

For Review Only

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BE NEATH
THE RUG

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**Anonymous names to protect the identities of individuals.*

Trigger warning: stories may include references to abuse, abortion, drug use, mental health struggles, sex, and trauma

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KIND INTENTIONS
MAY HAVE
UNINTENDED
CONSEQUENCES.

1

In Singapore, We Love Through Food

Jerome*, Policymaker with experience in service delivery
and coordination at a Social Service Office

In Singapore, we love through food. It is a cliché but also a hard kernel of truth.

At home, my dad insists that we have meals at the dining table. “We can’t be like those modern American families who have TV dinners. Put down your phone.” If I reach home late, he sits with me at the table to accompany me while I eat. A family who eats together, stays together.

I fondly recall meals at Chinatown with my colleagues that served as an emotional reprieve. “Please accompany me while I queue for sugarcane juice”, or “We’re both so early today, let’s get peanut butter thick toast and teh?”
Sub-text: “I’m exhausted from that long community walk and I need to recharge.” / “It seems like you’re having a rough week, would you like to talk?”

Food is an easy medium for conveying our intentions. When we pass our friends a snack that we specially bought for them from overseas, we are saying, “Hey, I thought of you while I was away!” When we partake in meals together, we are showing up and being present for them. To our friends and family, our giving is generous—abundantly so.

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Our giving to the less fortunate however, can sometimes look a little different—a little more measured, reserved and conditional. One of my earliest experiences of this was in primary school, when I met an elderly uncle begging for money. He said he was hungry. I shook my head and walked off—I think it was a combination of ‘stranger danger’ and having a paltry sum of pocket money that led to my response. Later, I asked my dad if I should have given my money to the uncle. In reply, my dad said that it is good to want to help others, but if you meet someone begging for money, you should offer them some food instead—like a *char siew pau*. Just in case they take your money and use it to buy cigarettes. This made sense to me as a kid. It was only much later that I started to question this advice. Is it right of me to assume that the less privileged would use my money for vice? What if he was genuinely hungry but does not like *char siew pau*?

Our assumptions about the less fortunate will colour our giving. Many, if not all of us, would agree that no one should go hungry in Singapore. But if we dig a little deeper, we would realise that tackling food insecurity is not so straightforward, because the issue is value-laden and abounds with paradox. For instance, when providing low-income beneficiaries with food, should we prioritise autonomy and variety in their food choices, or food that most efficiently meets their daily recommended nutritional requirements? Can we understand that there are times when low-income families want to have fast food due to convenience or the need to decompress after a trying day, and that this is no different from our occasional indulgence in bubble tea and the like? Giving requires us to confront common assumptions and stereotypes that we have about the less privileged. By actively questioning and unpacking these, we can better understand their needs, and evaluate if our initiatives are headed in the right direction or if they are even necessary.

During my undergraduate years, the first academic theory on social work that resonated with me was ‘Systems Theory’. We learnt to identify all possible factors that could influence an individual’s behaviour and draw linkages between them—therein defining a ‘system’—and used it to make sense of various situations. This proved to be quite useful when I joined the Social

Service Office (SSO). My job involved ground sensing: to profile vulnerable communities, chart their existing resources and strengths, and identify potentially unmet needs.

One of the first few communities we worked on was *Jalan Kukoh*, which is one of the bigger rental flat clusters in Singapore. During the team’s community walks, one of the mama shop owners in *Jalan Kukoh* shared an interesting observation. Over her many years in the community, she noticed that there was an annually recurring trend in her business: that sales were not as brisk in certain months, including June and December. This puzzled us. It was only much later that we drew the connection—that volunteer groups were most active during the school holidays due to the abundance of good-hearted students, and many of their initiatives involved distributing free food and dry rations. Thus, residents did not need to buy much sundries in those months. Introduce new resources into a system, and it will compensate in some way to maintain its equilibrium. I raise this as a somewhat benign illustration of how **kind intentions may have unintended consequences**.

The giving of food can lead to social issues that are hidden, or trickier to resolve. Take for instance, cultural beliefs that encourage us not to waste food. Could our overzealousness in food donations cause public hygiene or hoarding issues if a recipient is unwilling to throw out canned food that he or she is unable to consume? On one community walk, we saw a resident throw a packet of rice out of his window onto a grass patch, drawing a flock of pigeons to the spoils. Was he unable to finish his rice (we sometimes hear of the elderly receiving several packets of food from different groups in a day) and did he therefore perceive it to be less wasteful if he fed the pigeons instead of throwing it away? Recent initiatives in the charity food space seem to be focused on better coordinating efforts between various groups, and customising the food package that each person receives.

