it three times at night your home will be safe from *shayatin* or devils. When you say it five times your street will be safe, and seven times will protect the whole area. So I'd say it seven times or even more. Then I'd pray to God, 'Bless us. First our father and family, then our street, then our whole *mohalla*, then all Swat.' Then I'd say, 'No, all Muslims.' Then, 'No, not just Muslims; bless all human beings.'

The time of year I prayed most was during exams. It was the one time when my friends and I did all five prayers a day like my mother was always trying to get me to do. I found it particularly hard in the afternoon, when I didn't want to be dragged away from the TV. At exam time I prayed to Allah for high marks though our teachers used to warn us, 'God won't give you marks if you don't work hard. God showers us with his blessings but he is honest as well.'

So I studied hard too. Usually I liked exams as a chance to show what I could do. But when they came round in October 2012 I felt under pressure. I did not want to come second to Malka-e-Noor again as I had in March. Then she had beaten me by not just one or two marks, the usual difference between us, but by five marks! I had been taking extra lessons with Sir Amjad who ran the boys'