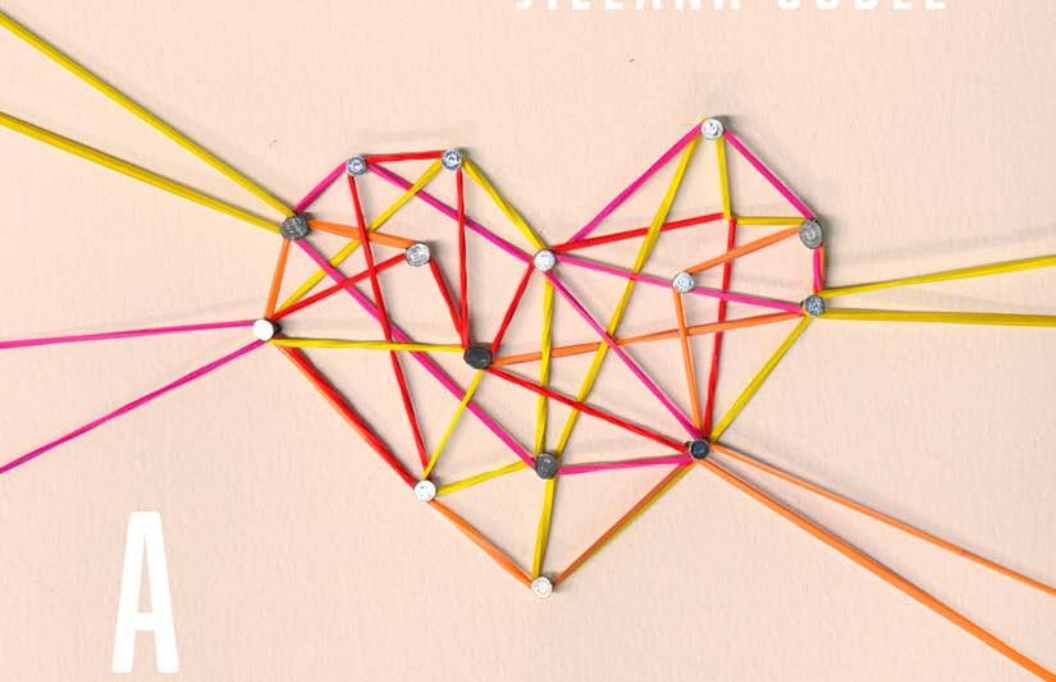


JILLANA GOBLE



A LOVE- STRETCHED LIFE

Stories on Wrangling Hope,
Embracing the Unexpected, and
Discovering the Meaning of Family

The terrifying choice, someone once warned me, is between a comfortable life or an abundant one. Time and again, Jillana Goble voted with her heart. She tells the truth about the consequences, writing with unnerving grace.

STEVE DUIN, columnist, *The Oregonian*

In a world of hot takes and sound bites, Jillana Goble has written a rich, complicated memoir of what happens when we open up our lives to radical hospitality—both as receivers and givers. Heartbreaking and eye-opening, it is a call for mutual aid in our communities and neighborhoods. There is love written into every line; there are grief and joy too, just like how life is. We will be stretched if we allow ourselves to pay attention to the stories in this book.

D. L. MAYFIELD, author and activist

Sometimes a memoir is written to highlight a special grace given to a person in power or with fame. Jillana's story, found in *A Love-Stretched Life*, is filled with a special grace of a different sort. Her story is powerful because it highlights the beauty and danger of what happens when we live a self-sacrificing, others-centered life. This is what the world needs now. Jillana lives in a way that will challenge the reader to ask the question *Can I live this way too?* The answer is *yes!*

BEN SAND, CEO, The Contingent and author of *A Kids Book about White Privilege*

From the moment I first met Jillana and heard her story, I was struck by her authentic and relentless commitment to ensuring that children and families impacted by the child welfare system are seen and feel loved. In *A Love-Stretched Life* she challenges decades of practice and presumption that for children and families facing the greatest challenges of trauma and adversity, short-term, transactional interventions just don't work. Jillana is someone who not only talks about the power of love and unconditional relationship, she lives it.

For anyone desiring to change the world for children and families encountering significant obstacles, this book will inspire you to love more deeply.

ERINN KELLEY-SIEL, chief officer of Expansion and Policy for Friends of the Children and former director of the Oregon Department of Human Services

In a culture where unrelenting voices of fear, judgment, and even hatred seem to be louder than any others, Jillana's gentle voice in *A Love-Stretched Life* is a salve of humility, compassion, and love that our battered spirits so desperately need. Her story is a beautiful illustration of consistently offering what one can in the oft-paralyzing battle against injustice. Readers will close these pages with opened eyes, challenged minds, and love-stretched hearts of their own.

KIMBERLEE COOPER, founder and executive director of The Family Room, Portland, Oregon

It's easy to buy into the idea of a perfectly curated life, one that is neatly tied up in a bow. With raw authenticity and genuine warmth, Jillana Goble instead gives readers of *A Love-Stretched Life* permission to enter into the complications of a real, messy life—a life that accepts pain, clings to hope, and believes in a faith, hope, and love bigger than anything else.

CARA MEREDITH, author of *The Color of Life*

The stories Jillana shares in *A Love-Stretched Life* are raw and real. You won't want to put this book down as you read time after time of heartbreak and struggle. But the stories are not only hard, they are beautiful too. They are about choosing to "love against the grain." For anyone who has considered stepping into the story of a vulnerable child, this book is for you.