The street soccer court at *Jalan Kukoh* bustles with activity every weekday evening. I hung out with a group of youths who were resting after their match. They were incredibly friendly and welcoming. One of the topics we

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spoke about was their part-time jobs. One of them told me proudly that he had a part-time job working for a restaurant on weekends. The job paid him well, but more importantly, he emphasised, he got to eat the leftover food from the restaurant and could *dapao* some of it for his family. “Cher, wedding dinner food good sia!” To him, it was the best part-time job ever.

Let me provide some context. *Jalan Kukoh* estate is situated near several office buildings, it is common to see office workers and white-collar professionals frequent its stalls on weekdays. But the food centre is closed at night, and only a handful of stalls are open on weekends. I think this is because residents constitute only a small part of the stalls’ business, and it is not worth the operating overheads to keep the stalls running on weeknights and over the weekends. I surmised that this presented some unique problems for a specific group of residents—namely, children and youth whose parents worked the night shift. As *Jalan Kukoh* is a relatively isolated estate, there is no way for children to buy dinner as their parents would not let them cross the busy stretches of roads surrounding the estate by themselves. Many of them had to wait for their parents to get home late at night before having dinner.

We fretted over possible solutions for this problem. Do we request some food centre stalls to remain open at night, even though it may be unprofitable for them? Do we engage volunteer groups that provide free meal deliveries to the elderly, to extend their services to children and youth as well?

It turns out that the problem already had a community solution. One night, I spoke to Mdm. Nor*. She has stayed at *Jalan Kukoh* for a long time and is a familiar face to the residents there. Mdm. Nor said that there were times when she would come across hungry children running around the neighbourhood. She found out that their parents were not around, and decided that she would step up and provide these children with a warm meal. Ushering these children into her home turned into a daily affair, and she is constantly on the lookout for other children who may need dinner.

Incidents like these reaffirm my belief that supporting those in need requires creative solutions from all segments of society, and I admire the community’s ability to plug gaps nimbly. There are so many more incidents that I could name, such as when a volunteer group succeeded in befriending and assisting an elderly man with decluttering his flat, by offering him durian, when other local agencies had tried and failed time and time again. After this incident, I wondered to myself, would the public approve if a government-funded agency did this? Would the media misconstrue the purchase of durian as wasteful usage of taxpayer dollars?

Community solutions can sometimes seem inconsistent in their coverage. But I urge us to consider that there will always be trade-offs on both sides. **Perhaps our focus should be on nurturing fertile ground for community solutions to flourish, and working hand-in-hand to facilitate community implementation.**

Back when I first spoke to Mdm. Nor, she asked if I would like to join her for a meal. I had politely declined. I thought that I would be imposing and eating into her household’s food supplies. Now, I would gladly accept this invitation, and think of other ways that I could maintain reciprocity and build this relationship. After all, it is less about the food, and more about the meaning of the invitation.

HOLD SPACE FOR
COMPLEXITIES THAT
CHALLENGE OUR
ASSUMPTIONS

4

Why Wouldn't She Just Turn Up

Maya*, Former Senior Social Worker
at a Family Service Centre

As a senior social worker doing the groundwork in a community where needs are aplenty, accompanied with my position of relative seniority and influence over the colleagues I supervise, I am reminded daily of the complexity of our work. These complexities pop up in various forms and if we are not quick enough to pause and unpack them, they can easily fester, turning into frustration and resentment towards the job.

To serve our clients, we are trained to assess their needs, identify goals, connect them to resources, support them by providing accountability in achieving these goals, offer emotional support, build a relationship, et cetera. When we sign up to be a social worker, we are signing up to embrace complexities in all its forms and shades. Yet, we work in a system that values data, clean facts, ticked boxes and outcomes that show progress.

Change is messy and change cannot always be quantifiable.

Change is also a concept that takes years getting familiar with, and sometimes we never see the seeds of change that we plant in our work. I wrote this story

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as a reflection of my sentiments towards some clients who make me feel like I am on a constant cat and mouse chase. They are the ones who say that they will turn up and never do, the ones who tell you that they want to change but do not always show up with the behaviours you expect. We may call them unmotivated, recalcitrant, absent, difficult to engage, or we may flip it and feel that it is our fault. That we haven't found the perfect way of engaging them and that perhaps we do not have the skills to adequately engage.

Maybe we just do not get it. In this 'yo-yo' of blame between them and us, we try to forge a relationship and understand their circumstances with theories and assumptions about their lives. When I wrote this story, I allowed myself to channel details from the many stories I have heard over the years and gave some room for creative liberties to take over. This was not based on one true story, but instead, on many stories, with fictional characters that I have woven together. This is my attempt to step into the shoes of a world I interface with but will never have full access to.

Why wouldn't she just turn up?

