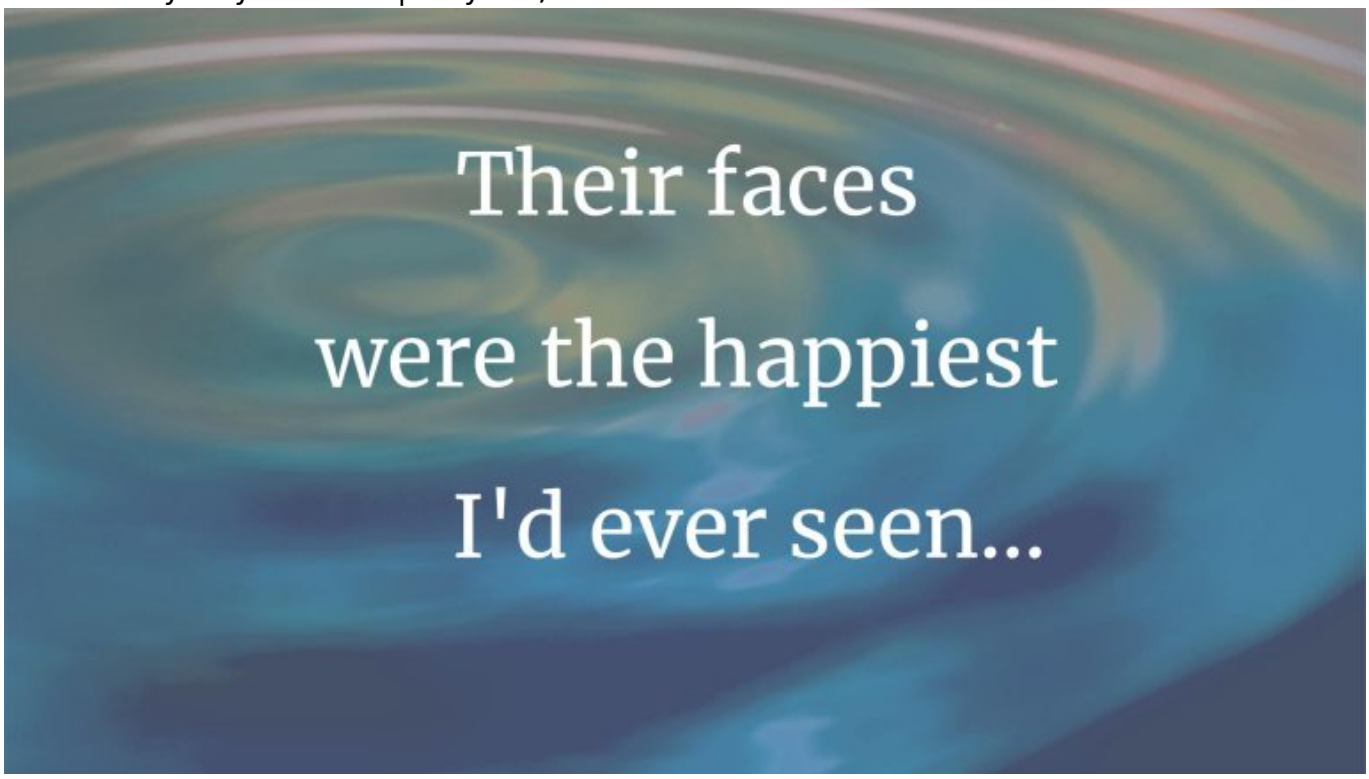
Happiness Loves Company

Category: Stories
written by Suyash Jha | May 31, 2024



I remember the first time I saw the gates of the Missionaries of Charity home for the destitute and dying, on the outskirts of my hometown, Pune, in western India.

I must have been nine or ten. To my annoyance, my parents had woken me early that Sunday morning to go with them to visit the home and bring donations of clothes and other necessities.

“How much longer, Papa?” I kept asking as we drove. In about an hour, the facility’s tall red-painted gates came into view.

A frail, stooped man with dark glasses opened the gates; as we passed through, his face beamed with a singular expression of satisfaction, and he folded his hands in the Indian greeting known as namaste.

Further inside, more residents greeted us. Some approached; others just watched from their wheelchairs. But I was struck that every face wore the same gracious expression as the gatekeeper’s.

Out walked the Sister in charge, a motherly figure in a blue-bordered sari. Within the home’s two large, impeccably clean rooms, she and the other Sisters cared for some fifty terminally ill, destitute people, whose families had brought them here when they could no longer take care of them.

Sister asked us to put our clothing donations onto a nearby pile and then come and sign for them. I accompanied my father into the small office.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” Sister asked me.

