The bravest girl in the world.

Last year, the Taliban shot Malala Yousafzai in the head for daring to speak about the need for girls' education in Pakistan. She survived--and she's still talking.

Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani schoolgirl, was just 11 years old when she became famous in her native Pakistan for speaking out for the rights of girls.

Malala lived in Pakistan's Swat Valley, a beautiful region that was once popular with tourists. But in 2007, the Taliban arrived in Swat from neighboring Afghanistan, where they had been battling U.S. troops since 2001. The Taliban imposed their harsh interpretation of Islamic law on the region, banning music, dance, and many personal freedoms, including schooling for girls. They also forbade women from being in public without their husbands or fathers. The Taliban used violence-including public beatings, torture, and beheadings--to spread fear and enforce their edicts.

Malala and her father resisted the Taliban's reign of terror. They spoke out, insisting on the right of every girl to attend school. Their defiance won them many admirers--and many enemies.

In 2009, Pakistan's army drove the Taliban out of the region, but not completely. People continued to live in fear. In 2012, the Taliban tried to kill Malala, and failed. That attack has made her more famous, enabling her to spread her message to the entire world.

Now 16, Malala has written a book about her experience. In this excerpt from the recently published I Am Malala, she describes the day that forever changed her life.

The day when everything changed was Tuesday, Oct. 9, 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 brass door in a white wall across from the woodcutter's yard gives no hint of what lies beyond.

For us girls that doorway was like a magical entrance to our own special world. As we skipped through, we cast off our headscarves like winds puffing away clouds to make way for the sun, then ran helter-skelter up the steps.

The school was founded by my father before I was born, and on the wall above us KHUSHAL SCHOOL was painted proudly in red and white letters. We went to school six mornings a week. As a 15-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 Mingora, the main city of Swat, but also those like the Taliban who think girls should not go to school.

The school was not far from my home and I used to walk, but since the start of last year I had been going with other girls in a rickshaw and coming home by bus. It was a journey of just five minutes. I liked the bus because I didn't get as sweaty as when I walked, and I could chat with my friends and gossip with Usman

Ali, the driver, who we called Bhai Jan, or "Brother." He made us all laugh with his crazy stories.

I had started taking the bus because my mother was scared of me walking on my own. We had been getting threats all year. Some were in the newspapers, some were notes or messages passed on by people.

My mother was worried about me, but the Taliban had never come for a girl and I was more concerned they would target my father, as he was always speaking out against them. His close friend and fellow campaigner, Zahid Khan, had been shot in the face in August on his way to prayers and I knew everyone was telling my father, "Take care, you'll be next."

Our street could not be reached by car, so coming home I would get off the bus on the road below and go through a barred iron gate and up a flight of stairs. I always thought if anyone attacked me it would be on those steps.

Like my father I've always been a daydreamer, and sometimes in lessons my mind would drift and I'd imagine that on the way home a terrorist might jump out and shoot me on those steps. I wondered what I would do. Maybe I'd take off my shoes and hit him, but then I'd think if I did that there would be no difference between me and a terrorist. It would be better to plead, "OK, shoot me, but first listen to me. What you are doing is wrong. I'm not against you personally, I just want every girl to go to school."

I wasn't scared, but I had started making sure the gate was locked at night and asking God what happens when you die. I told my best friend Moniba everything. We'd lived on the same street when we were little and been friends since primary school and we shared everything--from Justin Bieber songs and Twilight movies to the best face-lightening creams.

Moniba's dream was to be a fashion designer. She knew her family would never agree to it, so she told everyone she wanted to be a doctor. It's hard for girls in our society to be anything other than teachers or doctors if they can work at all.

I was different. I never hid my desire when I changed from wanting to be a doctor to wanting to be an inventor or a politician. Moniba always knew if something was wrong. "Don't worry," I told her. "The Taliban have never come for a small girl."

The bus was actually what we call a dyna, a white Toyota truck with three parallel benches, one along either side and one in the middle. It was cramped with 20 girls and three teachers. I was sitting on the left between Moniba and a girl from the year below called Shazia Ramzan, holding our exam folders to our chests and our school bags under our feet.

After that it is all a bit hazy. The bus stopped. We couldn't see in front, but a young bearded man in light-colored clothes had stepped into the road and waved the van down.

Another young man in white approached the back of the van. "Look, it's one of those journalists coming to ask for an interview," said Moniba.

Since I'd started speaking at events with my father to campaign for girls' education and against those like the Taliban who want to hide us away, journalists often came, even foreigners, though not like this in the road.

The man was wearing a cap and had a handkerchief over his nose and mouth as if he had flu. He looked

like a college student. Then he swung himself onto the tailboard at the back and leaned in right over us.

"Who is Malala?" he demanded.

No one said anything, but several of the girls looked at me. I was the only girl with my face not covered.

That's when he lifted up a black pistol. I later learned it was a Colt .45. Some of the girls screamed. Moniba tells me I squeezed her hand.

My friends say he fired three shots, one after another. The first went through my left eye socket and out under my left shoulder. I slumped forward onto Moniba, blood coming from my left ear, so the other two bullets hit the girls next to me. One bullet went into Shazia's left hand. The third went through her left shoulder and into the upper right arm of Kainat Riaz.

My friends later told me the gunman's hand was shaking as he fired. By the time we got to the hospital my long hair and Moniba's lap were full of blood.

Six days later, I 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 you love is not something I would wish on anyone.

Update

After the attack, Malala was flown to a hospital in Birmingham, England, for emergency treatment. Several surgeries and a long recovery later, she is back in action. She now lives--and goes to school--in Birmingham with her parents and two younger brothers. She continues to work for education rights for girls--even though the Taliban still threaten her life for doing so.

In 2013, Malala became the youngest person ever nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Speaking at the U.N.

On July 12, 2013, her 16th birthday, Malala addressed the United Nations Youth Assembly. Here are excerpts from her speech.

In the name of God, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful. Honorable U.N. Secretary General Mr. Ban Ki-moon ... respected elders and my dear brothers and sisters ...

On the 9th of October 2012, the Taliban shot me on the left side of my forehead. They shot my friends too. They thought that the bullets would silence us. Bat they failed. And out of that silence came thousands of voices. The terrorists thought that they would change my aims and stop my ambitions, but nothing changed in my life except this: Weakness, fear, and hopelessness died. Strength, power, and courage was born. I am the same Malala. My ambitions are the same. My hopes are the same, and my dreams are the same....

The wise saying "The pen is mightier than sword" was true. The extremists were and they are afraid of books and pens. The power of education frightens them. They are afraid of women. The power of the voice of women frightens them.... That is why they are blasting schools every day. Because they were--and they are--afraid of change, afraid of the equality that we will bring into our society....

We call upon the developed nations to support the expansion of educational opportunities for girls in the developing world.

We call upon all communities to be tolerant--to reject prejudice based on cast, creed, sect, color, religion, or gender. To ensure freedom and equality for women so that they can flourish. We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back.

We call upon our sisters around the world to be brave--to embrace the strength within themselves and realize their full potential....

So let us wage a global struggle against illiteracy, poverty, and terrorism, and let us pick up our books and pens. They are our most powerful weapons.

One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world.