RYAN AND KAYLA NORTH, cofounders of One Big Happy Home

In *A Love-Stretched Life*, Jillana shows us how to walk in an "all in" kind of faith that is authentic and real. Jillana puts flesh on what

it means to walk by faith for the sake of others; and the result is a holy, messy, beautiful picture of heaven breaking into earth and souls being transformed. You will find a friend in Jillana as you walk this uncommon path; we believe that these pages will show you the grace of knowing you are not alone.

RICK AND JEANNE MCKINLEY, founders of Imago Dei Community in Portland, Oregon; parents and full-time caregivers of a child impacted by disability

What an outpouring of heart and soul! With humility and grace, Jillana Goble invites you into the intimacy of her family for an eye-opening glimpse into the rigors of foster care and adoption. Despite the ever-present shadows of grief and loss, not once does she falter in her ability to shine light where it's most needed. You will not want to say goodbye to this labor of love.

KENDRA MORRIS-JACOBSON, director of Oregon Post Adoption Resource Center

A Love-Stretched Life is Jillana's story of faith and hope alongside the reality of the heartache and struggles that come with choosing to love vulnerable children (and their families) with your whole heart. From our very first conversation with Jillana when we heard her desire to uplift the children, families, and staff impacted by the foster care system, we knew we wanted to be part of it. It's been amazing to watch as Every Child has become a statewide movement, born out of Jillana's heart to come alongside, embrace, and be part of the solution.

MARC AND SUSAN ESTES, pastors of Mannahouse and adoptive parents of two children with disabilities from the foster care system

In this book, Jillana shares an honest portrayal of a life stretched by love. Her story is one of struggle, faith, hope, and connection— but most of all, love. As an adoptive and special needs mom, I felt like I was reading a letter from a dear friend. Her wisdom and insight will be an encouragement to the reader.

AMY J BROWN, writer and cohost of *Take Heart* podcast for special needs moms

In *A Love-Stretched Life*, Jillana and Jennifer, “two imperfect moms [who] walk toward one another for the sake of loving the same child” draw you in to rescript the assumption of family and create room for those who need a home. If we all lived like this, the world would truly be a very different place.

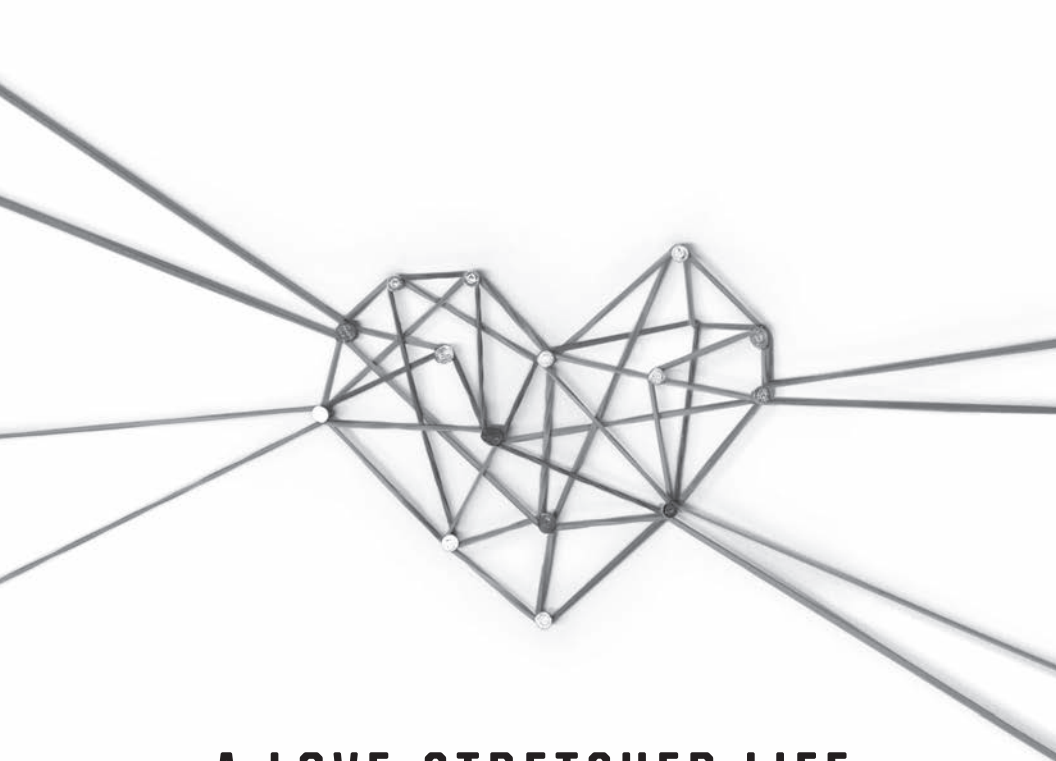
DIANN R. TAKENS, founder and executive director of Peace of the City, Buffalo, New York

This raw and gritty story depicts a life that hasn't chosen the easy road. *A Love-Stretched Life* cuts to the heart of getting to know others' stories before jumping to judgment. It's made me pause and reflect on the relationships in my own life. This evolving story doesn't have a neat and tidy ending but in the stretching, there is love.

ALLIE ROTH, president and founder of With Love

If parenting is in your heart, this memoir will captivate you. Jillana's journey of childhood to adulthood, becoming a teacher, parent, neighbor, and friend, gave me a broader, more beautiful definition of family. She reminded me of the wild capacity I have been given to love. You will be inspired.

