

RAISING MY VOICE

THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY
OF THE AFGHAN WOMAN WHO
DARES TO SPEAK OUT

MALALAI JOYA
WITH
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RIDER

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CHAPTER 1

THE ROAD FROM FARAH

I WAS BORN IN THE SMALL VILLAGE of Ziken in the mountainous Anardara district of western Afghanistan on 25 April 1978. Three days later a Soviet-backed coup changed the course of our lives for ever. Within a year we were an occupied country, and since then war is all we Afghans have known.

I am the second born of ten children, and the eldest of seven daughters. Although my family has suffered many deprivations, the only commodity that has never been in short supply is love. But we often lived in fear. One of my earliest memories is of clinging to my mother's legs while policemen ransacked our house, looking for my father. They turned the place upside down searching for clues, emptying everything out of our drawers and suitcases and ripping open mattresses and pillows. But my mother did not know where he was either. He had lost a leg while fighting with the mujahideen against the Soviet occupiers. Then he had to flee Afghanistan. My family thought he was living in exile in Iran, but no one had heard from him in many months. Already, the neighbours were calling my mother a widow. My grandfather told her not to give up hope, but truly they did not know whether my father was alive or dead.

Soon after my birth, my family moved to Farah City, in the

province of the same name, which borders on Iran. It is a poor, sparsely populated region, plagued by drought and windstorms. Only half a million people live in the whole province; 50,000 of them in the area around Farah City. These days Farah is mostly out of sight and out of mind of the capital, Kabul, but there was a time when great armies poured through the wide river valley along the road between the ancient cities of Herat and Kandahar. Darius I of Persia once ruled here. The ruins of a mud-brick citadel, known as Infidel's Castle, built by Alexander the Great still stand in Farah, in the shadow of the mountains. Later, Genghis Khan sacked Farah on his march through Afghanistan. More recently, the British Empire tried to swallow Afghanistan, as did the Soviets. And now the Americans and their European allies. Afghanistan has always been on the route of conquerors because of its strategic location at the crossroads of Central Asia, perched between India and Russia, Persia and China. There is a wise saying in Africa: 'When elephants fight, it is the grass that is trampled.' Afghanistan has been that grass, but it never stays trampled for long. A longing for freedom beats in every Afghan's heart, and we have eventually repelled every foreign occupier. This is something the United States government might consider as it rains bombs on our villages in the name of liberating us.

As I have said, I can't tell you the real names of my parents or close relatives. Because of my outspoken politics, it would put my whole family in danger. But I can tell you that my father is an educated man who believes in democracy. He attended post-secondary school and even studied to become a doctor at Kabul University, but his involvement in politics and the persecution that came with the Soviet Union's invasion in 1979 meant that he never got the chance to practise medicine.

My mother, on the other hand, did not have the opportunity to get an education. Her life has not been easy. Both her parents died when she was still young, and so she had to take care of both her own children and some of her younger siblings. She had

two older brothers who became the family breadwinners. My maternal grandfather had been an honest and well-respected tribal leader, or Malik, for forty years. The people of Ziken called him the 'stick holder', because he was famous for having beaten someone with his stick after he saw him taking a bribe. Even though tribal heads in Afghanistan are among the richest men, my grandfather was too honest to keep anything for himself. When he died nothing was left for his children, but the surrounding villages helped support my mother and her siblings. When my mother was born, the families arranged for her to marry my father. This custom remains common in the villages of Afghanistan today.

I am often asked by reporters to describe my ethnic background and I always tell them 'I am an Afghan. Tajik, Pashtun, Hazara, Uzbek, Nooristani, Baluch, Pashae and other ethnic groups are all the same for me.' In Ziken, Pashtuns and Tajiks mixed, intermarried and lived in brotherhood. I prefer not to play into the hands of those who would use religious and tribal differences to divide us. A divided country is easiest for outsiders to control, and that is something I have fought against all my life.

