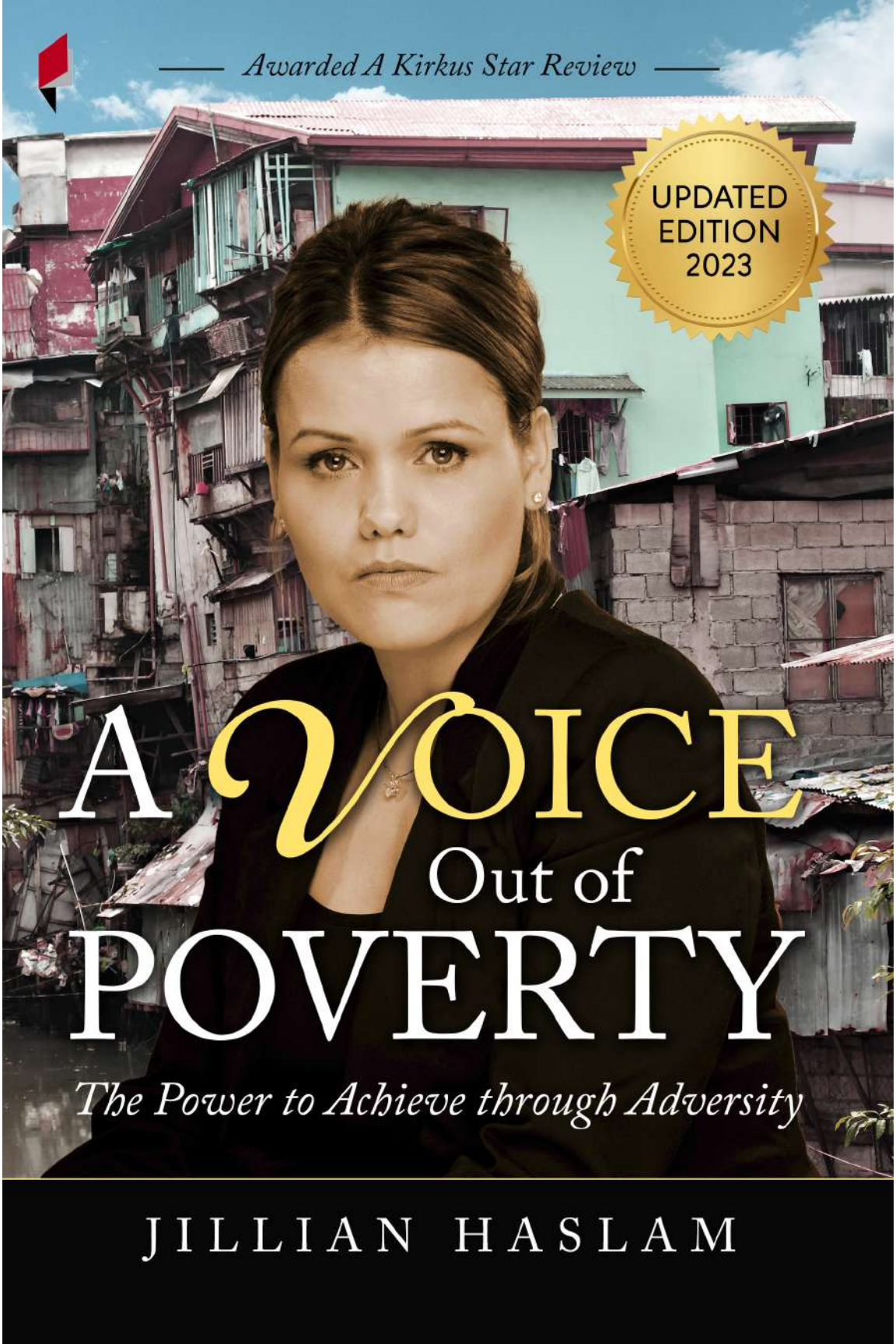
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A VOICE Out of POVERTY
The Power to Achieve through Adversity
JILLIAN HASLAM

a Voice out of Poverty

The Power to Achieve from Adversity

JILLIAN HASLAM

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A bristly, grey rat jutted its head through a wide crack in the peeling stucco wall, its long tail draped behind and hidden. It squinted its beady eyes and sniffed the air, as a light drizzle started to dampen the ground.

A few feet away, an older homeless woman, sitting under a precarious building canopy, shifted her eyes towards the rat, without moving her head. A stray dog nestled next to her, one of three gathered snuggly around her, bared its teeth, and growled at the rodent, without rising.

The woman swiveled her head in the rat's direction and shooed it away with a claw-like hand slicing the air. The rat withdrew, vanishing inside the wall. The dog returned its head to rest on its paws and closed its eyes.

The drizzle turned into a light rain.

My mother and I took in the rat scene side by side as we ambled down the street. My eyes remained riveted on the homeless woman. I wondered if she had a family or young children like me. Then, the noisy "pop-pop" of a Vespa flew near my eyes and broke my

concentration, causing me to pull my head back abruptly. I gripped my mother's hand as tightly as I could.