JOY EGGERICHS REED, author of *Get to the Publishing Punchline: A Fun (and Slightly Aggressive) 30 Day Guide to Get Your Book Ready for the World*



A LOVE-STRETCHED LIFE

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Unexpected, and Discovering the Meaning of Family

JILLANA GOBLE



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A Love-Stretched Life: Stories on Wrangling Hope, Embracing the Unexpected, and Discovering the Meaning of Family

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All the stories in this book are true, but some names and identifying information have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals. As the author, I take seriously the sharing of any story that intersects with my own. I weighed heavily the decision to write about my youngest son and share his diagnosis. With his permission, I have done so, with the hope that it will increase awareness, understanding, and compassion for individuals with invisible, brain-based differences and for the families who love them.

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To Luke

*whose steadfast and supportive partnership
has kept equilibrium in our love-stretched life*

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THERE, WHERE THE FOREST FELL

DARK AND DEEP

THERE WAS NO PATH.

SO I TROD ONE.

~ Edwina Gateley ~

Introduction

LEANING IN

HAVE YOU EVER COME TO THE realization that a normal day for you may be the very definition of what someone else would squarely label “overwhelming”?

In my household, we are acutely familiar with how a lighthearted moment can suddenly tip into a nerve-racking one, but on this *nothing special* afternoon in our home, there’s a vibrant fullness—a delightful chaos.

My two teenage daughters, Sophia and Eleni, are in the kitchen, the room in our house that is continually filled with hustle and bustle and crumbs on the countertop. Fifteen-year-old Eleni is doing homework at the breakfast bar. I’m suspicious of the homework part because even though she’s holding a pencil, she also holds up her phone every five minutes and asks, “Do you think this would look good on me?” while showing me photos of models with their hair dyed burgundy. Sophia, who is admittedly a better cook at seventeen than I am at forty-five, is stirring something on the stove. Sophia turns on some music to accompany the stirs, and before I know it, she starts tap dancing barefoot. It’s taken years of practice to get to the place where all those fast, skilled

taps look effortless, and Eleni, who also has taken dance classes for years, joins in. Our black Labradoodle, Theo, and our kids-are-lonely-during-the-pandemic-decision cat, QT, look on. I would love to tell you my daughters got those cool moves from me, re-creating my glory days, but that would be a lie. I had exactly zero dance glory days. They got them from their father.

In the midst of this, my husband, Luke, walks in the door, ending his workday. Charlie, my ten-year-old, squeals, “DADDY!” and throws his arms straight behind his back, fabricating his own invisible superhero cape as he sprints down the hallway toward him. Charlie entered our family via a phone call asking us, “Can you foster a baby for the weekend?” He’s our weekend baby turned lifelong family member. As Luke hugs Charlie and hangs up his coat and work bag, he passes by the gray sign with white letters hanging in our front entry hallway that declares *Goble Family Established 2000*. He gives me a quick kiss.

Charlie immediately starts peppering Luke with questions about heading out the door to go gold mining right *now*. (Charlie’s backpack is full of gold-mining supplies that he keeps on his person at *all* times because one never knows when they might stumble upon gold.) If he can’t mine gold before dinner, he wants to drive to Target right *now* to buy the LEGO set he saw the last time he was there, because what if another customer picks it up to look at it and then puts it back in the wrong place and then he goes back to the store and can never find it again? Or what if LEGO suddenly stops making that set? There’s a daily urgency involving all sorts of things Charlie *has* to do before it’s too late!

When Charlie was four years old, he was diagnosed with an invisible, brain-based disability. Charlie is smart and interesting, clever and unique, and the way he experiences brain differences affects every single aspect of his life—and ours—at every moment. Corey, a trusted family friend who helps Charlie navigate the world, serves as Charlie’s developmental disability aide. When school is out, Corey’s full-time job is to be in our home with us or in the community with Charlie, helping him stay safe and regulated. Now that Luke is home, Corey grabs his keys and heads out the door saying, “See you tomorrow, Goble family,” giving friendly waves or fist bumps on his way out.

As soon as Corey disappears out the front door, my thirteen-year-old son, Micah, comes into the kitchen through the back door. He is sweaty from bouncing on the trampoline in our backyard with his friends from across the street. Our home is a revolving door for his friends, who are always in and out, and Micah is just as welcome at their houses. Micah stands shoulder to shoulder with me at five foot eight and will be taller than me any minute. Behind him I spy a cherished photo of our family from years ago when he was only up to my knees—an oldie but goodie photo that will always have a place of prominence in our home. In the frame, three adults and lots of kids are crowded together, smiling, on our front porch: Luke and me, Sophia, Eleni, Micah, and Charlie, alongside Micah’s first mom, Jennifer—a cherished part of our family—and Micah’s three biological siblings. The happy photo of all of us leaning together was taken a few years after we adopted him.

My phone starts vibrating on the counter. I make a

concerted effort to limit phone time when my kids are home in the afternoons, but I spy the name on the screen. It's Royal, the son of my heart. I pick up and hear, "Hi, Mom," in the deep voice of a twenty-four-year-old young man in whom I delight. Royal was six years old when we met, and he walked through my front door with his possessions in a garbage bag. He was the first child Luke and I ever welcomed in foster care. Through an improbable series of events, Royal and I reconnected after thirteen years apart and today claim one another as family. In the broad, miscellaneous category of life and parenthood labeled *Things I wasn't grateful for at the time, but now I am*, this phone call qualifies. I appreciate the gift of being able to talk with Royal now on a normal phone call from his home to mine, and not one where I pick up the phone and hear an audio recording from a correctional facility where his name is inserted into the script, asking if I'll accept the call, like in the past.

