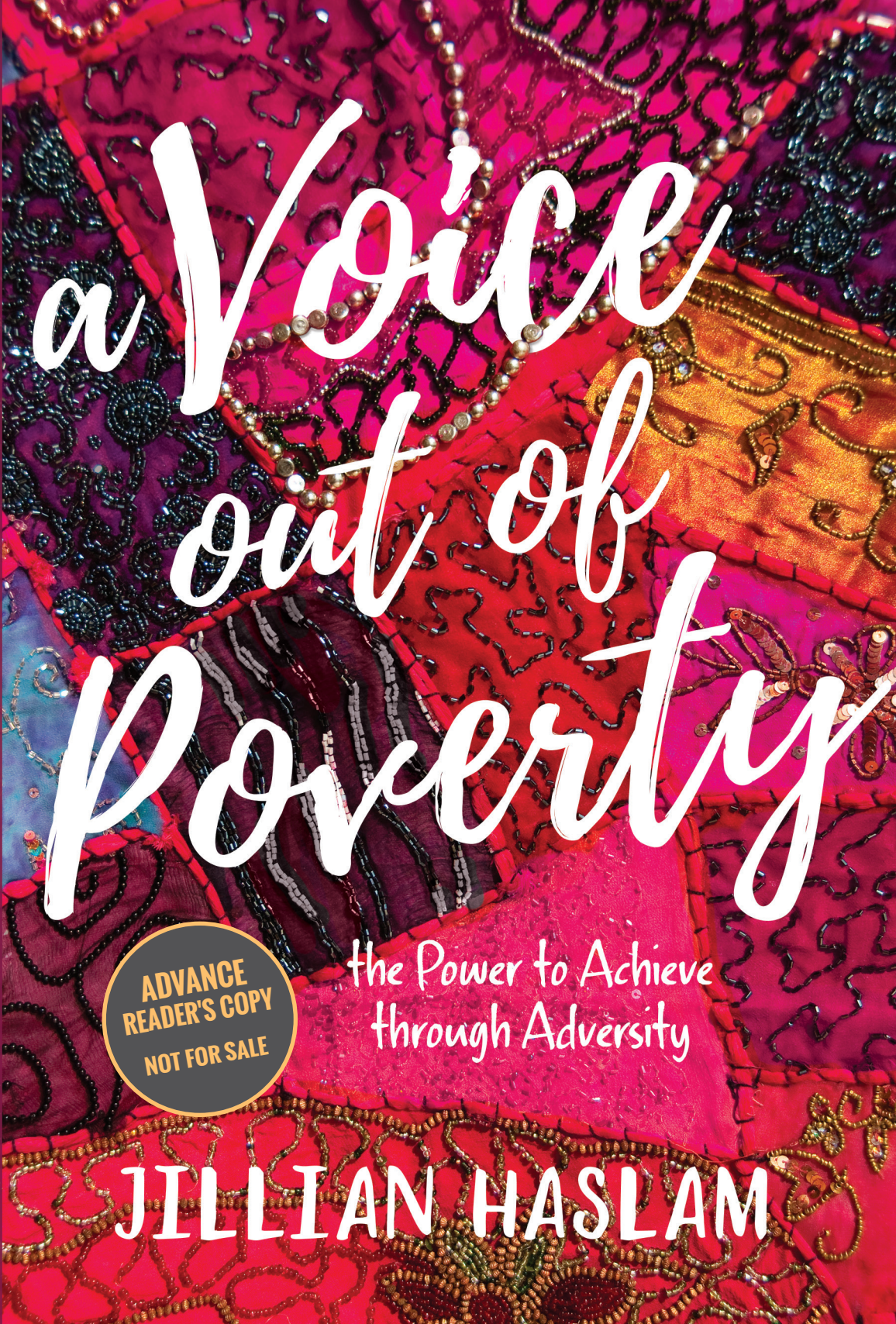
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the Power to Achieve through Adversity
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JILLIAN HASLAM

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Dedication

This book is book is dedicated with all my love to:

My father, Roland Terrance Haslam and my mother, Margaret Althea Haslam

All my siblings, who endured and came through some of the worst times with me, and especially to:

Donna, Vanessa, Neil & Susan

My Nieces, Jillian and Samantha and my nephew Oliver, for the love and happiness they have brought into all our lives after so much hardship and misery.

And finally, to all those who suffer from hardship, poverty and discrimination through no fault of their own.

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1 | Dum Dum

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.