

A VOICE OUT OF POVERTY

by Jillian Haslam

EXCERPT

“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.