• • •

I wonder if your days have ever felt like mine: real and complicated, messy, colorful, exhausting, and exhilarating—often simultaneously. Starting in 2003, my parenting journey as a foster, biological, and adoptive mom (in that order) has certainly given me a unique path, but a universal fact remains: Intentionally caring for and cultivating a family is hard. Yet just like in the classic children's story *The Velveteen Rabbit*, I would not trade my worn-down, real life for something shiny and new, as tempting as it may feel some days. Stretching to

love and love well, even when it's hard—*especially* when it's hard—is what has given me the life that is mine.

If you saw the Family Rules that we put together sitting around the dinner table (written in crayon on green construction paper and taped to one of our kitchen cupboards), you'd read such things as

Be safe with your body and words

Respect one another

Celebrate each other's unique qualities

Promote one another's well-being

Some of you might be tempted to think we've got things dialed in and figured out, but don't be fooled. We have had to work, reconcile, ask for forgiveness, take deep breaths, and keep plugging along. I don't have all the answers. Honestly? I don't know if I have *any* answers. But here is what I'm learning: We're divinely created to engage this world, be connected to others, and prop one another up.



This compilation of stories is my way of inviting you to my (proverbial) table. If I were to host you at my house someday, I'd want you to know this in advance: You might get the white linen tablecloth with fresh flowers, or you might get a smudged table with leftover crumbs from the Take 'N' Bake Pizza shop down the street. I've always aspired to have the skills to put together a dazzling charcuterie board like I see on Pinterest, but it's highly likely my grapes will be clumped

in an ordinary bowl sitting on the table. Though expertly snapped Instagram photographs surround us, perfectionism never breeds authentic connection. Bringing our *real* selves to the table and sitting shoulder to shoulder, eating those grapes from a plain old bowl, is what allows us to come as we are. Whatever I may lack in inspirational food presentation, however, I hope I would make up for in this: my genuine interest to sit with you, to listen and lean forward as you share the stories of what has shaped you and what makes you come alive in this world.

Like you, I wear many hats. My roles as a daughter, a sister, a wife, an employer, a neighbor, a leader, and a friend all indelibly shape me. It is specifically through my role as a mom, however, that I have been invited on many of life's detours and the ever-expanding lessons that accompany them. When life and family and relationships proceed less like a nice, neat line and more like something that closely resembles a scribble, I am shored up by this truth: *Difficult* and *worthy* are not mutually exclusive—they are often intertwined.

The details of our lives may look similar or completely different, but as you hold this book, I hope you find truth in these pages. I'm delighted you're here. You belong here. Your story matters to me. As we lean in together, know this: I am unequivocally *for* you. May these stories of walking across a suspension bridge between reality and hope anchor you, gently giving you what you need to navigate your own love-stretched life.

PRESENCE THAT SHAPES YOU

Influence

SOMETIMES IN ORDER TO BETTER understand the “What led me here?” of the present, we must go back to the past. The reality is that an ordinary, nothing-special afternoon in my home—the place that shelters the people and photographs of those I hold dear—would have looked entirely different if I had skipped this part of my story. Many people would not have been present. Sometimes when we embark on a journey, we are aware that a person or a place will forever change us and give direction to our lives. I had none of that awareness when my plane landed in Central America in 1999.

I stood alone at the curb outside La Aurora International Airport in Guatemala, excited about the adventure ahead but missing my fiancé, Luke. I had only had two weeks to wear my engagement ring before I put it in a safe-deposit box as

I left for Central America. Luke's proposal was memorably romantic. We were on a rugged Northern California beach at sunset. Luke strummed his guitar and sang an original love song to me, finishing just before high tide had a chance to soak our blanket. I tackled my husband-to-be with my eager yes and momentarily admired the sparkly diamond on my finger, and then we sprinted to the car hand in hand. We were both twenty-two and fresh out of college.

Since Luke was heading off to Kazakhstan for a year and I had committed to teach at an orphanage in Guatemala for six months, we had barely a week together to plan our wedding for the following summer. We sampled cake, chose our invitations, and found a beautiful vineyard for an outdoor wedding ceremony. The first dress I tried on is the one I chose for our wedding. All the main details were taken care of, which enabled us to wholeheartedly concentrate on our separate adventures ahead.

I looked at my watch. *Did the director of the school receive my flight information? How long should I wait before I call someone?* Just then, a rickety maroon minivan rounded the corner, music blaring. The friendly driver who worked at the orphanage introduced himself to me as Juan Carlos. He said, "*Mucho gusto,*" and took my suitcase and my bag of teaching materials as I slid into the passenger seat. In English he asked me, "Have you been to Guatemala before? Are you nervous to be here? Have you worked with kids before?"

The answers were all no, but I added, "I'm excited to be here and use my Spanish. I know I'll learn so much being here." As we drove out of the city and got on the highway, we passed numerous humble roadside markets, houses, and

tin-roofed shacks. The glass birdie dangling from the van's rearview mirror almost went flying when Juan Carlos suddenly turned sharply onto an unmarked road. As the gravel crunched under the tires, we approached a compound of buildings that I recognized from the photos on the website. I saw a two-story building in the middle of a large compound. I recalled from what I'd read that the school classrooms, a kitchen, and an open concrete area for assemblies and church gatherings were all located there. On the second floor of the same building was a three-bedroom apartment with a large living space that served as the infant and toddler live-in nursery.

