

Treasure Hunt

TREES WHISPER. A BREEZE BLOWS. I AM SIX YEARS OLD. MY AUNT DEBY AND I ARE HAVING AN OUTDOOR TEA PARTY. (YES, THE SAME BELOVED AUNT MENTIONED EARLIER.)

We wear floppy hats, sip tea, and imagine we are in England, at the palace with the queen. Her pretend British accent lilts and tickles my ears. It is the first memory I have of an accent, and right then and there, I am captivated.

As I grew, so did my curiosity and passion to surround myself with people from all around the world. I posted *National Geographic* pictures and world maps on my walls in my childhood bedroom. They hung from my ceiling and covered my door. These images were of distant lands and communities—of food, homes, and villages I'd not yet seen. I would go to sleep and wake up thinking about these people and places. Even then—in my early days of life—I dreamt that I would see, visit, eat with, and get to know these strangers in distant lands.

Years later, as a teenager, I was offered the extraordinary opportunity to go to India. I basked in the sounds of new languages and blaring horns I heard as I got off the plane in Calcutta, the wave of hot air that hit my skin as I exited the airport, the sensation of wearing saris, the mode of traveling around the city in rickshaws, the smells of aromatic spices coming from the street food vendors at every corner, and the *delIGHT* to my senses of steaming, sweet, spicy, and milky chai.

One afternoon, I headed outside with a friend, in the midst of my first monsoon. We walked into warm sheets of rain plunging from the sky and watched the streets swell from puddles to streams to rivers. Shopkeepers moved with focused and accustomed determination, effortlessly and expediently clanging their shop doors down within minutes to protect their wares. I muffled a scream as a mouse trying to escape the flooding streets ran across my toes, the first of many firsts in this far-off land.

This bewildering familiarity and joy were clues pointing to my purpose.

From the very start, I felt at home. Back then, it was a bit of a mystery. I found myself thinking, *How can it be, that a place so unfamiliar, so different, feels like home?* But, now, I know why. I understand. This bewildering familiarity and joy were clues pointing to my purpose.

I fell in love with the posse of kids who begged for money on India's streets, trailing me with eyes pleading to give them something of value. I'd tucked pieces of gum in my pockets to offer and blew bubbles as I walked. I loved sitting down with them, tousling their hair, giving hugs, and smiling a warm hello.

Over a ginger-spiced cup of chai one afternoon, I sat across from Christy, a friend who had been living in India for ten years. When I told her about my encounters with the kids on the street, she gently asked me if I knew that many of them had been unimaginably mistreated, purposefully handicapped, burned, blinded, and undernourished. She explained, "Those who own or have power over them have figured out that sick, thin, and disabled kids generate more money than do the healthy. This is the reality throughout India and in many parts of the world among the vulnerable poor."

My thoughts collided, violently tumbling over one another. *What? Noooooo way! Wait, how can this be? This was done to them?* My brain shorted out with incomprehension. Time stopped. My tears poured into my chai. My head and heart ached.

I remembered seeing lots of blind children, some whose skin was badly burned, and others on wheeled platforms, scooting from one place to another, their limbs twisted or missing. Blowing bubbles and sharing a piece of gum suddenly felt terribly inconsequential and paltry. I was humbled at the smallness of my offerings in the face of this reality.

The next morning, I headed out to make my way through the streets. However, I walked and looked around differently. I still handed out gum and blew bubbles, but did so with a palpable ferocity that had begun to burn in me. I didn't want to look the other way or to shrink away from the heartbreak.

A seed of a dream was planted in me on that hard and humble walk. It beckoned me to commit to be a part of life with those who are vulnerable to this sort of cruel exploitation. That seed has grown since then, its roots deepening and becoming an inextricable part of my passion to do my part whenever I can with and for these bright-eyed beauties.

Many years later, I met a remarkable woman, Jaimala, who has become a treasured soul sister. She wrote a book, *Eighteen Million Question Marks*, about the millions of vulnerable kids who live on the streets of India. A fierce visionary and innovative force of love, she co-founded Vatsalya (vatsalya.org), an organization that cares for these resilient and at-risk kids. In the desert of Jaipur, India, she has crafted an oasis of a community-family, breathtak-

ing in beauty, love, and fresh starts, radiant with possibilities for these wee ones.

My days with Jaimala and her cherished children in the desert of Jaipur grew that seed, first planted in my teens, and fueled the fire that was building in me. 'Cuz that's what happens in this mighty tribe. Our sparks kindle the flame in one another. Over and over.

I see how that passion was being sparked and stoked years earlier, in my first memory of an accent with Aunt Deby ... as I ripped out magazine pages and wallpapered my room with people and life from all over the world ... when I got on a plane bound for India as a teenager ... and as I sipped and cried an ocean of tears into my chai with Christy. Such simple, *EVERYday*, and important clues for the treasure hunt of my life. Step by step, year by year, the sparks would be set more ablaze, the distance would lessen, and these faraway people and I would connect and claim one another as family.

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