

# It pays to be alert, even in S'pore

Young people who think it is passe to be vigilant in our safe nation may be in for a rude shock



BY SERENE LUO

BEING alert in Singapore has become an anomaly, if reactions to my recent misadventure are anything to go by.

About a fortnight ago, after an assignment at Marine Parade Community Club, I entered an empty women's restroom and, upon occupying a cubicle, heard someone else enter.

Yet, when none of the usual sounds followed - the clinkety-clack of high heels, zippers unzipping, water running - my hackles were raised. I hesitated, kept my clothes on and looked around.

That was when I saw it: a hand holding a candy-bar cameraphone under the cubicle divider. I screamed, and the perpetrator fled, but not before I recognised him as the man I had passed on the way in.

In the hours after that incident, the refrain I heard repeatedly as I recounted my shock was this: "Wah! How come you were so alert?"

That was the reaction from aunties sitting in the community club office, staff, my family, friends, even a police officer or two. After all, the last thing anyone expects in sunny, oh-so-safe Singapore is a man tailing a woman into a public toilet in broad daylight - and trying to take indecent photos of her.

Perhaps living in a low-crime state has lulled most of us Gen Y types into taking our safety for granted, even in crowded libraries, neighbourhood centres or malls.

Those of my generation and younger are generally strangers to violent crimes like kidnapping, hostage-taking or armed robbery. Our squeaky-clean streets promise that they do not constantly need to be on their guard. But while that security is what so many people love about Singapore, it also means it may have somewhat dampened our street smarts.

In comparison, my grandmother used to tell me how back in her day, when gun-toting robbers and child abductions were common in Singapore, people held on to their purses and little ones a lot tighter. Being naturally cautious, they were more aware of their surroundings and strangers who passed by.

The relative lack of urban intelligence might just be a reason why young people here have been labelled as delicate "strawberries" who bruise easily.

Elsewhere, young people seem quicker on their feet. A 23-year-old Vietnamese social worker and former street urchin I spoke to recently told me he would often give hungry children a place to sleep at night if they did not have anywhere to go. It is why he makes it a habit to lock up his wallet and cellphone every night, even in his own home, just in case any of them are desperate enough to steal from him.

The fact that being alert has become passe is frightening. Young people who expect only good from their city surroundings are likely to find their naivety repaid with more than a rude shock. Meanwhile, the real anomalies - perverts who try to take advantage of the vulnerable - fly under the radar.

Sure, our streets are mostly safe. But in a population of five million which continues to swell, being alert is a social investment which yields only a safe return.

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