When I got out of the van, I was given a quick tour. The main building was surrounded by a covered pigpen enclosure, a flock of free-range chickens, and six numbered trailers that housed kids divided by age and gender. There was at least one adult assigned to each trailer as a house parent, all of them native Guatemalans. Over sixty kids called this orphanage home. Some were truly orphans, while others were there temporarily.

I knew from the emails I had received that I would be living in trailer number three, only a stone's throw from the school. I put my one suitcase in my small, laminate wood-paneled room, while the six school-age girls who lived there watched me from the doorway. I introduced myself and they all eagerly told me their names. A moment later, Teresa, the house parent for trailer three and a fellow teacher, appeared. Before I had a chance to open up my suitcase, the American director of the school came by to offer a heartfelt welcome and then delivered some unexpected news.

“The teacher for the second- and third-grade combination class just up and quit! Jillana, would you be willing to finish out the school year as their teacher so the children can end on a positive note?” He knew I was prepared to teach ESL (English as a second language) daily to all the grades, but now the most urgent need was for a regular classroom teacher.

“I know Spanish was your major in college and was hoping you could show up tomorrow morning at 8:00 a.m. and fill in the gap.” This was not what I had signed up for, but I found myself nodding my head and saying I’d try my best. It was good I hadn’t known this last-minute change ahead of time. I would have been so overwhelmed with my self-professed inadequacy that I might not have come.

Twenty-four hours after setting foot in Guatemala, I took a deep breath to calm my nerves as I smiled at the sixteen kids in the classroom and was introduced as “Maestra Jillana.” Since I had looked over the curriculum beforehand and paged through all the books I was given, I was mildly confident about teaching all the subjects—with the exception of Guatemalan history. That subject would keep me on my toes the most. Thanks to the students, I learned about the *quetzal*, the country’s national bird and also the name of the country’s currency, through a song and presentation the class had already prepared for the school assembly that week.

During our first science class, we planted seeds in a garden patch behind the main building. Weeks later, as I crouched down, excitedly examining a student’s budding plant, a group

of boys clustered together erupted in laughter. Francisco, a little boy with a huge scar across his head, visible under his buzz cut, was peeing on the sprouts. *Oh, Francisco.*

Francisco sat in the back of my classroom with a ready, amiable smile on his face at all times, but he had no volume control. After he missed every spelling word for a few days, I told him I'd love for him to sit closer to me in the front of the class. He responded with an eager "Of course, Maestra Jillana," in what I would soon discover was his happy-go-lucky attitude toward everything.

As the days went by, I increasingly noticed the kids didn't play or interact much with Francisco. He was loud, and he was always dirty. The sink for washing hands was located in an open common area, and I often winked at Francisco, whispering for him to go back and wash his hands during recess. More times than not, however, he would wriggle his second-grade hand into mine before washing and ask me, "How are you doing today, teacher?" As I washed my hands later, I thought of this endearing boy.

When the house parents in Francisco's trailer had to leave for a few hours one evening, I volunteered to supervise the boys. I sat in the trailer with seven mid-elementary-age boys as we slurped our dinner of broth with sliced carrots and bits of chicken. *I never expected to do this as an ESL teacher!* I somehow managed to oversee the post-dinner cleanup, made sure they got their jammies on and brushed their teeth, then read them a story. The boys were on triple-stacked bunk beds on both sides of the room. Except for Francisco.

He slept outside the room on the living room couch. When the house parents returned late that evening, I asked

them why Francisco slept there. They motioned for me to follow them outside.

Standing on the steps of the trailer in the dark, the woman told me in a hushed tone with absolutely no emotion, “Francisco was sold to a pimp when he was young. When he returned one day with no money, the pimp tied him up, strung him upside down from a tree, beat him, and let a dog attack him. That’s where the scar on his head came from. He was about five years old. Francisco was found that way and was brought here. He is separated from the boys because he tries to act out with them, you know, what was done to him.”

Because I was one of only a handful of non-native Spanish speakers living on the compound, I wanted to be sure I understood what they had said. My mind recognized the words, the sentence structure, the syntax, but I couldn’t comprehend what I was hearing. So I repeated it back to them with a lingering question mark in my voice.

“*Sí*,” they nodded, and they bid me goodnight.

There was one buzzing fluorescent light hanging above the short concrete path between our two trailers that flickered like a faint strobe light. I was grateful for the strict lights-out policy on the compound, so I didn’t have to talk or interact with anyone as I crept past the sleeping girls into my small bedroom in the trailer. I stayed up half the night, feeling like the dark wood-paneled walls in my tiny room were closing in on me. Sleep wouldn’t come. In just a few hours, I’d be standing at my classroom door greeting the kids by name. I pictured Francisco in the front row, missing almost everything, yet raising his hand, speaking too loudly, and

flashing a full-toothed smile. I stared at the moon outside my little window with my mind bouncing around like a pinball machine, wondering how a compassionate God could allow such heinous things to happen to an innocent child.

I must have dozed off at some point during the night because I was awakened the next morning by a squealing pig being butchered. I sat on the edge of my bed, head in my hands, and suddenly felt overwhelmed. I wanted to pack up and head to the airport.

The dial-up internet at the one communal computer didn't work consistently, so I found myself scribbling things down in a little journal, both as self-therapy and so I wouldn't forget details.

At an afternoon staff meeting two months into my stint at the orphanage, we were told that a pregnant sixteen-year-old named María would be coming to live at the orphanage.