The rain was now steady but not enough to flood the crowded streets or inhibit the pace of the fast-moving foot and vehicle traffic.

I looked up to see an old man pulling a rickshaw coming towards us. I stared at him. His emaciated body looked as if his skin could peel off in thin layers, like a stale onion. He stared at me, sharing his single black tooth. I held my stare.

The rickshaw puller veered off the line of his path, forcing a dilapidated scooter that packed an entire family to swerve near us. The scooter splashed mud onto my legs and dress, and I started to cry. My only proper dress was drenched with filth. I now would have to undress to underclothes while it got washed. My mother stopped and crouched in front of me. I didn't hide my disgust.

"Oh, come on now Jillu, it's not that bad!" she said. The brusque tone harkened to how she'd counsel us not to yield to emotion. My mother relentlessly stressed that life could always have been harder. Never make a fuss. Be grateful for what you have, however paltry. Things can be worse.

I wasn't appeased, and my mother could tell.

"We can get it cleaned up when we get back," she added, wiping tears from my cheeks with a single thumb. Her other hand was trapped inside the hand of my younger sister, four-year-old Vanessa, who held on as if worried she'd fly away like a released balloon if she let go.

"Anyway, we're leaving in a few days, and where we're going is better." More parental reassurance about greener pastures.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To Mrs. Brown's. She's letting us sleep on the floor in her room for a while. It will be crowded but all of us will be together again."

"You mean Daddy and Donna can go there too?" I asked, my mood brightening. I saw a ghost of a smile emerging on Vanessa's

face as she took it all in. We often lived apart as a family because of our circumstances.

"Yes, but we can only stay for a few weeks, and then we must find somewhere else again. But don't worry, you know Daddy and I always find us something."

"Okay," I said, nodding.

We resumed shuffling down the streets, navigating mass congestion. I turned my head for a long look back at the old woman and her dogs. I felt a surge of empathy for her, alone in wet and dirty clothes, facing each day with the promise of nothing. Soon we'd have a roof over our heads in a family home while she'd continue to fend for herself in the unsympathetic and unforgiving slum streets. She'd continue to get wet and dirty. She'd continue to try to survive each day with no family to love and care for her; I felt grateful for what I had and prayed that someday she might have the same. As those thoughts flooded me, she gingerly placed sheets of old newspaper on the wet ground to sit on.

The rain fell a little harder.

That mid-1970s Calcutta scene typified my early childhood. We were homeless most of my first six years of life. Even in the best of financial times, when my father enjoyed full-time employment, his salary was insufficient for us to afford a permanent room, let alone a house. My mother often had to call upon friends—themselves often living in a single room—to allow us to squat on their floor or out on their veranda. When that wasn't available to us, we stayed in tiny, temporary rooms in areas steeped in squalor, where the rent was little or nothing.

Our life was a wandering migration through slums. We were never able to settle down in any one place as a family should. We

alternated locations every two or three months, and sometimes sooner. I suppose the good news was we traveled light. We tugged along two dirty plastic bags with our personal belongings and one larger bag to haul all the bedding we had.

The saddest was the separation. Because we had so few options as a relatively large family, because of limited space in places that welcomed us, we had to divide the family up to make living arrangements workable. For weeks on end, we'd be a family trying to survive as disconnected smaller units. Our vagabond existence destabilized us, threatening to disrupt the family cohesion my parents held dear.

When my father, at the age of fifty, suffered his first heart attack, we hit near rock bottom. We were at severe risk of long-term separation and illness from lack of food and nutrition. We longed for his return. But after his long stay in a free hospital, he went to live with a friend and our mother took us younger girls to live with another friend.

The new family was incredibly kind. I've never forgotten how loving and selfless they were with us, even though they didn't have much themselves and we had nothing to offer in return. It was a brief respite. We knew we'd have to leave at some point soon, if for no other reason than staying wasn't fair to them. But to where?

One day my mother took Vanessa and me to see Mr. Nazareth, a kindly family friend. Mr. Nazareth was a tall, dark, South Indian, Christian gentleman in his late forties, who my parents had met through a mutual acquaintance and in the past helped my father find work. Mr. Nazareth was blessed with a charitable heart. Poor himself, he was always smartly dressed, a habit from his father who had worked closely with the British Army during British rule. His family had worked for the British Army and he always wore perfectly pressed shirts and trousers and behaved like an absolute gentleman.

Seeing Mr. Nazareth was a high point for Vanessa and me. He never failed to have a bag of *Muri Balls* ready for us. Flavored with cardamom, ginger, and coconut, and the size of a golf ball, Muri Balls were made from puffed rice, honey, and jaggery—an unrefined sugar. They were super sweet and light and a huge treat. Each time we saw Mr. Nazareth he'd have a bunch for us wrapped in a paper packet called a *thonga*.

But my mother didn't take us to him to indulge our sweet teeth. My mother sought his guidance regarding where and how we should live, which we desperately needed. He asked us to return two days later with my father.

We returned as requested and gathered with him into the crowded small living space in his two-room home. My parents perched on his two cane stools called *moras* and he, hands on his knees, sat upright on his sole dining chair. Vanessa and I sat on the floor and leaned against the wall, devouring the obligatory Muri Balls as fast as humanly possible.

