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52 kg Luggage

A pioneer embarking on an unconventional path will encounter hurdles that have not been experienced by anyone he knows. These hurdles could lead to dire consequences or to a funny anecdote. This is a story of the latter.

Going out of the country was monumental. Most people I know have never taken a plane, and this was my first time flying, too. In honour of the occasion, my mother and aunt thought I should be dressed smartly, so I left Sri Lanka in my best dress shirt, a tie, nice trousers, and black leather shoes. They also thought I should be well-prepared, so my suitcase had everything a person would need if they were suddenly dropped off in the middle of nowhere.

There was the usual stationery typical for students: pens, pencils, and a pallet of A4 paper, which was perhaps a bit more unusual. There were clothes, toiletries, medicine, then rice, dhal, curry powder,

sugar, and milk powder. There were also pre-made meals like dried fish cooked in black pepper. My mum's space-maximising strategies made it possible to fit everything in one regular-sized suitcase. There was just one caveat: The suitcase was 52 kg. At the time of packing, we weren't worried about luggage weight limits because we had never left the country—we didn't know there was a weight limit to consider. So, the main weight-related concern was whether the luggage would be too heavy for me to carry alone.

I was by myself when the check-in lady weighed my luggage. I still remember her expression—astonishment frozen on her face as the number flashed on the scale: 52 kg. The baggage limit back then was 20 kg, so I was more than two and a half times over. She shook her head and said, "That's extra." Extra? No, I didn't think so. "Nothing in there is extra", I remember explaining. "My mother and I packed only the essentials."

I began justifying every item in my suitcase. I needed the pens and pencils because I was a student—I even showed her my NUS acceptance letter as proof. I'm also human, so of course clothes and food were essential—surely that needed no explanation? In my desperation, I even mentioned my neighbour's daughter, a flight attendant for Sri Lankan Airlines (even though I was flying Singapore Airlines). I thought that maybe, as someone who knew me, she could help explain why stationery, rice, dhal, and clothes all felt essential to me.

I rambled on. Clearly, I was not getting through to her. Eventually, the check-in lady called the counter manager. The counter manager then called the ground-handling manager, a gentleman clad in a fancy suit. One by one, I told each of them the same thing: "I'm going to Singapore to study, and nothing in my bag is extra."

I became a Singapore Airlines Gold Class member in 2008. Now, I enjoy priority check-in and the luxury of extra luggage allowance. Yet, despite the countless trips I've taken since, I still have flashbacks of that early incident every time I check in luggage. I remember how clueless I was—I didn't even think to call my parents or try to offload my excess weight to fellow passengers whose luggage was under the weight limit.

Come to think of it, that's probably what happened in the end. They must have quietly dispersed my extra kilos amongst a few passengers to avoid giving me a fine. I still remember the check-in manager's last words: "This is the one and only time we'll allow this." I was so happy to finally go on a plane that I didn't even realise my naivety had just gotten me out of an impossible situation.

When I meet Sri Lankan students at my annual ICE (Innovation, Creativity and Entrepreneurship) workshop, I am reminded a little of my former naive self. Many of them have had little opportunity to explore the world; keenly aware of their inexperience, they find the unknowns intimidating. So, I tell them this story, hoping they will come to appreciate the fleeting nature of naivety with its innocence and simplicity. I strive to open their eyes to the surprising ways it can stretch a person's capacity for leniency, and its ability to overcome longstanding rules and norms. With each passing experience, we grow more seasoned, more worldly, and sometimes more cynical and sophisticated. But the remnants of who we once were live on in the funny anecdotes our naivety left behind.