

# SOMETIMES IT IS HARD TO MAKE YOURSELF UNDERSTOOD

**Kathryn Stok**

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As early morning light drifted through the window, Sophia squeezes her eyes shut, attempting to block it out for a few more moments of sleep. But the light coupled with the warm, muggy morning, as almost all mornings in Singapore are, eventually forces her up and into the bathroom for a shower.

Since her arrival in Singapore six months earlier, Sophia has been through a whirlwind of new sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and despite the occasional twinge of homesickness, she feels that she has settled in, in an unsettled kind of way. Never quite comfortable, but no ongoing hassles.

When she comes out of the bathroom, she glances over to the neighbouring bed. Her roommate is still sleeping soundly – the only way Sophia has ever seen her. Arriving home at night, Ling Li is already asleep, and never up until Sophia has left house. On the rare occasion they do meet, an impenetrable language barrier exists, cutting off any opportunity for conversation.

In the kitchen Sophia puts on the water for coffee. She reaches into the fridge for the milk, and pours it into her mug. The milk trickles out of the carton and rather than providing a creamy coffee, produces flaky white curd on the surface. Her first thought is that maybe the milk has been sitting in the fridge for a while, and she may have just been too slow in drinking it. But as she moves to return the carton to the fridge, she realises that it is almost full, and remembers that she only bought it two days ago. Now taking the milk to the sink, she starts to tip it down. Large chunky congealed milk tumbles out of the carton.

‘Well, I don’t think I’ll have that cup of coffee after all,’ she mumbles to the empty room.

Next, she returns to the fridge to check that the thermostat is set to its usual 4-degree-self. It appears to be in the right position, but she will check with the other girls in the house, to see if anyone has moved it. This will have to wait though, since she is currently the only one out of bed. Packing her bag, Sophia then heads off to work, stopping at a nearby canteen to buy a cup of coffee on her way. When she arrives at the office she puts the coffee on her desk, turns on the computer and plans her work for the day.

Sophia came to Singapore to study for her doctorate. Despite promises of research without the burden of insufficient funds, she has found recently that this isn't ringing true. Since she is in no position to question the situation, however, she has to wait and hope that the required equipment will come as promised without too long a delay. At this time, she is still wary of the future.

Before she starts working she checks her email. Email is always a welcome source of news from friends and family back home, and also a great way to start the day. And she isn't disappointed. There is a letter from her sister reminding her to organise a flight at Christmas. Sophia does this on the Internet - her first foray into Internet shopping. What a buzz! When she looks up again, the rest of her colleagues are arriving. At the same time, she looks down at her coffee to discover that it is cold, and seems to have attracted a suicide fly. She takes it to the sink. Trying for a third attempt at coffee, she fills the office kettle.

Going back to her desk she starts her work. She has to meet with her supervisor today regarding a particular design she is working on. She finishes the drawings and prints them out. As she is finishing, she remembers that she didn't finish making the coffee. But before she can return to the kettle, a message flashes up on her computer. One of her housemates has just discovered that her fruit in the fridge has gone smelly and turned to pulp. Sophia replies to say that she will ring maintenance and ask them if they can come and have a look at the fridge. She rings maintenance:

'Hi, this is Sophia. I live in Nanyang Valley, and my fridge isn't working.'

'Ahhh, sorry, slow please, 'comes the reply.

She tries again, 'My - fri - idge - is - not - work - ing.'

'Ahhh, who?'

'What?'

'Hello, hello?' (new voice)

'Yes, hello?'

'Can I help you ma'am?'

'Yes, I live in Nanyang Valley, and my fridge is not working properly.'

'Air-con?'

'No! Fridge! Where you put food to keep it cold.' Sarcasm rose so easily to the surface in this country.

'Ahhh - the problem is the power supply.'

'I don't think so. The fridge is on, but it is not very cold.'

'I will ring technician, and ring you back.'

'Okay, thank you.'

Sophia walks away from the phone muttering about the absurdity of enforcing the English language in a country which obviously has precious few inhabitants for whom this was their first language.

The phone rings again five minutes later, and the technician says he will be at the apartment in fifteen minutes. The coffee will have to wait. Rising from her seat, Sophia grabs her glasses, wallet, keys and the drawings she has just completed - planning to go past her supervisor's office on the way back. When she arrives at the apartment, it is a short wait before the technician appears. He informs her that he is there to fix the power supply of the fridge (actually he pronounces it 'frizz'). Despite the feeling that the power supply probably isn't the problem, she keeps her mouth closed and shows him into the kitchen. He removes his tools from the pouch he is carrying. He then takes a cursory glance at the back of the fridge, and announces that he cannot do anything since he only fixes power supplies and that's not broken. As he says this he starts to return all the tools he hasn't even used to the pouch, and prepares to leave. Sophia stares at him startled, and a little bit annoyed.

'You can't just leave! You need to bring someone here who can fix it!' she proclaims.

The technician looks at her as if she is some dangerous creature that he has no experience in dealing with. And he says nothing.

'You must tell your boss to send somebody here... today!' she continues in the face of his unresponsive attitude. 'You tell him that I will charge the Estate Office for the cost of replacing all the food which is going bad.' A harmless threat, since she could never imagine going through with it.