I first met María when I was returning our trailer's dinner trays to the kitchen where she was washing dishes. She looked much younger than her age with a flawless complexion, a few gold-capped teeth, and long black hair pulled back into a braid. She was dressed in a mid-eighties secretarial outfit, wearing a mid-calf length, yellow polka-dotted dress with buttons down the front and a tie in the back. She was also wearing slightly oversized heels that clicked loudly on the cement floor. It was clear her outfit was from a donation clothing barrel.

María and I would greet each other in the kitchen each night and wave to each other when I'd see her wandering around the compound throughout the day. I started inviting

her to my class to help me with a few tasks, more to include her than for any specific purpose. She could easily pass for a middle-school student if she didn't have a protruding belly. María sat at my desk since I was always up and moving around. When Francisco loudly announced in the middle of class that he was hungry, María broke off a piece of her granola bar and gave it to him.

One night as I dropped off the trays, she asked if I wanted to see her room when she was done with dish duty. I said I'd like to, and she smiled ear to ear. I helped her finish cleaning up the kitchen, we turned the lights out, and I walked with her to the trailer.

She shared a small room with another teenage girl. Her bedspread was beautiful with deep indigo-colored embroidery, and there were three stuffed animals on her pillow. She invited me to sit down on the bed and then, one by one, she silently handed me each of her stuffed animals to hold. She smiled again and said, "I like you. You talk to me."

I've learned and experienced over the years how people respond to trauma. One response can look like being significantly overwhelmed by a dire sense that one can never do enough. While I was falling in love with Guatemala, the people, their culture, and the kids who called this orphanage home, I also was aware there was never enough time, never enough money, never enough resources, never enough adults to help. Despite the good intentions of those present, scarcity abounded.

One night as María and I were finishing up with dish

duty, she smiled her soft, shy smile and asked, “Ms. Jillana, can I talk with you?”

“Of course. Let’s go somewhere quiet.”

We put away everything in the kitchen and headed toward the auditorium. María’s heels clicked on the concrete floor as we walked together. She wore the same yellow dress that tied in the back, and her black hair was gathered in a loose bun. We pulled up two green plastic chairs close to each other in the empty auditorium. Sitting across from her, I asked her how she was feeling about the baby coming soon. With her unassuming smile, she told me she wanted me to name her baby.

I was flabbergasted. “Wow. What an honor, María. Are you sure?”

She nodded and informed me that immediately after the baby was born, she planned to leave the hospital without the baby and return home. “I need to be there to protect my little sister,” she said, “so my father doesn’t do this (pointing to her belly) to her too. But you will make sure the baby is okay, right, Ms. Jillana?”

Her brown eyes looked into mine, and her smile was as pure as the moon shining through the skylight, creating a circle of light where we sat.

“I will do my best,” I told her. I walked her back to her trailer, and we hugged.

I spent that night staring out my little window, thinking about how unqualified I was at twenty-two to be engaging in such a conversation with María. Shouldn’t I have a PhD in counseling or something? Everywhere I turned, there were

high-needs situations. Every single one of the sixty children had experienced some twist of the life-altering common denominators of abuse, neglect, and trauma. Despite my inability to change this situation, I could offer her the one thing that was within my own capacity—the ability to see her and talk with her. Presence. Human presence.

After I finished my classes the next day, I told a few adult leaders that María would continue to be around her abuser. I knew the kind lawyer at the orphanage was a dedicated advocate in the courts for the children, and admittedly, it wasn't my place to know what was going on behind the scenes. Those with whom I shared seemed already aware. They nodded compassionately but could only offer a resigned "There's not much we can do" shrug.

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Two weeks later, María went into labor and delivered a baby girl. When I visited her at the hospital, she was her shy self, yet I saw a resolute strength in her.

It wouldn't be until five years later when I was lying in a hospital bed after pushing out my own baby girl that I would be able to fully recognize the emotional weight of what was missing from that hospital scene with María—a baby being placed in her arms, a body depleted and a heart full.

You might blame it on the *telenovelas* (Spanish soap operas) I watched with my Dominican host mother the semester I studied abroad, but I gave this six-pound peanut a whopping eight-syllable first and middle name—a name that rolled off the tongue with flair and meaning. Esperanza (hope) was her middle name.

Two days later, María was gone. I never saw her again.

Esperanza was taken to the second-floor nursery above the school, where every day after school, after high-fiving my students and releasing them to go back to their trailers, I'd walk up the stairs to rock and sing to her. The nursery had full-time staff who lived and worked there, so Esperanza was lovingly held and bathed and fed by them, but I had a unique connection to this girl.

I had known her mother.

A single American woman named Kayla came to the orphanage and volunteered in the baby room. She quickly fell in love with Esperanza and was determined not to leave her. This assuaged the feeling that I was abandoning Esperanza when I had to return home.

Six months later, as I rode in that same rickety van back to the airport, the school director thrust a letter of recommendation into my hands, citing my contribution to the orphanage as I waited to board my plane. I didn't know it then, but I'd be back. Guatemala would shape the trajectory of the rest of my life.

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Luke and I started our married life in a tiny apartment in San Francisco, decorated with an array of framed wedding photos: me in my bridal gown getting out of a horse-pulled carriage; my arm intertwined with my dad's; Luke dipping me back in his arms, my veil touching the ground, as we gazed into one another's eyes with giddy smiles plastered on our faces.

I would take the N Judah train into downtown San

Francisco to teach English, while Luke commuted over the Golden Gate Bridge every day to his job at an after-school tutoring center. We rented an apartment that didn't have an oven, so we used a convection oven/microwave placed on a TV tray in the living room. We also lacked kitchen counter space so a card table in the corner of the living room became our food prep station and dining table. It would shake every time we cut up our food.