Shonia*. Why can't she just turn up? This was the question that had always plagued my mind. Was she not bothered about doing better for herself and her child? Why was she still with her boyfriend who was obviously not helping the situation? Did they think they could always depend on handouts? It was easy to go down that route and give in to the stereotypes held about the poor, without second thought.

We come into this line of work because we know that circumstances define individuals and families, and that we, as a society, have an obligation to do better. We believe that change is possible with time. Yet, when faced with situations where our resolve and patience is tested, it is so much easier to blame the client for not trying hard enough. The best of us have gone down this route, some have verbalised it while others probably kept it in and soldiered on.

I pick up the office phone and send her a reminder text for our appointment, with a knowing feeling that she is not going to show up. Oh well, one can only keep trying. At the very least, I have it in my records that I have tried.

If you only knew—Shonia's perspective

I hear my phone vibrate. "Hi Shonia, hope to see you for your appointment later at 2pm today." I sigh. What do I tell her this time? Doesn't she just get it? I'm not free. Something came up. I am not well. And yet she still keeps sending me these reminders, like a buzzing fly that refuses to go away no matter how many times I swat it away.

I am tired of pretending that I want to talk about my shit. To think about what to do, about change and 'goals' and food rations and my feelings. It is ****ing tiring. She talks like she knows how hard it is for me. Does she...really?

What would she say if she saw my husband passed out after the ICE he shot up last night? What if she knew the money we were getting from the government, the so-called handouts that we were supposed to be grateful for, was not going towards our baby? That I am too scared to say or do anything against this man who claims to love me. The kind of love that can kill. That suffocates me into submission. No, there's no room for anyone. What would she know of the hopelessness and scary thoughts that enter my mind when night falls? Of the many times I have inhaled the familiar smoke to fight the urge to disappear into nothingness. Just to escape.

So tell me, what do I reply her? The truth? I can't even handle my own truth.

"Sorry, I forgot. Next time maybe."

I place the phone face down on the mattress and glance over at my husband's face that is lit up by the glow of the phone. He is snoring gently, his face turned towards me, with his body in a side curl. He is hugging our son's

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bolster. This was the one that we bought the night before Baby Adam* was born. The both of us, giggling, laughing and punching one another playfully as we walked into all the baby related shops in *Plaza Singapura*. We hardly visited *Orchard Road* to shop, and if we did, it was usually to window shop, smoke at the park opposite and hang out with friends who had some money to spare. This time, it was special. Adam, our firstborn, needed his very own pillow to hug, apart from his mommy of course. I wanted him to feel safe and special. I remember the look on the sales lady's face when we entered the shop. It was the same expression I get whenever I'm with Ray*. They see a boy with bleached blonde hair, skulls tattooed on his neck and arms, with a scar across his left cheek. I guess he looks scary if you don't know him. You will probably think he's trouble and stay away. That's what my grandmother told me when she first saw him. "Stay away baby girl... you're too innocent for him. He's no good... you don't know about love... he will just hurt you." I don't think she saw what I saw. I don't think the world does too. "He is good to me!" I screamed back at her. The way I felt whenever he hugged me in those strong arms and looked into my eyes, saying he will protect me—that is something I couldn't explain to anyone. No one would believe it too, and so I retreated further into his arms and away from the people I loved. Why does falling in love have to come at such a cost? I haven't seen my grandmother since she found out that I was pregnant and threw me out of the house. I miss her but I don't dare to say it out aloud. Ray says that we don't need anyone else—it's us against the world.

"Can I help you?" the sales lady asks nervously, keeping a distance away from the both of us. I look around and see another couple who were laughing with the salesperson who was helping them to find a onesie for their baby. No laughter on our end, just my husband's tense voice that replied. "No, we're fine." She scuttled away immediately, while keeping her eyes on us the whole time we were there. We chose the bolster easily. It was the only one in dark blue, without any prints. He had said that our son, our little prince, needed something 'manly'. What does it mean to be manly? The men in my life—not one of them until I met Ray—had lived up to this ideal version of a man that they deemed important. Did they bring in the money? No. Did they protect their women? No. They had all left me, cheated on me, hit me, pretended

like I never existed... Ray was the only one who stayed. He made me feel like his precious princess, even though I always made him angry and upset. He told me that I needed to grow up now that I am going to be a mother. He said he would help me, but he's got a lot of things on his mind too. I wish I could make him feel less stressed on days that he smokes a pack for an hour and paces up and down our room. I know he is worried that the police would get him again. When he behaves like that, I keep my mouth shut and wait for the stress cloud to pass. It always does.

We decided on the bolster he liked and I squeezed his hands as he reached into his pocket and paid for our son's first pillow. I was pregnant with hope.