As she finishes saying this, one of the other housemates comes out of her room to see what is going on. She announces that she also thinks the temperature inside the fridge is not cold enough - but this does little to slow the technician's hurried retreat from the flat. Sophia moves around to the front door to block him, 'Sir, at the moment I am a little bit mad, but if this fridge isn't fixed, I'm going to your boss and I am going to be very mad - so what can you do to help me?'

With this last statement, she is drawing on the fact that few of the Singaporeans she has dealt with in the university's maintenance and administrative systems were willing to risk their own neck when a hurried retreat will suffice. The man's reaction to it was, for Sophia, a now familiar one when she threatened to complain to a higher manager. And although she felt guilty in doing it, it was so unbelievably effective, that when her blood began to boil, it was all she could think to do. In this instance, the technician quickly agrees to go back to the office and get someone else. (Sophia is not sure if this is in response to her threat, or because he just wants to get away from the mad woman.) With no more to do in the apartment, she

heads off to the Estate Office to speak with the man in charge of maintenance at Nanyang Valley. She pauses for second at the canteen, but decides to try and solve the fridge problem before the, as yet, unrequited coffee problem. When she arrives, she asks the receptionist if she can speak to the man in charge of Nanyang Valley.

A man returns and Sophia asks if he can send someone to look at the fridge, adding her concern about the limited longevity of their food in Singapore's thirty-plus degree heat. He says he'll look into it for her, and satisfied she heads off for a meeting with her supervisor.

Afterwards, she looks at the time, and decides that since it is now 2.30pm it must be time for lunch, or at least a cup of coffee. At the canteen, Sophia buys the largest coffee available, and some Chinese rice: The Chinese rice is accompanied by a big leafy (unidentified) vegetable on the side. One of the problems she has noticed with eating Chinese food is that they don't often give you a knife to eat it with. So as she attempts to wind the vegetable around her fork, her mind drifts off to contemplate the events of the day...A moment later she is gagging over her plate, trying to extricate the big leafy vegetable, which has, with a mistimed swallow, lodged itself in her throat. Thinking this is her moment of death, no less noble being in a university canteen choked by a vegetable, she pulls it from her mouth. Retching and regurgitating after the event, she decides that she's not that hungry anyway, grabs her coffee and heads back to the office. Upon arrival she finds a note to say that a technician will be at the apartment at 2.30pm. It is now 3pm. So she leaves her - still untouched - coffee on the desk, grabs the house keys and once again traipses off to the apartment.

On the way down she mutters to herself of all the things in Singapore she finds annoying - the list quickly stretching out of all proportion and fairness. She tries to tell herself to be open-minded and make a similar list of all the things she likes, but it seems that will have to wait for a better mood, since right now she is much too busy being annoyed. When she arrives, she is not surprised to find that no one is there. She walks over to the little campus 'supermarket' which isn't that super and buys a phone card. Only to find when she approaches the phone, that it takes coins, but not cards. She dives into her bag for a 10-cent piece and dials the maintenance people. They say they'll send someone around immediately, and she returns to the apartment. Fifteen minutes later two new technicians turn up. After examining the fridge for a while they come into the lounge where Sophia is waiting.

'Miss Sophia, we have a look at the thermostat, and it is working very well.'

With barely suppressed annoyance, Sophia points to the empty milk carton on the sink, and says, 'Well something isn't working, and it's your job to find it and fix it.' Again she knows that she is being petty, but it seems such a long, cruel road of

misunderstanding and standing around to get something fixed around here. Is it this hard at home in Australia? That is a dangerous question, she thinks, since it reeks of unfair comparisons and a grass-is-greener mentality.

One of the technicians, obviously doesn't take to her attitude, and replies with an I-don't-care look. The other one realises that he can probably calm the crazy lady down, if he goes along with her. He pulls out a thermometer from his bag and puts it in the fridge, closing the door behind it. As the three of them stand there, Sophia glaring at the fridge, the nice technician looking at his watch, probably trying to work out how long to give the thermometer inside the fridge, and the bored technician standing at the window watching the Valley outside. After a few minutes, the nice technician opens the door.

12oC.

'Mmmm... You're right,' he says, 'It should be much colder than that.'

'I know', she replies.

At this point the two technicians get serious, probing the fridge inside and out. An hour later, after much poking and prodding, they decide that that the most likely problem is the refrigerant and that a specialist refrigeration technician will need to look at it. Unconvinced, but realising that at least there was now a genuine, concerned response to the problem, and promises of a speedy solution, she sees them out the door.

It is now 4.45pm. The coffee she left on the desk in the office is going to be cold. She still needs to get that morning caffeine. Could that explain the nagging headache starting at the base of her skull? On the way back to the office she picks up another coffee at the canteen.

Getting to the office, she manages to down this coffee within about two minutes. Everything suddenly seems easier to cope with.

Sometimes life in a new country can be tough. Most times it has to do with communication entanglements. But if I can just get that coffee, it is always more manageable.



**Kathryn Stok** was born in Geelong, Australia. She completed her Master of Engineering, at QUT Brisbane in June 2001, and in September 2001 moved to Singapore to study for a three-year doctorate thesis. Plans changed, as they do, and in October 2002, she moved to Zürich, Switzerland, where she now lives, making a second attempt at a PhD in Medical Engineering, reading avidly, and discovering the snow.

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