My parents named me Malalai, a popular name in Afghanistan. It was given to me as a tribute to one of the great freedom fighters from our country's history: Malalai of Maiwand. In our schools and in our homes, all Afghan children learn of Malalai's bravery and sacrifice in our struggle for independence against the British Empire. In 1880, during the Second Anglo-Afghan War, she was a very young and patriotic woman who went to the front lines to tend to the wounded during an important battle against British colonial forces at Maiwand, in Kandahar Province. At a key point when the British had gained the upper hand and the Afghan fighters were becoming demoralised, she took over from a fallen flag bearer and led the men back into battle. Malalai encouraged the Afghan fighters with defiant and poetic words:

*Young love! If you do not fall in the battle of Maiwand then
By God, someone is saving you as a symbol of shame!*

Malalai of Maiwand was struck down soon after, sacrificing her life to inspire the resistance fighters who delivered the British a stunning defeat. Nearly 3,000 Afghans died, but an entire British brigade was destroyed, and this victory was an important landmark in our country's struggle for independence. My parents named me Malalai because my father was a strong supporter of democracy and human rights at a time when these values were also under siege.

Although he would later become the most important influence in my life, in my first years I did not know my father. Because of the political situation in the country, he often had to live apart from us in hiding. Father was part of the politically active generation that came of age during the time known as the 'constitutional period', from 1964 to 1973.

In 1964 King Zahir Shah, under pressure from mass movements, introduced a new constitution that maintained the monarchy's ultimate control but included provisions ensuring women's rights and the creation of an elected parliament. Many new political parties were formed in these years, and the campuses became hotbeds of political activity. Islamic fundamentalists, nationalist reformers and communists were able to organise, up to a point. Even though my father was independent of any political party, he was very active in the democracy and human rights movements, and had been since he began attending university in 1972.

This brief period of relative tolerance ended in 1973, when the king was overthrown by his cousin Mohammed Daoud Khan, who declared himself president and Afghanistan a republic. In 1978, Daoud himself was killed in the coup d'état called the 'Saur' or 'April' Revolution by its Russian-backed leaders in the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which had earlier helped him to kick out the king. This coup ushered in the period

of direct Soviet intervention in Afghan affairs. The pro-Russian PDPA and its two major factions, Khalq and Parcham, were ruthless in repressing and killing their opponents – as well as each other – in mass purges. Noor Mohammad Taraki, the first Russian puppet was soon killed by Hafizullah Amin, who ruled briefly until 1979. When Soviet troops rolled into Kabul, they killed Amin and installed a more reliable puppet, Babrak Karmal, as ruler of Afghanistan.

While he studied medicine in Kabul during those years, my father became known as a strong supporter of democracy and an opponent of both the monarchy and the Soviet puppets. The authorities knew about my father and his activities.

But his own father did not always realise the extent of his involvement.

One day, when my father was back home in Farah, some government officials came to complain to my grandfather about his son's activities. Grandfather was a very religious man who ran a small pharmacy to support his family. He was a respected elder in our community, very well known in Farah, and his door was open to everyone. On this day, however, he did not like what his visitors told him.

'Your son has been involved in some of the student demonstrations at the university.'

'No, I don't think so. My son only goes to school to study,' Grandfather said.

But the government men explained that in fact my father had been a speaker at a number of protests, and was scheduled to speak again the next day in Farah. They told Grandfather that his son's involvement in the student movement was well known to police intelligence and that he could find himself in jail if he didn't cut out these extra-curricular activities. Grandfather was upset and worried for the safety of my father, ordering him to stay home the next day.

To emphasise how serious he was, Grandfather added that if he went he would not be forgiven, nor let back into the house. In

fact, that night, Grandfather even locked the door to my father's room from the outside!

My father, however, was very determined to participate in the demonstration. He stuffed towels and pillows under the bed covers and, with the help of a cousin, snuck out through the bedroom window. Until lunchtime or so, Grandfather just thought he was sleeping in. But when he discovered he had been deceived, he was very angry. He also prayed for my father's safety. For a week my father did not return home, in order to show respect for Grandfather's anger towards him. In the end, he was forgiven and taken back into the house.

My father took many risks during these years, and was jailed for sixteen months in the early 1970s, delaying his medical studies. He finally had to leave school in 1979, when Soviet tanks and troops poured into Afghanistan.

Like many young men my father joined the fight against the invasion. While I was still an infant he began to train with the local mujahideen. Like many such groups that rose up in the villages, they were largely self-organised with limited resources. Uncle Azad,* my mother's brother, also joined the freedom fighters, and he often travelled alongside Father during their clandestine operations in the province.