"I'd like to make you a proposition," he said. His tone was more formal than normal, like a CEO leading a discussion with staff. He paused to emphasize the moment and continued.

"I have spoken to a friend who would like to open a school for the poor in Dum Dum. The area is desperately short of such facilities, so many children in need."

"I see," said my father, with a tone of respect, "but why are you telling us?"

"I would like you, Roland, to be the principal and Margaret the teacher. I want you to teach the children to speak and learn English. But beyond that, I want to offer you all a place to live. You cannot go on like this."

Understanding some but not all, I looked at my parents for reactions. I'd never seen the facial expressions they wore. They were incredulous, off-center, even stunned. They darted looks between each other, and then my mother spoke.

"But why … why us?" She asked with a rare stammer.

"Because I can think of no one better. You're both intelligent people, and no one could deny your love of children," he added with a smile-filled glance at Vanessa and me.

"I see, but what … what would the, um, arrangements be?" asked my father, struggling to find the words.

"I have acquired some premises to serve as the schoolrooms. Adjacent to those is a good room—it needs some work—that will provide you with a home. In addition, you'll both receive a salary. Not much, but more, I know, than you've recently earned, Roland. So, what do you say?"

Our parents looked at each other in silence. A few seconds later, my usually stoic mother burst into tears. I had never seen her cry. I had never known tears of joy.

Dum Dum, at that time, was a rural suburb and offered an exodus from central Calcutta where odds of survival as a family had grown long. It was also where my father was born in 1922 to British parents. My parents had increasing concerns for my sister Donna's welfare. Approaching the age of fourteen, she was becoming more and more attractive, making her a distinct target in the unsafe, darker depths of Calcutta. My parents accepted the appointment with immense gratitude.

My parents worked hard to set up the school, following the same model the British used years before. Within months, it was up and running. Using two ramshackle rooms next to our home, the school started with four or five children and grew to around sixty. English was in high demand and my parents wanted to make a difference in the lives of the local Indian children.

Our home wasn't quite up to normal standards, to say the least. The underlying land was once used to dump rubbish and was home

to a generous collection of rats and snakes. We had a single room, sized fifteen-by-ten-feet, in which we ate, lived, and slept. It was built of mud and stones and was covered with a patchwork roof of mixed and broken tiles. Each time it rained, we had to move the old mattresses that served as beds and place old towels and mugs on the floor to collect and absorb rainwater. My mum's friends and elder siblings recall how the large gaps in the roof let them gaze at the sky whenever they slept over during a visit.

The place where we lived in Dum Dum

We cooked outside, not far from an Indian-style squat toilet in a small courtyard—no more than a patch of mud with walls made of rusting, corrugated iron. It was here we'd shower too, scooping water with an old plastic jug from a concrete tank that we poured over ourselves.

It was hard. But we were grateful. We had begun to enjoy our first family stability in memory. We were together under the same roof, which also meant we could eat and pray together in an attempt to strengthen family bonds and let our spirits feed one another.

My father was an early riser, up at 5 a.m. every day—a habit born of his service in the British Army in India. Each day, once up, he'd venture to the narrow veranda to make his first cup of tea of the day and bring another to my mother in bed. Returning to the veranda, he'd sip his tea while sitting on a mora, waiting for Vanessa and me to arrive with our sleepy heads to join him while he cooked us breakfast.

Before this time, my father had almost never ventured into the kitchen to try his hand at meal preparation. In our new circumstances, however, he was eager to do so, wanting to lighten the domestic load from my mother, now that she was the school's teacher.

The kitchen featured a small, single-burner kerosene stove on which he balanced a flat pan. Apart from the plates on which we ate and the one pan for cooking, the kitchen included two large tins: one filled with *atta*, the flour to make different breads; and the other with *dalda*, a hydrogenated vegetable oil, a cheaper version of ghee. The tins were large. Buying in bulk was less expensive and also, because of their size, the tins doubled as places for little people to sit.

As soon as we awoke, we scurried in our nightclothes to the veranda to find our father. We'd give him a big hug and kiss on his head from behind and wish him "good morning." As consistently, he'd turn around, give us each a kiss back and return to cooking. I have this image forever embedded in my memory of my six foot, two inches tall father, dressed only in vest and underpants, preparing our breakfast, fascinated by his long legs, pushed out like a giant wishbone.

We would dutifully take seats on the two tins. We were so tiny that when we put our legs up, with our knees towards our chests, we sat quite comfortably while we waited for the first story of the morning. While the alluring whiff of the cooking flatbread—called

parathas—broke our sleep, as hungry as we were, the kisses and stories he'd tell us are what we were eager to enjoy.

One tale I've never forgotten got told after Vanessa attempted to turn the paratha on the hot pan despite being told not to touch it. My father lectured that bad things often happen to naughty children who don't listen and do as they are told. He proceeded to explain.

"This story is a secret one," he said in a deep whisper as he leaned towards us. "You must promise never to tell anyone I told it to you."

