

# The Kindness of Strangers

By Dr Tan Su Ming

**I**n 1989, when I was a medical student doing an O & G posting at the old Kandang Kerbau Hospital (KKH), I got a room in the hostel there, so I could be near the labour wards. As the babies came into this world at all hours of the day, I wanted to be there when they appeared.

The old KKH was near Little India, and sometimes in the evenings I would put on my running shoes and run around the neighbourhood.

One evening, I folded a \$2 note till it was the size of a tiny square that could fit into the tiny pocket at the front of my running shorts. I liked to have a little bit of money on me in case of emergencies, like if I ran too far and got too tired to run back, I could hop on a bus home.

That day, I walked past an Indian vegetarian restaurant at the end of my run. It was already dark and I stopped to see what I could get for dinner because I didn't feel like cooking instant noodles again.

I looked through the glass display cabinet where the food was displayed and pointed to the various Indian breads, asking the friendly waiter how much each one cost.

Pooris were 40 cents each, a vadai was about the same, and so was an idli, while the thosais and bhaturas cost a little more. After doing brief mental calculations, I figured that my \$2 could buy me two pooris and a bit of dhal.

Feeling pleased, I sat down to eat.

As I tucked into my meal, the waiter brought a plate of bhathura, chickpeas and chappatis and a glass of lassi, and placed them before me.

I looked at him in surprise and said, "I didn't order these."

He smiled broadly and said, "From the boss. Boss says no need to pay for these."

I surmised that the boss was the kind portly man behind the cash counter, who might have observed me earlier, when I was holding the \$2 note in my hand, figuring out what I could afford to order.

He must have overheard me asking his staff the price of this and that dish, and might have thought I was impoverished. I did look like a ragamuffin in my faded sweaty t-shirt and running shorts.

I could barely finish the generous spread in front of me, but did my best as I did not want to waste anything. I thanked the boss profusely as I left, very touched by his kindness.

A few days later, I returned to the restaurant, dressed in nicer clothes, to pay the boss for all the food he gave me on the house. I explained to him that I could afford the meal actually and didn't want to take advantage of his generosity.

He didn't take my money.

It's been many years since that evening, but I think of that act of kindness every time I drive past that restaurant. **SMA**

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