We made friends, attended a small church in the heart of the city, and spent some of our wedding gift money on the quintessential sporting goods item of 2000: Rollerblades. We bladed around Golden Gate Park, with Luke looking cool as he weaved around confidently, with me, not quite as cool but more safety conscious, fully decked out with kneepads and wrist guards. We lived two blocks from the ocean and would saunter down to the beach any ole time. In fact, on our one-year anniversary, we pulled out a piece of frozen wedding cake to celebrate the occasion. The cake was crumbly and flavorless, but the seagulls liked it. Life was unbelievably good.

Strolling down the beach, I jokingly told Luke, "You're my dream guy in every way but I always kind of thought I'd marry someone who spoke Spanish." When I playfully suggested we move to Guatemala for a little while, he smiled and said, "Let's go!" I looked to see if he was joking, but he wasn't. His added "Carpe diem!" made it official.

Six months later, we packed up and headed to Antigua, Guatemala, with barely enough money to pay for six months' rent and Spanish language school for Luke. I now had my master's degree in teaching ESL and was hired to teach English at a private high school during the week. On most weekends,

we went to the same orphanage where I had lived and taught two years before. We offered respite to the house parents, giving them a break from their 24/7 parenting duties. It was the perfect way for Luke to dip his toes into what life had been like for me at the orphanage when we were separated during our engagement. Many of the same kids were still there two years later. I immediately looked for Francisco but couldn't find him.

When I asked a staff member where Francisco was, the staff person said he had been sent to the juvenile detention facility “for the safety of others.” I knew immediately what Luke and I needed to do. We boarded a bus crowded with people and their animals. There were chickens in small cages and others fluttering around on the bus. We shooed away a goat that was attempting to eat our clothing.

The juvenile detention facility was in the middle of nowhere. As soon as I walked in, I knew that the “therapeutic” in the title of the facility was meaningless. We waited in a large visitation room for Francisco. He was escorted by a staff member, and I immediately recognized his smile. The scar on his head was fully visible and dirt smudged his face. When he stretched out his hand for me to grab, I couldn't help but notice the dirt clumped underneath his fingernails. I grasped his hand tightly, as I had two years earlier on recess breaks when he was in my classroom.

“¡Hola, Maestra Jillana! ¿Como estás?” he eagerly asked me.

“I am so happy to see you! How about you, Francisco? How are you?”

“Great!”

Luke and I had been allowed to leave the premises for an

hour with Francisco. We took him out for ice cream. The time passed way too quickly, and we returned to the facility. As we were escorted back to his room, Francisco asked if we could visit him again.

I wanted to say we would make our best effort, but I knew in my heart this would be our one and only visit, and I didn't want to set him up for disappointment. Instead, I looked deep into Francisco's eyes and told him I would always remember him.

He smiled and made a grand gesture as if taking a bow and said, "Thank you for always remembering me, Ms. Jillana."

I squeezed his hand one more time as a staff member arrived. Francisco turned and waved goodbye. I waved back and then I walked out, biting my lower lip to keep my quivering chin from cuing a bucket full of tears. Luke, emotionally steady as a rock, put his arm around me.

In that moment, one of Jesus' beatitudes came to mind: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." It is Francisco's blessing to claim forever.



Luke and I lived in a two-bedroom furnished apartment in Antigua, in an alleyway off a main street. Every morning, like clockwork, a shepherd would herd his flock of bleating sheep right by our front door. There was a market nearby selling all sorts of meats, spices, produce, and—my favorite—fresh flowers. Much to my delight, carnations are actually the most expensive flower in Guatemala and roses are among the cheapest, so our apartment always had a vase of fresh roses on the table.

At Spanish language school, Luke met a couple in their forties with four young children who were preparing to work for a non-profit in the Dominican Republic. Since I had lived in the DR as part of my college Spanish studies and had lived in the same city where they were headed, we had a natural connection. Luke and I went to Pete and Lola's house for dinner a few times, then planned to hike together on Acatenango, the two-peaked volcanic mountain that towered over the city as an impressive backdrop.

We packed a small picnic and set off on a trail that wound around the mountain with a gentle incline. There weren't many other people on the wide main trail this particular afternoon. Nevertheless, we had been advised to stick together. As we climbed a little higher, Lola handed me their camera and asked me to take a photo of her and her family. The scene behind them was postcard-perfect: blue skies, fluffy clouds, green pastures in the valley below the mountain. I snapped several shots of them as two men walking their donkeys came around the bend.

We continued on until we decided it was time to turn around and head back down the mountain. Luke and Pete started engaging in a playfully obvious game of hide-and-seek with the children, zigzagging across the trail. Lola, carrying their toddler in a hiking backpack, and I were engrossed in conversation and kept a steady pace in front of them as we kept heading back to the base of the mountain. Soon, without realizing it, we had left them behind. We looked back and could no longer see Luke, Pete, or the kids.

Suddenly two men, wearing black ski masks and brandishing machetes, jumped out of the bushes in front of us. The

one closest to me held two blades high in the air and spoke rapidly in Spanish.

“Don’t move. Don’t scream. Give us the camera and your money. Now!”

How do they know we have a camera? These must be the men with the donkeys, I thought. The camera was in Lola’s cargo shorts pocket, and I didn’t want them to get it.

I locked eyes with the black slits peering at me through the opening in his mask and said with an eerie calmness, “Lola, don’t move or scream.” I knew how deadly a machete was since Luke had been using one to help clear land around the orphanage. A few whacks from a machete could take down a tree with a trunk as wide as a pineapple. Lola couldn’t control herself—she primally screamed her husband’s name and took off, sprinting up the trail with her toddler wobbling back and forth in the backpack.