I thanked God the minute I saw Adam's perfect body on mine right after he was born. God had given me a perfect child, even though I was far from perfect. I never prayed, was rude to my grandmother, had sex with many boys before marriage (some I regretted, some I didn't), smoked, experimented with drugs and yet here he was, my perfect child. A gift from God at 22-years-old. I do not know if I am deserving, but I prayed that I would do whatever was in my power to give him the best. I became a mother in that instant, without my own mother or kin by my side.

Is it possible that in trying to protect your child, you make things worse for him? One year has passed since Adam's birth and I am a confused wreck. Ray has not fulfilled any of his promises to me—he hasn't found a job and even if he were offered any, from the many places that I begged to give him a chance, he never turned up. His friends continued to come to our home and sleep with us through the night, although I've told Ray that the smoke makes Adam cough and cry. They smoke, they laugh, they sing and when I don't join in, they say that I'm a party pooper and have become too serious, that I no longer know how to live and play. Is that right? Have I changed too much? How long were we going to pretend like we didn't have a care in the world? The bills are stacking up on our kitchen table, his family's kindness has now turned into debt, and we have a child to whom we owe the best. Is his skin so thick that he does not see the disappointed and irritated look that comes from his mother whenever he asks her for money?

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He isn't even there when I turn up at the Family Service Centre (FSC) to meet the social worker who is always asking me questions that I can't give answers to. I am tired of making excuses, lying and having to keep track of the lies. It is exhausting, but what choice do I have? He would kill me if I told anyone the truth of what is really going on. But if I can't explain why my husband still has not gotten a job or has not come for any appointments with me, my social worker says she cannot support the renewal of my baby's milk powder subsidies for the next month. Then, what? The baby pays the price? I feel like we are no different from beggars or people without a backbone. I am deeply ashamed and I feel the shame twice as much, both for him and for the baby and I. All he does is think that the world owes him a living and complains incessantly. How long can I continue to live like this? I remember my grandmother's words—that this will not go well, that I will come back to her begging when he has ruined my life. My pride will not let me go back even though I know she is right. Look at me. Shame has become my closest friend in this lonely existence. If not back to grandmother, then who?

I have lost contact with most of my friends. I used to be the popular girl in school. The pretty one that guys used to chase after. I thought I had it all, and it didn't matter that I was not smart. At least I was pretty and had my pick of boys. The cool ones with their slicked back hair, biker jackets and wild streak in their blood. I had girlfriends who were jealous of me—they had every reason to be. The girlfriends who hung out with me bitched about me behind my back, but at least they were kind to my face. I saw a few of them posting pictures of their families and children on Facebook. Everyone seems to have grown up, gotten grown up jobs, and are living in grown up houses. What the hell happened to me? I got stuck with Peter Pan who doesn't believe in growing up. And now we have a baby who's growing fast, needs his milk, his diapers, his playpen and yet his parents can't buy him anything. They beg their once upon a time friends, their family who is stuck to them by blood ties and the social services. I know if I leave, Ray will send his gang to look for me. They have people everywhere. He's not going to stop because I know his secrets. I know where they sell that magic powder, and who gives it to them. He's going to make sure that if he goes down, I am going down with him. Both of us are now buried in a hole that he dug and pulled me into.

That's not fair. Shit. Life's not fair.

Am I a bad mother? Will my son look at me when he's older and hate me for staying with his father? Or will he hate me for leaving his father and not giving Ray a chance to change, to be the father he can be. It is a very small 'can'. Yet I hold on for dear life, wishing, hoping and praying that one day, by a stroke of luck, Ray will realise and change. Maybe it is time to let go—let go of my hope that things will get better, because in reality, things are just getting shittier and I need to get out before I am buried in too deep with this man I once loved. Ray is still sleeping soundly as Adam is beginning to move and make that face which looks like he's about to cry very soon. I quickly pick Adam up and bounce him up and down on my lap. I need to do something fast. I grab my wallet, which has two green \$5 notes in it, my handphone, my keys, EZ-link card and quietly let myself out. Into the sunlight, away from the dark and musty home. I turn around and look at Ray as he's peacefully sleeping while I close the door on him. It is time.

Questions to ponder

- While reading the story, how do we feel about the characters? Do we feel anger? Sadness? Empathy?
- How does the story impact on our views of clients/beneficiaries of aid that seem 'ungrateful' or 'irresponsible'?
- How does the story influence our view of social workers and the role they play?
- If we could step into the shoes of someone we're trying to help and write a story from their perspective, what would it look like?

I hope that in reading this, we see that the helping relationship is layered with so many hidden perspectives and realities that we often don't hear about. That the lines between right and wrong are blurred and while it is important to have a clear guide that frames our helping process, we also need to hold space for complexities that challenge our assumptions of the world around us.