"We promise Daddy; we promise!" we replied in excited unison. I gripped my hands together and pushed them into my lap to keep me still and attentive.

"One day, a very fair girl with blond hair and blue eyes, about eight years old, saw a tin containing biscuits on a top shelf in a tiny kitchen. Below were two other shelves and below them a big pot of hot water on a stove. Her mother asked her not to touch the biscuits, but the little girl couldn't stop thinking about them. When her mother left the kitchen, she grabbed a box, stepped onto the bottom shelf, and, as she reached for the tin, lost her balance, and fell—backside first—into the pot of hot water. Her screams were heard everywhere, and being of fair skin, her body turned red like a tomato. She wound up with a huge blister across her backside. And that, girls, is what happens when you are disobedient!"

"Oh, Daddy!" cried Vanessa, "How did she go to the toilet?"

"Very carefully!" he replied with a grin. Then, he added with a mischievous grin, "And guess who that girl was?

"Who?" We piped up together again.

"It was Donna! But remember … it's a secret."

We burst into giggles and laughter. Immediately forgetting our promises not to tell, we ran into the room to wake up Donna, demanding to see her burnt backside!

It was at my father's side where many of life's questions got answered. He was fond of saying that the best school in the world

was at the feet of an elderly person. Today, I see that as a kernel of infinite wisdom.

Despite our new beginning, we never lost sight of what life was like before Dum Dum. Some parts I remembered and never forgot. Other parts I wanted to hear about from my favorite storytellers, my parents.

So, one day during our routine breakfast gathering, I asked my father to tell us about earlier times, beyond the stretch of our memory. As he often did, against the backdrop of the rising sun, he turned his reply into a wonderful story.

What the inside looked like in our living quarters in Dum Dum

"One chilly yet sunny October morning, a family was living in a tiny yellow room on a narrow rundown street in the city of Calcutta. To the right of the door was a wooden, wobbly chair, and further in, an old, iron bed with hardly any bedding because the family was

quite poor lay a lady who was trying to get some sleep. Across the room from the bed were some old tin trunks with clothes on them and, towards the end of the room on the left, was a table with a tiny stove and some utensils, mugs, and washcloths.

"Outside the door were buckets used for water and a cooking pot, and inside, a man was pacing up and down, repeatedly muttering to himself, 'Will someone help me, will someone help me please; will someone help me, will someone help me please.'"

It seemed my father was more than acting out the story. It seemed he was reliving his past. His brow furrowed, his mind wandered, and I noticed a hint of tears in his eyes. But he caught himself, smiled, and turned the paratha on the pan with an old, flat, aluminum spoon. He then returned to the story.

"Eventually, his wife, who was the lady lying on the bed, gave him an angry look that said—STOP. He turned to her and asked, 'What can we do? We need to get you to a hospital!' 'But we have no money,' replied the woman. 'We'll have to go to a free hospital then,' said the man, 'we need help because you're going to have a baby!' Now the woman stared at her huge tummy and looked even more exasperated."

"What does exas … exasper … mean?" I asked while he placed a paratha onto my aluminum plate. He looked at Vanessa and then winked at me.

"Like you feel when you've told Vanessa twenty times to stop doing something, but she carries on," he replied with a smile, and, with a grin of my own, I nodded. Vanessa started to protest, but I quickly shushed her. After placing the next paratha on the pan, my father continued.

"'I know very well I'm having a baby, but I'm *not* going to one of *those* places,' the woman replied between gasps and contractions, 'and we don't have time. My waters have burst. The baby will have to be born here and now!'"

"What are cont … contractions, Daddy, and what waters had burst?" asked Vanessa as he turned her paratha.

"It's like a pain that comes and goes; one moment you want to smile and the next minute it's '*Ahhhhhh!*'" he said, with a mock grimace while grabbing his stomach so dramatically he almost fell off his stool. He moved past the part about bursting waters.

We laughed and then urged him to continue. My breakfast remained untouched. I'd lost track of my hunger.

"The man looked around the room and said, 'Here? Now? It's filthy and there's no doctor, not to mention the fact we have no money to pay for one to come here either. What if we lose this baby too? Just as we lost the other two?'"

That last part made him pause for a moment. "What babies?" I wanted to ask but decided to wait for the right opportunity. The look on my father's face told me he wanted to continue.

"The woman replied that those babies survived their births, but the man said neither of them made it past six months old. She told him it wasn't time to think about the past and to stop arguing. She told him that he must go and see if Jenny was home and ask her to come quickly. Jenny was a nurse who was a friend and lived in the area. The man rushed to Jenny's home and asked her to come quickly, that the lady was going to have a baby."

"Who was Jenny?" I asked as he put another paratha on Vanessa's plate.

"She was not very tall but quite plump with strawberry blonde hair and *big* glasses," he replied, outlining the shape of spectacles with his fingers and thumbs and peering through them with exaggerated bug eyes.

We sniggered, and Vanessa wanted to make this into a new game, but I urged him to carry on with the story.