One night their headquarters in the mountains near our village was attacked by Soviet troops. After days of heavy fighting, the mujahideen ran out of food and ammunition, so they had to retreat. Before they left, the Russian troops destroyed the headquarters and planted anti-personnel mines everywhere, including around the bodies of thirteen slain mujahideen. Father and Uncle Azad took on the grisly mission of retrieving the bodies for their families. Before they could finish the job, Father stepped on one of the landmines. The force of the explosion knocked him uncon-

* I have changed this and other names in this book for security reasons

scious, and when he woke up in the field, his left leg had been shattered by the blast, and he was bleeding profusely. Luckily, Uncle Azad was nearby, and he reacted quickly and helped tie a tourniquet to stem the bleeding. In fact, Father was able to give instructions for his own treatment, and this is one of the reasons he survived. After a dangerous thirty-hour journey by car to Iran, Uncle Azad managed to get Father to a hospital. Today, the same uncle who saved my father's life is the head of my security.

To keep Father alive, the doctors had to amputate part of his leg. In fact, they had to operate three times. He was one of hundreds of thousands of Afghans who lost a limb during the long war against the Soviets. A 2005 survey conducted by Handicap International put the number of 'severely disabled' Afghans at up to 867,000 people. And landmines like the one that maimed Father still lie buried in fields throughout the country, injuring children and farmers, continuing their evil work long after their makers have gone home.

As you can imagine, Father's injury was a traumatic and difficult thing for my mother, too. To make matters worse, shortly after he sustained this injury it became too risky for him to live with us at all. The Soviets and their Afghan puppets were killing thousands of opponents during this time. During the brief rule of Hafizullah Amin, the puppet regime itself issued a list of over 12,000 people it said were killed in prisons and blamed Noor Mohammad Taraki for it. My father lost many of his friends and colleagues, and he knew the pro-Soviet forces wanted to do away with him as well. So, sadly, he had to leave our family home and live in exile.

When my father left, his older brother, my Uncle Babak, looked after and provided for our family. Retired, he returned to work as a teacher to support us. Since this happened when I was just an infant, I did not have a clear understanding of our relationship and started calling my uncle 'Baba', which means 'Daddy' in Dari. All my life Uncle Babak has been very close to me and to our whole family. Even though he was not a political person, this

uncle was jailed three times and tortured because of my father's activities against the Soviet occupation. The authorities were punishing him because he would not give information on the whereabouts of his brother. Later, my activism caused him to be harassed by some. He had a severe heart condition, which could only have been treated abroad. Uncle Babak died in July 2006. His loss was a tough blow for my whole family. And it still troubles me that I was not in a position to be able to pay for his treatment.

But as much as he loved his brother, Uncle Babak was in many ways very different from Father. My father was unlike most Afghan men his age, and we did not have male domination in our household. My uncle preferred girls to cover their head with a scarf when men came to the house – for my father it didn't matter. One day my uncle bought me a scarf and he asked me to wear it. He also didn't like me to shake hands with males.

As a little girl, I was very close to my paternal grandmother, who also lived in Farah. Most of what I know about her comes from the stories of others. She loved me a lot, and at meals I would often share food from her dish. This was a great treat, because, in our tradition, elderly people always get the best food. Grandmother once told my mother that, after she died, she wanted me to go to her grave, put water on it and shout three times. 'I want to hear her voice,' she said.

In the days when my father was in exile, my grandparents still lived with us. My grandfather remained very active even in old age. As kids, we were told he was over a hundred years old. But you have to understand that in Afghanistan many people's birthdates are not recorded, and there is often some exaggeration of ages. He had a way with words, and loved to talk to new people wherever he went. In a way he was our family's first 'politician'. I like to think that I picked up some of these traits from him.

Grandfather was an extremely hospitable and unselfish man who always put others ahead of himself. I was told as a child a story well known in our family: Grandfather was hosting some

friends for lunch, and food was about to be served when he received terrible news – his twelve-year-old son, my father's eldest brother, who had fallen gravely ill, had died. Rather than break the news to his guests right away, Grandfather made sure everyone enjoyed their meal first. It was only after the meal and pleasant conversation was finished that he shared the tragedy, and everyone cried together and comforted each other for the terrible loss. He was well loved in our community.

When government police officers came to search our house and interrogate us about my father's whereabouts, Grandfather would often make them ashamed of their actions. He appealed to their sense of patriotism and pride to make them see that they were serving the wrong master. 'It is a shame that Afghans are fighting and killing Afghans,' he would say.

'Sorry, Grandfather,' the policemen often replied, 'but we are just doing our job.'

On some of these occasions when the authorities came to our home, Grandfather would recite and even improvise poetry, speaking verses that combined religious and political ideas. He had a creative talent for writing and recitation, and he was an excellent communicator.

