

It wasn't the first time. When I was little I went to the bazaar with my mother and spotted a pile of almonds on a cart. They looked so tasty that I couldn't resist grabbing a handful. My mother told me off and apologised to the cart owner. He was furious and would not be placated. We still had little money and my mother checked her purse to see what she had. 'Can you sell them to me for ten rupees?' she asked. 'No,' he replied. 'Almonds are very costly.'

My mother was very upset and told my father. He immediately went and bought the whole lot from the man and put them in a glass dish.

'Almonds are good,' he said. 'If you eat them with milk just before bed it makes you brainy.' But I knew he didn't have much money and the almonds in the dish were a reminder of my guilt. I promised myself I'd never do such a thing again. And now I had. My mother took me to say sorry to Safina and her parents. It was very hard. Safina said nothing about my phone, which didn't seem fair, but I didn't mention it either.

Though I felt bad, I was also relieved it was over. Since that day I have never lied or stolen. Not a single lie nor a single penny, not even the coins my father leaves around the house, which we're allowed to buy snacks with. I also stopped wearing jewellery because I asked myself, *What are these baubles which tempt me? Why should I lose my character for a few metal trinkets?* But I still feel guilty, and to this day I say sorry to God in my prayers.

My mother and father tell each other everything so *Aba* soon found out why I was so sad. I could see in his eyes that I had failed him. I wanted him to be proud of me, like he was when I was presented with the first-in-year trophies at school. Or the day our kindergarten teacher Miss Ulfat told him I had written, 'Only Speak in Urdu,' on the blackboard for my classmates at the start of an Urdu lesson so we would learn the language faster.

My father consoled me by telling me about the mistakes great heroes made when they were children. He told me that Mahatma Gandhi said, 'Freedom is not worth having if it does not include the freedom to make mistakes.' At school we had read stories about Mohammad Ali Jinnah. As a boy in Karachi he would study by the glow of street lights because there was no light at home. He told other boys to stop playing marbles in the dust and to play cricket instead so their clothes and hands wouldn't get dirty. Outside his office my father had a framed copy of a letter written by Abraham Lincoln to his son's teacher, translated into Pashto. It is a very beautiful letter, full of good advice. 'Teach him, if you can, the wonder of books . . . But also give him quiet time to ponder the eternal mystery of birds in the sky, bees in the sun, and the flowers on a green hillside,' it says. 'Teach him it is far more honourable to fail than to cheat.'

I think everyone makes a mistake at least once in their life. The important thing is what you learn from it. That's why I have problems with our *Pashtunwali* code. We are supposed to take revenge for wrongs done to us, but where does that end? If a man in one family is killed or hurt by another man, revenge must be exacted to restore *nang*. It can be taken by killing any male member of the attacker's family. Then that family in turn must take revenge. And on and on it goes. There is no time limit. We have a saying: 'The Pashtun took revenge after twenty years and another said it was taken too soon.'

We are a people of many sayings. One is 'The stone of Pashto does not rust in water,' which means we neither forget nor forgive. That's also why we rarely say thank you, *manana*, because we believe a Pashtun will never forget a good deed and is bound to reciprocate at some point, just as he will a bad one. Kindness can only be repaid with kindness. It can't be repaid with expressions like 'thank you'.