"She told the man she needed a bowl of hot water and some towels very quickly and then she got to work. The woman who was going to

have the baby was so calm, as though she had done this before, and chatted with the nurse while also dealing with her contractions and pain and telling the man what to do!

"It was shortly after nine in the morning when there was a loud cry and into the world a healthy little baby arrived. The baby was simply perfect and brought great joy to everyone. It was a girl, a *very* special little girl. She was named Jillian … but we call her Jillu."

Both our little hands rose to cover our smiles under our beaming eyes. We were in awe and shock. His story moved me beyond words, and not simply because it was about me, but because of how he told it, with such love and warmth.

My paratha lay still untouched but, with a mouthful of food and crumbs on her chin, Vanessa quickly put her plate on the floor and jumped up to give me the biggest hug she could manage. I can still feel those skinny little arms wrapped around my neck to this day.

Our lives had changed. We weren't comfortable. We barely could make ends meet. But we adjusted, and my parents made us feel like a family, bonded in a single cramped room by love and devotion. Our poverty included priceless possessions—each other.

My happiest childhood memories are from Dum Dum, and I recall how proud my parents were of what they'd accomplished after much hardship and pain.

The joy that swept into our lives in Dum Dum, however, was not to last. The passing reference in my father's story to two children who didn't survive six months of life were siblings I never knew. They died from malnutrition. Part of family history, it was a dark harbinger.

12 | The Milk of Human Kindness

Hours passed without me noticing anything except the ticking of our rusty alarm clock. It was early February 1980 and eight months before my tenth birthday, and the temperature was a comfortable twenty-four degrees Celsius, a heat I could usually sleep soundly in. Not today. My mind rattled too much and so I rose to start the day. To avoid wakening Vanessa, I quietly scurried around the room, sweeping, cleaning, and folding and refolding a blanket for a bed. I even mopped the outside veranda as best I could. Once done, I sat in my father's chair, a rickety piece of twisted iron. My bare feet scarcely touched the cracked floor.

In our tiny room, we had a single shelf, high on the wall, attached to the dirty, white-painted concrete. It was where we stored precious items. Among them was the small torch someone gave Dad, the pretty handkerchiefs Mum took huge delight in receiving on birthdays, and the odd cracked ornament grateful neighbors passed on as a thank you.

Below the shelf and above the bed was a little altar, two eight-by-eleven-inch pictures: one of Jesus, the other of Our Lady Mary. We were not particularly religious, but we did pray at night, beseeching

for the health and happiness of our matrons, teachers, parents, siblings, and neighbors, and of course each other. We parroted the Lord's prayer, taking comfort in the reference to daily bread, no matter how empty our bellies.

This day I kept a vigil eye on the doorway, eagerly hoping for any sound that announced the return of our parents. My pregnant mother had left several days ago to give birth, my dad half carrying her to the free hospital several miles away. The look on her exhausted face haunted my dreams when I half dozed earlier, trying to conjure up a best-case scenario but all the while fearing the worst.

The free hospital was where the poorest of the poor got treated and gave birth. It was the best option for Mummy and the baby to survive. I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping against hope, but the thought of Mummy not coming home nibbled at the edges of my mind. That could never happen. Could it?

No.

None of us could cope without Mum.

Vanessa awoke. She wanted to help and offered to scrub the utensils, trying her best to take some of the load off me. She, too, was exhausted from anticipation. I'd given up trying to rest. Each time I'd closed my eyes, the distant cry of a baby, from a nearby room, turned into the echo of my eldest sister Donna's screams five years ago. Her anguished cries, at the sight of our twin baby brother Alan and sister Kimberley being placed inside tea chests for burial, were sounds I'd longed to forget. But never have. Never will.

After the burial, I overheard Mummy telling friends that doctors warned her about having more children. But pregnancy, either wanted or unwanted, was part of God's will. I prayed and prayed it wouldn't lead to Mummy's death.

When she left for the hospital this time, she reassured me she wouldn't be long as she winced and waddled off into the night, with Dad propping her up. She never wanted us to worry. Her mantra was

consistent: there is someone worse off than you. And in the slums, she was right.

But she also never wanted us to go without. Every night she insisted we eat whatever food she'd found that day, claiming she was full because someone or the other had fed her earlier. As her shadow disappeared down the streets a few days ago, I had fixed on her matchstick-like legs, as if they could easily snap, barely able to prop up her middleweight.

Why weren't they home yet?

As dawn broke, I continued to stare at the passage as the daily familiar sounds and smells of the slum slowly filtered into our space.

First, the fire next door got lit. Didi, the Hindi name for sister, Mum's best friend, always rose at 4 a.m. to light a fire to cook her husband's *subzi* and *roti*—vegetable curry and bread made with flour—for his lunch before he set off for work. The smoke seeped under our door and through wall cracks. Vanessa coughed in response. We were long used to coughing in the morning. It never bothered us. Dad even sang a silly little ditty about it.

"Oh, Didi's frying again and Didi's frying again. It's 4 o'clock in the morning and Didi's frying again."

