

“Powerful lessons about the value of home.”
—Elim Chew, founder of 77th Street and community advocate

homeless

THE UNTOLD STORY OF A MOTHER'S STRUGGLE
IN 'CRAZY RICH' SINGAPORE



LIYANA DHAMIRAH

WITH A FOREWORD BY RAVI PHILEMON

HOMELESS

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STRUGGLE IN CRAZY RICH SINGAPORE



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WITH MANISHA DHALANI AND KHAI ANWAR



EPIGRAM
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*For all the women fighting the good fight.
And to everyone who wonders if I'm writing about them.
I am.*

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FOREWORD BY RAVI PHILEMON

I WANT TO thank Liyana for giving me the privilege to write a foreword to the story of her truly amazing and inspiring life journey. Much of her struggles, and how she coped with them, reminds me of my own mother.

My mother is my hero. When my father abandoned us when I was about eleven years old and we became homeless, my mother held down three jobs to keep her three children in school. She put me in her elder sister's house and my sisters in a convent, and she rented a little room to stay in. Five years later, she eventually earned enough to buy a two-room flat in Bukit Ho Swee. At last, my mother, sisters and

I could live as a family and we have never looked back since.

Liyana, like my own mother, is a superwoman who succeeded despite the many odds stacked against her. I can understand that not all people who are down and out will have the kind of support, goodwill and chance that Liyana had to claw out of their predicament. Indeed, one needs to be a superhero to do so—and that’s certainly not everyone.

For me, the real takeaway from Liyana’s memoir is that parents, regardless of their circumstances, must stay engaged in the lives of their children. For by staying engaged, we prevent them from falling into the traps that we ourselves may have gotten entangled in, and more importantly so that in them we can see a better, brighter future for ourselves.

I want to thank many of my friends from *The Online Citizen (TOC)* who came forward to help this amazing woman; they include Andrew Loh, Joshua Chiang, Lisa Lee and Kirsten Han. At that time, the unofficial government narrative was: “there are no homeless people in Singapore”. We tried to pitch the stories of some of these vulnerable families to the mainstream media, but they would not touch it with a ten-foot pole.

And eventually, when an international media agency picked up the story of the plight of the homeless in Singapore, the government indirectly labelled *TOC* as one of the “irresponsible websites” which have caused

falsehoods from international media’s “misreporting” to circulate widely on the internet. Perhaps partly due to the advocacy of *TOC*, we now have better housing options for people and families that find themselves homeless.

Besides my friends from *TOC*, I would also like to thank my good friend Bryan Long for believing in Liyana by giving her a break in his entrepreneurial ventures.

I must also thank Ministers K. Shanmugam and Vivian Balakrishnan. They both responded very quickly to my email and took steps to get Liyana out of her misery during her stay at a beach in Sembawang while heavily pregnant.

Lastly, I want to thank Liyana for trusting me and for allowing me to walk alongside her at a very difficult time in her life. This memoir is perhaps the midpoint of the many successes which lie ahead for her.

I wish Liyana all the best!

ONE

THREE DAYS HAD passed, and the festive mood after Hari Raya had dissipated. In the seventy-two hours we had been living in Sembawang Park, my husband Fazli and I had established somewhat of a routine. We would do our laundry at the tap outside the public toilet nearest our tent, using soap from the sinks inside. We would eat only once a day: a mixed rice meal, usually with chicken or some vegetables.

On the fourth day of homelessness, Fazli returned to his job; he worked nights waiting tables at a club in Clarke Quay. That evening, as he got ready for work, I sat on a

stone bench outside our tent. It was warm to the touch, heat still emanating long after the sun's rays had grazed the tiles on the bench. We had been lucky with the weather the past three days, but that night, the air had changed. It felt cooler and the sky was tinged red. *Was it going to rain?*

"Okay, I'm ready," Fazli announced as he came out of the tent and made his way to me. I feigned a bright smile.

"Are you sure you're going to be fine by yourself throughout the night?" he asked.