Once some policemen pleaded *their* case to my grandfather. 'We are good people,' they declared righteously. 'We are just doing what we have to do.'

Grandfather responded right away: 'Yes, you are right. We are truly the ones who are bad people. Please forgive us.'

The policemen became so embarrassed that they left.

Another time the police were looking at our display of photos, which featured many of my father's university friends and colleagues who had since been killed or thrown in jail. When one of the policemen pointed at my father's picture and asked harshly 'Where is this man?', my grandfather's response was to recite a very beautiful and patriotic poem.

When he was finished some of the policemen had tears in their eyes, and again they left as quickly as they could.

On some occasions, however, the police were far more brutal. We heard stories of times when the authorities even killed children and babies in their cradles while going through the houses of suspected dissidents.

These years were, as you can imagine, very hard on my mother emotionally. Soon after my father lost his leg, as I have already mentioned, he had to leave Afghanistan entirely. We believed that he had taken refuge in neighbouring Iran, but there were long periods of time when Mother had no news at all from her husband. There was a war raging through our country and we had no means to communicate or even to receive messages.

Mother began to fear the worst. Then, when I was four years old, Uncle Azad, my mother's brother, arrived one day with dramatic news: my father was still alive! Uncle also carried the message that it was time for all of us to leave at once and join him in Iran. Mother could not believe her ears, could not believe that her husband was really alive.

The war with Russia was only getting worse. The bitter conflict showed no sign of ending soon and, by 1982, already tens of thousands of Afghans were pouring out of the country to escape the war and its brutalities. Our family joined this exodus. We packed up what we could carry and left Farah Province and Afghanistan behind us. Uncle Azad, Mother, my older brother and young sister – we all piled into a car for the journey to Iran. We said goodbye to Grandfather. It would be the last time I ever saw him. He stayed behind, never wanting to leave his beloved Farah Province. When he died there in 1987, we were told that hundreds of people came from many faraway villages to pay their final respects.

Like so many Afghans my age, I spent most of my childhood outside the country in refugee camps. Over the course of the war, literally millions of Afghans would be displaced, living mostly in crowded camps in Iran and Pakistan. This toll doesn't include the over 1 million Afghans killed during the decade-long Soviet occupation, which lasted from 1979 to 1989.

During this time, the United States was also involved in Afghanistan. In the name of the legitimate struggle of the mujahideen to liberate our country, the US funded, trained and armed some of the worst extremists in the world – people like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Abdul Rab al-Rasul Sayyaf and Osama bin Laden. The latter, of course, was not an Afghan. He was one of the thousands of foreigners that the United States and Pakistan recruited, trained and funded with the collusion of wealthy Saudi Arabian extremists. This intervention helped lead to the eventual downfall of the Soviet Union and contributed to the end of the Cold War, but it left us plagued with well-armed fundamentalists. Even before the Russians were driven out, many of the extremist groups had begun fighting each other and making life terrible for the Afghan people. Ultimately both the superpowers used Afghanistan for their own interests. And for us Afghans, this war brought great destruction from which we have yet to recover. And it sowed the seeds that grew into the ongoing misery we are still dealing with today.

Leaving Afghanistan, we travelled first to the eastern Iranian city of Zahedan. We were careful not to inform many people of our plans, because the authorities were trying to stem the mass emigration the war was causing. At the same time, the United States and its allies, along with Pakistan and Iran, were encouraging the exodus because it was easier for them to recruit mujahideen which they could then arm to fight the Russians. Pakistan and Iran wanted to increase the number of refugees because they brought in money from the UN and other donors. Also, these neighbouring governments could work among the Afghan refugees to recruit them as their agents and create political parties they could control. During these years eight new pro-Iranian parties were formed, and seven such parties were created under the control of the Pakistan intelligence services (ISI).

Cultural similarities made Iran a natural destination for those of us fleeing western Afghanistan. One of the official languages of my home province is Dari, which is a dialect of Persian, the

national language of Iran. But once an Afghan crossed the border, it was illegal to live outside the dangerous, crowded refugee camps without government permission. Anti-fundamentalist intellectuals like my father were being targeted and killed at the Zahedan camps, so he was living quietly in town, in a single rented room in a house with friends. And that was where all of us joined him at last.

I don't personally remember the event, but over the years Mother would often tell the story of her reunion with Father in Zahedan. When he first walked into the room it was as if the whole building filled with light. She said it was like witnessing the miracle of his coming back to life right before her eyes.