I smiled at the thought of Dad's daft song. It never failed to make us giggle first thing. I cleared my throat as the familiar tickle enveloped my nostrils. Quietly, so I didn't wake Vanessa after she'd nodded off again, I opened the door to let fresh air dilute the acrid smoke.

Next came the cheerful cry of the drain lady as other early risers shouted their good mornings to each other. With her bare hands and a piece of tin, she always picked up whatever delights the drain held to throw into a bucket with a flourish.

Next came the giggles of toddlers chasing each other up and down the slender lane, so narrow you could touch both sides with barely outstretched arms.

In the distance, I heard a street vendor chasing street kids away, probably throwing a piece of samosa or bread at them before he set up for the day.

Beyond, I could hear the clinking noise of buckets and the sound of the water pump as men started to brush their teeth with neem sticks and clear their throats.

Familiar sounds we'd grown to love, signifying the start of a fresh day before the incessant cacophony of a busy slum overwhelmed the air.

Suddenly Didi stuck her head inside our doorway.

"Any news, Jillu, about Memsaab?" She asked. She was smiling but her forehead was knotted with concern. Like all the neighbors, she called Mum *Memsaab*, meaning Ma'am.

Her voice snapped my consciousness fully back into the room.

"Not yet," I replied. My face was burning, my habitual fever reaction to an anxious event.

"Ah stay strong, God will never abandon us," Didi said, beaming the brightest of smiles. Her positivity lit up our room. She glanced at our altar. "God never gives you more than you can deal with. Stay strong, Jillu, they'll be home soon," she said. I returned the smile and off she went, chuckling to herself, her arms full of washing.

Vanessa woke again, rubbing her eyes, staring at me.

"Are they not back yet?"

"No," I replied, holding back tears.

As if Didi had known, the doorway suddenly filled with Dad's stooping shoulders, Mummy clinging to his elbow. I opened my mouth to speak but stopped myself. He held a bunch of blankets in the crook of his arm.

"You're back!" I cried.

Neither answered.

One look told me all I needed to know. Dad turned to help shuffle my mum to the bed. Wordlessly, she crawled under a blanket and curled into a fetus shape. With no more than a whisper, she told

us the doctors gave the baby about three days to live. Dad placed the bundle next to her and slumped into his chair.

They looked like broken souls.

"They sent us home, Jillu." He whispered. "They say she won't survive."

His voice was flat and dull, emitting a tone I'd never heard from him before. I looked at Mum, her face an impassive mask. She tried to speak to me, I assume to offer some comfort like she did about everything bad, but no sound escaped. Vanessa, mute with shock, stood there speechless.

Without asking, I took the few short steps to the bed. I moved the motionless bundle of blankets apart to see a peaceful, almost emaciated face nestled inside. Loosening her swaddle, I gently pulled out a tiny hand and tiny foot, the skin as soft as fine sand.

"She is so beautiful, Mummy," I smiled. She looked so perfect. It was hard to believe she was dying. I marveled at how precious she was, feeling a proud swell of love in my heart for my new baby sister.

Then she opened her eyes.

They were sunken and glazed. They told me she might never grow to see anything outside these walls. I knew the look of malnourishment.

I picked up Neil so he could see her and gave her a little kiss on her cheek.

Dad was bent double in his chair, head in hands. He usually held himself erect and proud, his sparse hair neatly combed, dressed in a shirt and trousers. The discipline he'd learned in the British Army never left him, even in a Calcutta slum. Tufts stuck up from behind his ears and his rumpled shirt wasn't fully tucked.

"Jillu, your sister has been born with rickets." He said slowly. "It is a disease caused by a lack of vitamin D, calcium, and other things. You can tell by looking at her with her swollen belly, her tiny thin … " His weak voice trailed off.

Dad never hid the truth from us, always careful to explain. He wanted us to grow up understanding our situation in an educated manner. Often, he used metaphors from philosophers, poets, singers, and writers to illustrate his points. We could quote Einstein, Kipling, and various British greats from the time we could speak. Even if we didn't know exactly what the words meant, they comforted us.

Mummy let out a noise that sounded like a sob from somewhere deep inside.

"I have lost my other babies and this will happen again," as if speaking to no one but herself. She took a deep breath, before turning her face to the mattress.

Instinctively and carefully, I picked up the bundle. In my mind's eye, I suddenly saw Donna again, hunched over the tea chest, sobbing her heart out at seeing her baby twin siblings die. I was too young to fully understand what had happened back then. Afterwards, I had wondered if all babies went off to live in tea chests.

Now, almost ten years old, I understood Donna's pain. As she loved those twins, I loved this baby already. It was a deep protective love that surprised me.

"We can help her," I whispered to Dad urgently. "Feed her milk. Stop her from starving."

He shook his head with such helplessness and sadness that my stomach knotted. I knew in that moment he didn't get the advance he'd asked from his boss. What little money we had wouldn't stretch far. I felt heat rising in my head again. But I didn't want to be unwell. I needed to be strong to help. I wiped my forehead, relieved Dad seemed too upset to notice. He might have told me to put the baby down otherwise.

"What's her name?" I asked.

"Susan," Mum replied.

