You have just entered the examination hall for your A-level exams.
Everyone is feeling more confident about you than they are of themselves, since you scored a 94 per cent average in your preliminary exams.

The only problem is, you’re coming down with severe typhoid and malaria.

In the exam hall, you know almost all the answers, but can’t move your hand to write.

You score a mere 49 per cent for the exams and your dream of studying medicine in college goes down the drain.

With that score, you can’t even get into a decent college. And your family can’t afford to send you to school another year to retake your exams.

Sad? That is the story of my talented colleague Subhash, someone I met while doing volunteer work in India last month.

After his exams, Subhash gave up his dreams to support his family in Mumbai.

He took up a job at a pharmacy as a store helper and enrolled in a painting course at the same time.

He would leave home at 6am and work till 11am before going for art lessons.

After class, he would again return to work until he knocked off at 11pm.

His schedule was hectic. This went on for three years.

When he started out as a painter, work was hard to come by. He could barely cover the costs of his materials.

So he decided to go higher up the value chain, and learnt animation.

He finally clinched a job at a studio, but only as an office boy.

He would sit in for editors at 2am when they took a rest.

This way, he learnt editing.

One day, the boss caught him at the computer and was furious at the other editors for allowing him to use the expensive equipment.

Subhash begged the boss to take a look at his work. When he did, his boss was startled by the quality of the work.

After some months, Subhash became chief editor, presiding over the same people who “trained” him.

Now, he lives happily in a new home with his wife and a young daughter.

Subhash’s achievements did not come easy. He took an unconventional route to success. But at least it has a happy ending.

The same cannot be said for another person I once worked with.

Shiela, an office maid, married her longtime boyfriend when she was 21.

Her husband didn’t smoke, drink or gamble, and had a decent business.

With a son and two daughters in the household, they decided to sell their home for a smaller house so they could send their children to good private schools.

Even after buying the house, there was suddenly a lot of cash in their hands.

Shiela’s husband, who didn’t frequent bars before, decided to visit a dance bar.

There, he met some dancers and was hooked.

He soon started an illegal business smuggling girls from rural India to bars in Mumbai.

Shiela could only watch in agony, as he would threaten to leave the family if she protested.

She stuck with him because he provided money for the household and because the children were still in school.

When I hear such stories, I cannot help but feel thankful for what I have.

Encounters like these can put things in perspective.

There are people who have had to go through or is going through much more to get what we take for granted.

The writer is a fresh graduate from the School of Information Systems, Singapore Management University. To give feedback, e-mail tnp@sph.com.sg