For any Indian boy, there were only two possible answers: doctor or engineer.

“Doctor,” I replied.

“When you grow up, you can come help us with the patients,” she said.

“Okay, but not on Sunday. Sundays, I sleep,” I replied.

She laughed. “All right, help us on the rest of the days. May you get what you want.”

Turning to my father, she said, “Next time, can you please bring some soap for the residents? We’re running out, and we need to keep them clean to prevent disease.”

“Yes, surely. We will bring it next month,” my father replied.

As Sister walked us to our car, the patients waved goodbye and thanked us as warmly as if we’d cured their illnesses. Their faces were the happiest I’d ever seen—they beamed with an innocent, childlike joy, a sense of being completely at peace with life.

Years passed, and visiting the Sisters’ home became a monthly routine. We brought whatever they requested—sometimes rice, sometimes *dal*, sometimes bandages. I was amazed that small, mundane articles such as toothpaste and soap brought the residents such happiness—a happiness all the more poignant given their incurable illnesses.

Seeing their contentment amid such suffering, and knowing that we were adding to that contentment, even in minor ways, made our visits feel worthwhile. Over time, as I talked with the patients, I began to sense that, as Sister once told me, “A kind, sympathetic ear can be great medicine, too.”

One Sunday, when I was about fourteen, a new face caught my eye.

A man with a receding hairline and a sparse white beard sat on a bed, his back to the wall, his body trembling in a rhythmic, almost dance-like motion.

He motioned me towards him with shaking hands, then folded them and said, “Namaste.”

I responded in kind and sat on the bedside stool.

“What is your name?” he asked. “You look just like my son….I have three sons, but no one comes to visit me.”

Hearing this, I was at a loss for words. I’d never before seen what real pain looks like, and I just couldn’t find in my head or my heart a suitable reply for this frail, trembling figure.

My mother came to my rescue.

“Don’t worry, Baba,” she said reassuringly. “We will visit you every month, and the Sisters will take care of you.”

As our monthly visits continued, I always went first to the old man, whom I called Baba. Over time, in speech that grew progressively less intelligible, he told me of his home, his family and life. He’d been an artist—a painter. On days when his tremor was milder, he’d make a few shaky sketches.

One Sunday, he pulled out a dusty box of sweets and offered me the last remaining piece.

“No, no! That is for you, Baba!” I objected.

“But I asked them to save it for you,” he protested. “I know you come on the first Sunday every month. I saved you a piece. It is for you.”

Reluctantly, but feeling deeply touched, I picked up the sweet and put it in my mouth. Baba’s generosity made it taste sweeter than anything I’d ever eaten.

Time flew, and I finished high school and left Pune to attend medical college. On some level, my encounters with Baba had fueled my interest in medicine; I welcomed the thought of being able to alleviate suffering.

My first year at school was difficult. I felt intensely homesick and had a hard time adjusting to a very different culture. Throughout those hard months, I often found myself thinking of the Sister’s home. I knew that far from this grown-up world, with its backstabbing and problems, there existed a different world, sheltered behind red gates—a place where people greeted one another with folded hands and peaceful smiles.

When I came home for summer vacation, I once more found myself at those red gates, making the usual monthly visit with my parents. After completing the registers, I asked about Baba.

“He’s getting much worse,” Sister said. “These may be his last days. He’s suffering from delusions, and a lot of depression.”

“What is his illness?” I asked.

“Huntington’s disease,” she said. I felt a pang, having learned in school about this disease, with its grave prognosis.

Across the ward, I spotted Baba, seated against the wall as always. I sat down on the bedside stool.

His trembling had worsened: His whole body shook, as if he were in great pain.

“I have three sons,” he muttered. “No one visits me.”

Just as in times past, I struggled for words.

“I’m here, Baba, remember me?” I finally managed. “You saved me the last sweet that day. Remember?”

“I have three sons. No one visits me,” he repeated. Then his expression shifted to a childlike happiness that belied his age and trembling frame.

“I had three eggs today!” he said, waving three fingers in my face.

His face shone with the same grace that I’d seen when I was ten, visiting for the first time. In that moment, it seemed almost as if death dared not touch his tranquil contentment.

Seeing this, I felt comforted, and no longer sad that he couldn’t recognize me.

I realized that, as Sister had said, a sympathetic ear is powerful medicine. I was company for Baba—and companionship brings happiness.

As I rose to leave, Baba’s trembling hands folded in a namaste. I too folded my hands, knowing well that there might not be a next time.

Seeing Baba take such happiness in the smallest of things has taught me to focus on life’s small joys, even when things are difficult.

Maybe that is the biggest lesson that I’ve learned behind those tall red gates.