"That's lovely," said Vanessa, peering at our new sister with pride similar to my own.

Susan was the name of a tall, beautiful teacher (the daughter of our food matron at boarding school) who helped us whenever she could. She was consistently kind, gentle, and respectful to my mother. The perfect person to name a baby after.

Mum reached for her with shaking arms and I carefully placed her on the bed. Mum was too weak to grab the baby from me.

"She's going to die, Jillu," she said gently. "We can't stop this. We just have to be here for her."

Tears formed in my eyes, making Mum's face fuzzy. Vanessa was openly crying now. I tried to keep my rising tears in.

"We must accept Susan may not make it. All we can do is make her as comfortable as possible, show her she was blessed. There is a reason she's been sent to our family so we will show her love and care," Dad continued weakly. "The doctor gave us this medicine but I doubt it can do any good. She needs it every hour, mixed with milk. But Mummy can't make milk and we can't afford what we need."

I took the small white envelope of paper he pointed to and held it to my chest. Inside were white tablets with instructions to grind, mix with a teaspoon of milk, then give to the baby. It was a glimmer of hope. The doctors had still given them something, hadn't they? They wouldn't have done that if she were destined to die would they?

Poor Mummy's eyes closed as weakness overcame her. I felt a surge of desperation to turn this situation around. I wanted to make Mum happy. I wanted to save my sister Susan, who had been handed a death sentence before she'd even drunk milk.

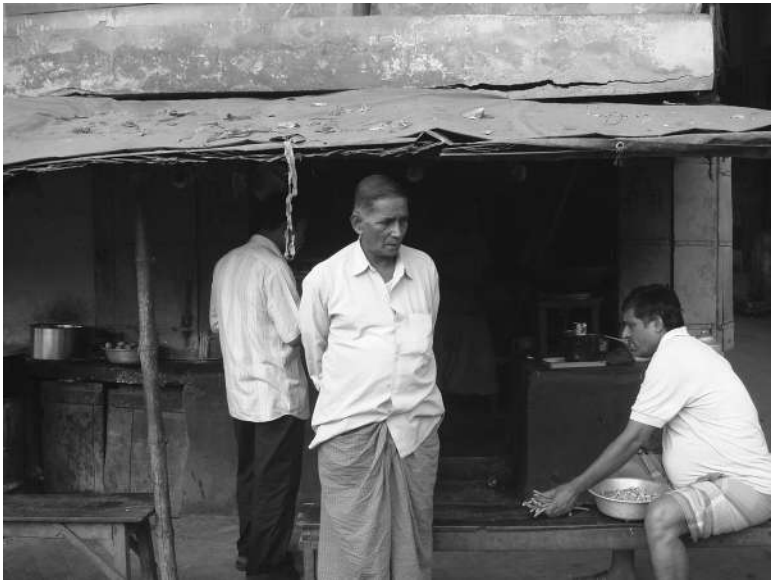
Milk!

Something so simple was the answer. Babies drank milk and she needed it more than ever now. It was her only chance. My only chance.

I carefully rearranged Susan's blankets, so they didn't fall over, then without saying where I was going, I put on my mother's slippers and darted out of our door. Spying a stainless-steel bowl washed up on our veranda, I grabbed it and tore down the passage towards

the vendors. My head spun with thoughts as I zigzagged as fast as I could down the narrow corridors, jumping over neighbors throwing buckets of water out, avoiding kids playing with a broken plastic ball. All I could think about was milk, milk, milk!

The vendors who sold food to the extremely poor of the slums worked a few minutes from our front door. They cooked from tiny places, in the street over large coal fires, using woks to fry sweets or dry fry rotis or provide tea and samosas. Vanessa and I had tried and true methods of extracting food from vendors, a combination of unabashed persistence and patience. But today it wasn't food I needed; it was milk. And it wasn't to fill a belly; it was to save a life.



The tea shop that gave me the free milk that helped me to save Susan's life

My new target was the tea shop.

A grumpy, middle-aged vendor called Ashok ran the small tea shop. We often worked for him, shifting to the bin the piles of ash that accumulated underneath his huge clay ovens. For that filthy

unpleasant job, he'd pay us in stale biscuits or any unsold food that was left for days. I'd never asked for milk before. Now I wondered what mood he was in.

Before reaching the tea shop, because I was so eager, I clumsily knocked into a man on a bicycle. He yelled at me but I didn't miss a beat of my run. When I arrived in front of Ashok, I was panting like an exhausted dog.

"Go away," he spat without even looking up from the dirty glass counter that displayed small sweets. In front of the stall sat two old benches for customers to sit on, next to an old metal drum of water where people could wash their hands and rinse their mouths. I took a deep breath before words tumbled out.

"Please-Ashok-I-need-some-milk," I said as if in one word.

He smiled, revealing red and brown teeth. For a split second, I wanted to hug him as it looked as if he would fill the bowl I held out, mimicking a scene out of Oliver Twist.

"Ha-ha! You want milk? Get lost. You'll be wanting half the shop next."

I knew Ashok had heard this all before, hundreds of times a week.