How tempted I was to tell him that I was afraid of the night in this still strange place. How scary it could be with all the stories I had heard about this park being haunted. How frightening it was for a young, pregnant 22-year-old woman to be alone in a tent under the dark night sky.

Instead, I said, "Yes, don't worry. Go out and make us some money." I did my best to sell him the illusion that I was okay.

I waved goodbye, took a deep breath and heard a rustle from the shadows.

"It seems like we will be sleeping in nice cool weather tonight."

I squealed as I slowly turned to face the mysterious voice from behind. *Please don't be a ghost, please don't be a ghost.*

To my relief, I found a woman, probably in her forties, clad in a beige wool sweater and a long brown dress. She was tugging at her sweater, wrapping it tightly around her

body. Her hair was neatly tied into a ponytail and her face was round with a mole on her right cheek; she had a very comforting and sweet look about her. She appeared matronly.

"But I hope the rain isn't heavy," she said.

I rubbed my arms for warmth. "I'm sorry, you are?" I asked, still trembling.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," the woman chuckled and held out her hand. "I'm Ani." As I lifted my own hand, I stole a quick glance at her feet to see if they touched the ground.

"Don't worry, I'm not a ghost," she giggled.

We shook hands and I acknowledged her as Kak Ani—"kak" meaning elder sister in Malay. We sat on the bench and Kak Ani began chatting away, keeping me entertained with her life stories. I felt Kak Ani's warmth and sincerity and slowly I began to open up. As I filled her in on bits and pieces of how Fazli and I had ended up living in a tent at Sembawang Park, Kak Ani just shook her head in disbelief.

The full story, which came out later in our friendship, stretched back almost ten years ago to when I was a girl and lost my first childhood home. Since then, "home" has been an elusive concept, not a permanent structure that gives one warm and fuzzy feelings.

While I confided in Kak Ani, she welcomed me to a new world, a new community I had no knowledge of before. I quickly learnt there were other homeless families on

the beach, too. She pointed to a few of the bigger tents. I no longer thought of the beach as cold and uninviting. I suddenly saw it as they did, a haven for those without a home. A shelter for strays.



There is something about turning twelve that you will never quite experience again in your life. It is the last year of your life when you are still considered a child. Ahead of you lies the tumultuous road of adolescence. Behind you, the magical carefree years of childhood bliss.

Like any twelve-year-old, I was loving every moment of my life yet was also ready for the years ahead. If you met me during this period of transition, you would be hard pressed to believe I could carry even an atom of a negative experience. I was surrounded by a loving family at home and by friends in school who all had a part in creating my happy childhood bubble. Looking back, I sometimes wish that I could have delayed growing up, because that year, my life took a turn. Whether it was good or bad, that is a matter of perspective.

It was 17 February 1999. As the clock struck twelve on my twelfth birthday, a new day was starting. It was at that moment that I was given a birthday present I had never expected. One I never wanted.

Just moments earlier, my friends, family and I were enjoying a triple celebration. My birthday coincided with the second day of the Chinese New Year festival. It was also the month of Syawal, when Muslims celebrate Hari Raya Puasa to mark the end of fasting for Ramadan. My closest friends, also my classmates at the time, were having a great time at my home, a modest flat sandwiched amidst the many rows of typical HDB residences in Yishun. It was an evening of nonstop festivities with friends and family. Even my younger siblings—ten-year-old Danial and my two sisters Siti, who was seven, and Sri, who was only two—were well behaved. My parents were their usual selves: Mum was busy in the kitchen, making sure all the platters were full with fried rice, chicken wings, hot dogs, fishballs, epok-epok and samosas. Dad was clowning around and cracking lame dad jokes. Even serious Auntie Zainab was there, in her frown and sombre dress. Merriment punctuated the air, fried bee hoon and watermelon (my favourite!) were piled on plates and joy illuminated everyone's countenance.

At the end of the night, as soon as my friends filed out of the flat, I received news so bitter that the lingering sweetness from the birthday cake disappeared instantaneously.

After sitting me down, my parents broke the news to me.

“Yana, Bapak and Mak are not going to be together anymore,” my dad reluctantly said, barely looking me in the eye. I had always thought of my dad as a strong man.

