The ticket inspector

After this story was on the BBC, several people wrote in with their stories about being helped by strangers.

I was living in a student flat in North London, when the police knocked on my door one night. I thought it was because I hadn’t paid the rent for a few months, so I didn’t open the door. But then I wondered if it was something to do with my mother, who I knew wasn’t very well. There was no phone in the flat and this was before the days of mobile phones, so I ran down to the nearest phone box and phoned my dad in Leeds, in the north of England. He told me that my mum was very ill in hospital and that I should go home as soon as I could.

When I got to the station I found that I’d missed the last train to Leeds. There was a train to Peterborough, from where some local trains went to Leeds, but I would miss the connection by about 20 minutes. I decided to get the Peterborough train – I was so desperate to get home that I thought maybe I could hitchhike from Peterborough.

‘Tickets, please.’ I looked up and saw the ticket inspector. He could see from my eyes that I’d been crying. ‘Are you OK?’ he asked. ‘Of course I’m OK,’ I said. ‘You look awful,’ he continued. ‘Is there anything I can do?’ ‘You could go away,’ I said rudely.

But he didn’t. He sat down and said ‘If there’s a problem, I’m here to help’. The only thing I could think of was to tell him my story. When I finished I said, ‘So now you know. I’m a bit upset and I don’t feel like talking any more, OK?’ ‘OK,’ he said, finally getting up. ‘I’m sorry to hear that, son. I hope you make it home.’
I continued to look out of the window at the dark countryside. Ten minutes later, the ticket inspector came back.

**The students**

I was living in South Korea at the time, teaching English. I had to leave the country and return again because of problems with my visa, so I booked a ferry to Fukuoka in Japan. I intended to change some Korean money into Japanese yen when I got there, but when I arrived I discovered it was a holiday in Japan and all the banks were closed. I didn’t have a credit card, so I walked from the ferry terminal towards the town wondering what I was going to do without any Japanese money. I was feeling lonely and depressed when suddenly I heard a young couple speaking French. I asked them if they spoke any English, and they told me (in good English) that they were Belgian students. When I explained my problem, they immediately offered to take me around the city and look for somewhere where I could change money. They paid for my bus ticket, and they took me to several places and in the end we found a hotel where I was able to change my cash. They then invited me to join them and their friends for the evening. I had a fantastic night and have never forgotten how they changed all their plans just to help a stranger.

– Karina
The angel

It was a cold Sunday evening in Manchester. I was a university student, and my girlfriend and I had been invited to dinner with our tutor at his house 30 km away. We decided to go on my motorbike, but we hadn’t realized how cold it was, so we hadn’t dressed properly, and after ten minutes on the bike we were absolutely freezing. When we were about half way there, the bike started to make a funny noise and then stopped. We had run out of petrol. We stood at the side of the road, shivering with cold, and not sure what to do.

Suddenly a passing car stopped. The driver got out, opened the boot of his car, and took out a can of petrol. He walked up to my bike, opened the petrol tank, and poured the petrol in. He then closed the tank and got back into his car, without saying a single word, and drove away. We couldn’t believe our luck. We sometimes wonder if the man who rescued us was an angel…

– Andy
A question of luck?

What is the question we always ask about successful people? We want to know what they’re like – what kind of personalities they have, or how intelligent they are, or what kind of lifestyles they have, or what special talents they might have been born with. And we assume that it is those personal qualities that explain how that individual gets to the top of his or her profession.

But according to Malcolm Gladwell, in his book Outliers, we are asking the wrong questions. He thinks that while talent is obviously a factor, there are two other more important ones that make a person successful. The first of these factors is luck.
He begins with the example of sports players. In recent research done on various groups of elite ice hockey players from Canada and the Czech Republic, one fascinating fact came to light. In both countries, it was discovered that 40 per cent of the players in the top teams were born between January and March, 30 per cent between April and June, 20 per cent between July and September, and only 10 per cent between October and December. The explanation was simple. The school year in these countries runs from January to December. A boy who is ten on January 2nd will be in the same class as one whose 10th birthday is on December 30th. The chances are the first boy will be bigger, stronger, and more coordinated. He is much more likely than the other boy to be chosen to play in junior teams. He will then get better coaching than the others, and will play many more games, so will also get more practice. In the beginning his advantage isn’t so much that he is more talented, simply that he is older. He was lucky enough to be born in the first months of the year. But by the age of 13 or 14, with the extra coaching and practice, he really will be better than the others, and far more likely to be successful.

The extra practice is vital, because the second factor that Gladwell believes is of great importance in determining whether somebody is going to be successful or not is what he calls the ‘10,000 hours theory’. This theory, based on studies in many different fields, says that in order to get to the very top you need to put in 10,000 hours of practice, whether it is playing an instrument or a sport, or programming a computer.

Adapted from a British newspaper