People brought their children with cleft palates, their husbands without legs, their starving pregnant wives, all begging for a small meal, one mouthful to save them from certain or near death. In desperate times, people took desperate measures.

"Ashok it's not for me, it's for Susan," I said, forcing myself to speak slower. "She's my new baby sister. She'll die without it."

He looked at me in disbelief.

"Ah really?" He questioned. "Go home to your parents and that naughty sister of yours."

But Ashok knew I wasn't lying about having a new baby in the family. After all, my mother had shuffled past him when she returned from the hospital. He also knew I was trustworthy. I'd never stolen from him or asked for more than was fair.

Ashok nodded at a waiting customer, indicating our conversation was over. I stood with a racing mind, wondering what I could say next to persuade him. I positioned myself neatly to the side, watching like a hawk.

We had in the past endured burning splashes of hot fat for hours for a piece of food. The least I could do now for Susan was stand here, despite my naturally shy nature. So I waited, humming to myself, swaying from foot to foot as Ashok pointedly ignored me.

An hour passed and I remained in the same spot. Several times Ashok tried to shoo me away, but I stood firm. When the buzz of the shop died down, he glanced up and caught my eye. This time he held my gaze with more interest.

"So, you say you have a baby sister?' he said, more gently. "She's dying? Who says so?"

"The doctors and my parents," I said, unable to take my eyes off the huge *dachi* of milk bubbling on the on the fire. "Please, Ashok, I can't let her die. Please give me some milk so I can feed her."

He snatched my stainless-steel bowl and smoothly filled it up with a ladle. It looked thinner in smaller portions, possibly diluted eight to one, but I couldn't stop smiling. It was liquid gold.

"Now get out." He bellowed. "And don't come back!"

"Thank you!" I exclaimed, turning as quickly and carefully as possible. I needed to get home fast, without wasting a precious drop.

Back home, the room was so deathly quiet nobody could have guessed a newborn baby had arrived.

"I have milk, Mummy!" I said triumphantly.

My exhausted parents exchanged startled looks before Dad quickly stood to help crush the tablets to mix with the milk. I took a spoon, squeezed Susan's cheeks, and gently dribbled tiny amounts in-between her thin lips, now a worrying shade of dark grey. Some pooled into the corners of her mouth but she gently sucked on the rest to my absolute relief.

My mother began to cry. I thought they were tears of happiness, but later realized they probably were from fear of harboring unrealistic hopes. Susan drank as much as she could, before closing her eyes.

As I rocked my baby girl back to sleep, I gently pressed my nose to her forehead breathing in her sweet baby smell. Silently I made a promise to do everything I could to save her. After laying her down, I picked up the rusty alarm clock to set the timer for the next hour. I was so tired. But I had to plan ahead, which I would do for nights on end.

I vowed silently to return to Ashok tomorrow and the next day and the next. Even if I had to beg for his kindness, I'd do whatever it took. I'd work extra hours for him. I'd get there early. I'd even offer to take the job of the little boy who washed his utensils. Just if he'd let me have the milk. Somehow, I was determined there would be a miracle and Susan would survive. That was my hope, and I clung to it.

We never had much but we always had hope. And I knew without hope in the slums you have nothing.

Finally, I allowed my heavy eyelids to close. With my intention to save Susan, I let myself relax again.

Little did I realize then, I'd found something precious, deep inside of myself. My strong willpower to make something happen made me more likely to succeed. I decided on a clear path to follow and nothing was going to stop me. Call it mind over matter, the power of intent, or whatever you like. But it's something I live by today, as much as my nine-year-old self did, holding my dying sister, back then.

About the Author

Jillian's combination of compelling stories, humanitarian effort, and inspirational wisdom, always spellbind her audiences including Cambridge University, King's College London, Bank of England, McDonalds, Barclays, Nova Nordisk and countless others. She inspires her audiences to appreciate their potential and how to achieve it.

As a survivor of poverty and oppression, Jillian Haslam brings a unique perspective gained from decades of proven resilience. She uses her own story to show others how to derive meaning from their hardships, find grace in adversity, and develop genuine purpose to achieve their destiny. Jillian honors the invaluable story within us all and shows us how to integrate our darkest moments in order to light the way to fulfillment.

Born in the slums of Calcutta to parents of British ancestry, Jillian faced a bruising childhood of extreme poverty, malnutrition, and disease. But from a young age, she had a gift of seeing beauty among the grit. Despite the bleakest of circumstances, Jillian demonstrates the messages of hope, generosity, and community, which she uses to

achieve her own dreams today. Audiences leave inspired to face their own adversity and achieve their destiny.

Determined to reduce the number of people facing the same hardships as her, Jillian has launched charities to empower everyone from young children and women to the elderly and disadvantaged. Her tireless work has brought her a growing list of awards, including the Mother Teresa Memorial International Award, and The True Legend Award from *The Telegraph*. *The Independent* honoured her at the Asian Woman of the Year Awards.

When Jillian is not traveling on the public speaking circuit or working with her charities, she can be found at her home outside of London where she lives with her husband and their very good dog, Molly.

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