I was still very young, only four years old, so I did not understand that this man with one leg was my father. At first, I wouldn't let him hug me or give me a kiss. Emotionally I remained closer to the uncle I had taken to calling 'Baba'. I did not yet realise how fortunate I was just to have a father, unlike so many thousands of Afghan children orphaned over the preceding decades of war.

Father worked hard to gain my affection. There was a market nearby, and even an ice cream stand that kept its freezer working with a noisy portable generator. Before a meal I was often sent out to buy some bread from the market and Father would slip me a little bit of extra money so that I could stop on the way back and get myself some ice cream. This was such a treat for me and, to this day, just the thought of ice cream brings back happy memories.

Sometimes my love of ice cream got me into trouble. On one occasion we had guests over for dinner and I was sent out at the last minute to pick up some bread. My instructions were crystal clear: 'Hurry home. Do *not* stop for ice cream.'

But I couldn't help myself. Not only did I stop for ice cream, but I hung around talking to some other kids while I ate. When I got back, everyone was annoyed. I realised I had been a brat but, despite this, Father didn't even yell at me.

And so I gradually came to understand and accept who my

father really was. He told me he first knew that he had won me back when he overheard me singing myself a little song that went, 'My father has only one leg, my father has only one leg ...' It certainly wasn't poetry, but Father was thrilled to hear this odd little ditty of mine.

As new siblings kept arriving in our family, my father became less and less able to support us financially – despite the fact that he was both well educated and a hard worker. There simply weren't enough jobs to go around. Back home in Farah, while we were certainly never rich, we weren't poor either. But now, along with thousands of other displaced Afghan families, we faced very difficult conditions.

The fundamentalist, fascist Iranian government has committed unforgivable crimes against its own people, but Afghan refugees have been – and still are – treated with even more brutality. Every Afghan who has lived in Iran has painful stories to tell.

Afghans, in general, were seen as second-class humans by the Iranian government. We were called 'dirty' by camp guards and forced to do the most difficult jobs for lower wages. The regime of the mullahs in Iran was only friendly to Afghans who were linked to its eight puppet fundamentalist parties. They were later merged into the Wahdat Party – or 'Unity Party' – dedicated to exporting Tehran's brand of political Islam to Afghanistan. Some ministers and many officials in Hamid Karzai's government – such as Karim Khalili, now vice president – come from this party. Given the bloodthirsty behaviour of Wahdat during the civil war years of 1992 to 1996 and otherwise, these men must be held to account.

These groups had free rein in the camps to forcibly recruit refugees and terrorise and kill their opponents. That's why it was actually safer for us to live in Zahedan and risk getting picked up by the police and sent to one of the dreaded detention centres. Like concentration camps, they were designed to humiliate Afghans and break their national pride. Detainees faced torture, deportation or worse. Some of the famous detention/deportation

centres were 'Tal-e-Sea', 'Askar Abad', and 'Safaid Sang'. The low point of the systemic abuse of Afghan refugees in Iran came in 1998, with the little-known massacre at Safaid Sang (White Rock, in Dari). After detainees revolted against their conditions and tried to escape, more than 600 were shot down and killed; some were strafed by machine-gun fire from helicopters.

We lived as exiles in Iran for four years. After one year of uneasy but relatively comfortable conditions in Zahedan, for economic reasons we were soon forced to move hundreds of miles north into less hospitable lodgings at the Khunuk Buzghala camp. At the time, about 85,000 Afghans were squeezed into filthy, overcrowded camps in the desert frontier of the Birjand district. The rest of the world knows this region for its beautiful Persian carpets and its history as a waypoint along the famous Silk Road; we knew it as a place where we were neglected and forgotten, where we baked in the heat of the day and shivered at night.

The houses in the camps were hastily thrown-together mud and brick structures lined up along open sewers. Most of the dwellings didn't have proper doors, and night could be a fearful time. There were some horrific incidents when foxes, wolves and other wild animals crept inside to attack and kill infants and young children while they slept. I will never forget Mother instructing us how to scream for help if we woke up to find an animal in our hut. She even had a special string attached to my newborn sister that would wake her if her baby was disturbed.

Even worse than these dangers and deprivations, however, was the fact that there were no schools in these camps. Afghan children were not allowed to attend Iranian schools, and were prevented from setting up their own education system. This was unacceptable to my family and especially to my father, who believed so strongly in the value of education, for young girls also. I was now seven years old and it was past time for me to begin school. So Mother and Father packed all of us up and we said goodbye to Iran.