The man I was still staring at commanded his sidekick to follow Lola. I was now alone with this man menacingly wielding two machetes. My initial calm boiled over into red-hot rage. I jerked the straw bag off my shoulder and turned it upside down. A DVD, a few half-eaten sandwiches, and some coins fell on the ground. In a Spanglish rant I screamed, “Leave me ALONE! What do you WANT from me? I don’t have ANYTHING!”

“Shut up! Shut up!” he hissed.

I slowly turned my head to look up the mountain, and I saw Pete handing the other thief his wallet. The courteous robber took the money out and handed back the billfold as if to say, “Nice doing business with you,” and then half-jogged back down the hill toward me, machete in hand.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, Luke, my now Spanish-speaking dream-guy-in-every-way, sprinted toward me so fast he left a red dust cloud in his wake. When he arrived on the scene, he assured me, “Honey, I can totally take these guys!”

Yes, no exaggeration. Hand over my heart, those were his *exact* first words to me in my moment of peril with two men and three machetes between them. My confident husband was going to “take” them.

If you ask Luke for his version of the story, he’ll tell you that he thought they were amateurs because they stood with their backs to the small ravine. They were also at least six inches shorter than either of us. They demanded Luke’s watch, which he reluctantly handed to them, and they immediately slinked into the brush. Pete, Lola, Luke, and I scooped up the children and ran down the hill.

At the police station, I reported the incident. As I explained what had happened, the officer kept yawning as if I were reciting long sections out of an encyclopedia.

We then got on a crowded bus for home, squeezed in between people and animals. All of us adults looked out the window with blank expressions on our faces, but the older kids, sheltered from a lot of the up-close drama, peppered us with questions. “Why were those men mean? What did they want?”

We adults were acutely aware that this was a case of Robin Hood taking from the rich for the sake of the poor. Our appearance and language tipped them off that we had resources. The camera had sealed the deal. At that particular moment, those men who likely had few material resources

had an opportunity to get something. It's not an excuse, but it was reality.

One of the children who saw the man holding up the machetes said with childlike innocence, "Let's just pray for those bad guys, so they can be good guys, and when they're good, we can have them over for dinner."

We were grateful that no one had been physically hurt, but Pete and Lola admitted they could never feel safe in Guatemala again. To make matters worse, while we were being robbed on the mountain, their washing machine and dryer were stolen, hoisted up and over the six-foot stucco wall that surrounded their house.

• • •

A decade after Kayla adopted Esperanza, she contacted me. We were both living in the States now. Esperanza was a teenager, and she was asking questions about her biological mother, María.

"You're the person who knew her," Kayla said. "Would you be willing to talk to Esperanza?"

"It would be a privilege. Put her on the phone."

I told Esperanza everything I could remember, from María's sweet demeanor to the way she walked and talked. "I liked having her sit in my classroom. We enjoyed washing dishes and talking together." When Kayla adopted Esperanza, I'd given her a copy of every picture I had of María. My favorite was the one I'd snapped of María on her embroidered bedspread, holding her stuffed animals over her large belly. As I talked to Esperanza now, it was clear she had studied those pictures well by the way she referenced them,

the yellow polka-dotted dress, the high heels, the shy smile, the braided, jet-black hair.

Even in the midst of hideous abuse, there can still be life, brimming with love and meaning. It's something Emily Dickinson captures beautifully in a line from one of her poems, one I framed and have sitting on my bedroom dresser:

“‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul.”

Hope is not a fluffy word to sugarcoat the real pain and lifelong effects of abuse and trauma. Hope is not a cover-up side story. Hope still acknowledges that all adoption, even under the best of circumstances, starts with a story of loss—loss that may be felt in the marrow of the bones, even if it can't be articulated. Even in the midst of loss, hope was braided into the fiber of cords of grace, tethering our lives together.



Before Luke and I had left for Guatemala in 2002, he had submitted several applications for grad school. An acceptance letter arrived while we were in Guatemala for a doctoral program in American Studies at the University of Buffalo in New York, the place where he grew up. We celebrated as bleating sheep scurried past our front door. Our six months were coming to an end, and it was time to return to the States.

On our last day in Guatemala, we bought a painting of the colorful city streets of Antigua with a large purple mountain (*the* mountain) as the backdrop. We've lived in six homes since we purchased that painting, and it's always been displayed in a prominent place in each one. It reminds me that Guatemala is where I was first exposed to the jagged reality

that I will see and hold suffering that seems beyond comprehension. Guatemala showed me the pain of swaddling a newborn baby girl in the hospital with a cloth of suffering and hope and bringing her to an orphanage without her beautiful mama. It also allowed me to see a tenderhearted woman step into that role.

In Guatemala, I experienced fear as I never had before, giving me a sliver of understanding of the body's "fight, flight, freeze" instinctive response to trauma, preparing me for what I would later witness with many children in my home. Guatemala gave me the privilege of feeling fingers wrapped around mine both in a classroom and in a lockdown facility. A humble offering of undivided presence, though it feels inadequate when there's an ocean of pressing needs, is still *something*.

This place showed me that vivid color and quiet beauty can still exist amidst traumatic, injustice-filled stories that brought children to live at an orphanage in the first place. Our time in Guatemala is what ultimately led Luke and me to ask, "Where are the vulnerable children here?" as we stepped off the plane to make our home in New York.

It was that very simple and straightforward question that led us straight to the doors of foster care.