

Why I Don't Wear Earrings and Pashtuns Don't Say Thank You

BY THE AGE of seven I was used to being top of my class. I was the one who would help other pupils who had difficulties. 'Malala is a genius girl,' my class fellows would say. I was also known for participating in everything – badminton, drama, cricket, art, even singing, though I wasn't much good. So when a new girl named Malka-e-Noor joined our class, I didn't think anything of it. Her name means 'Queen of Light' and she said she wanted to be Pakistan's first female army chief. Her mother was a teacher at a different school, which was unusual as none of our mothers worked. To begin with she didn't say much in class. The competition was always between me and my best friend Moniba, who had beautiful writing and presentation, which the examiners liked, but I knew I could beat her on content. So when we did the end-of-year exams and Malka-e-Noor came first, I was shocked. At home I cried and cried and had to be comforted by my mother.

Around that time we moved away from where we had been living on the same street as Moniba to an area where I didn't have any friends. On our new road there was a girl called Safina, who was a bit younger than me, and we started to play together. She was a pampered girl who had lots of dolls and a shoebox full of jewellery. But she kept eyeing up the pink plastic pretend mobile phone my father had bought me, which was one of the only toys I had. My father was always talking on his mobile so I loved to copy him and pretend to make calls on mine. One day it disappeared.

A few days later I saw Safina playing with a phone exactly the same as mine. 'Where did you get that?' I asked. 'I bought it in the bazaar,' she said.

I realise now she could have been telling the truth but back then I thought, *She is doing this to me and I will do the same to her*. I used to go to her house to study, so whenever I was there I would pocket her things, mostly toy jewellery like earrings and necklaces. It was easy. At first stealing gave me a thrill, but that did not last long. Soon it became a compulsion. I did not know how to stop.

One afternoon I came home from school and rushed into the kitchen as usual for a snack. 'Hello, *Bhabi!*' I called. 'I'm starving!' There was silence. My mother was sitting on the floor pounding spices, brightly coloured turmeric and cumin, filling the air with their aroma. Over and over she pounded. Her eyes would not meet mine. What had I done? I was very sad and went to my room. When I opened my cupboard, I saw that all the things I had taken were gone. I had been caught.

My cousin Reena came into my room. 'They knew you were stealing,' she said. 'They were waiting for you to come clean but you just kept on.'

I felt a terrible sinking feeling in my stomach. I walked back to my mother with my head bowed. 'What you did was wrong, Malala,' she said. 'Are you trying to bring shame on us that we can't afford to buy such things?'

'It's not true!' I lied. 'I didn't take them.'

But she knew I had. 'Safina started it,' I protested. 'She took the pink phone that *Aba* bought me.'

My mother was unmoved. 'Safina is younger than you and you should have taught her better,' she said. 'You should have set an example.'

I started crying and apologised over and over again. 'Don't tell *Aba*,' I begged. I couldn't bear for him to be disappointed in me. It's horrible to feel unworthy in the eyes of your parents.