He was not known as a talker and only spoke when he needed to. He drove a Prime Mover truck and had done so for ten years. In fact, in my innocence, I had concocted an image of my dad as the toughest man in the world. Yet there he was, telling me that the institution of love bonding him and my mother had collapsed. His voice was weak as he uttered the words.

My parents were getting a divorce. No discussion, no grace period, no ceremony. A new world lay ahead, one that frightened me to my core. I knew I would be truly alone. As the eldest child, and the supposed role model, I couldn't turn to my younger siblings nor to the adults in my life.

Over the next few weeks, strangers in suits and ties walked through our home, checking every room and intruding on our private lives. They spoke of how much our house would be valued in the open market. My siblings and I did not understand what was going on but I later learnt the people in suits were property agents. When they started bringing in potential buyers to tour our flat, Danial and I, being mischievous children, decided to play a prank. We hid in the storeroom, and when the agent and the buyers opened the door, we gave them quite a fright. It worked every time.

One evening, after a particularly successful storeroom scare, Danial and I were reprimanded, and finally told what was going on. My parents were selling the flat.

To me, they were putting a number on years of memories. What is a home truly worth? Is its value tied to the land it is built on? Or is the value intrinsic to the love and happiness that flourished inside? If sentiment were a factor, then every house that has ever been built would be priceless. For the walls were once the boundaries of a haven that had meant everything to me.

My brother and I had not been allowed to ask our parents any questions, and judging by the sadness on their faces, I had understood the seriousness of the matter. As the days flew by, relatives whom we hardly knew or had even spoken to before called to offer words of support and condolence. All those were but pleasantries, familial obligations fulfilled. Not once did any of them say, "Here, we'll fix this. This doesn't have to happen." I was showered with pity and controlled by fear. But mostly, I was reeling in pain. The only sliver of light was my Auntie Zainab, my mother's eldest sister, who went out of her way to help my family and tried to enforce a sense of stability.

Auntie Zainab, a stay-at-home mother, knew how to take charge. She was the eldest of ten, and the only sibling older than my mother. All of her own adult children already led separate lives, so Auntie Zainab took care of my siblings and me. She gave us home-cooked meals and clean clothes while our mother searched for work for the first time. Before this, my mother had always relied on my dad's

income. I learnt to adjust to this patchwork family, but it was not easy. I found we had to get used to the living situation fast.

Soon the inevitable day came when my family had to move out of our executive flat—a thousand square feet that felt like a castle to a little princess with big dreams. A home that was once filled with chatter and laughter became nothing but an empty shell. Together with my mother and siblings, we moved to a smaller flat close to the school that Danial and I attended.

Every day became a struggle. My mother's desk job earned her a meagre \$1,200 per month. That and the child maintenance we received from my father were barely enough to run the household. When my parents were together, we ate at restaurants and went grocery shopping as a family. If they were in a good mood, they even let us buy toys. Now, things were different. We stopped going out for dinner as a family. In fact, we stopped going out at all. We received hand-me-down clothes from cousins and had to discard many of our favourite toys due to space constraints in the tiny flat. We did not even get to go out to play on weekends.

Instead of toys, my brother, sisters and I resorted to using our imaginations. We pretended that our mattress was a lifeboat coming to the rescue as our imaginary ship sank. Upon that grey, fraying mattress, we shared an embrace

and protected one another from the circling sharks, our only sustenance were bananas we had brought onboard. We could entertain ourselves for hours until Auntie Zainab called us for dinner.

Bit by bit, chunks of my old life were being chipped away. I was thrust into a world without a plan. I took this all very hard. It affected me mentally, and I felt listless. With each passing day, my motivation suffered. Where I once looked forward to opening a book to study, now I stared at the words, unable to recognise what they meant, unwilling to comprehend their importance. Nothing made sense.

After six months since the announcement of the divorce, I eventually vowed to try to control at least one aspect of my life: my studies. Every night, I buried my nose in books, studying extra hard for my PSLE examinations as an escape from the reality around me. Through it all, I maintained hope that everything would return to normal someday and when it did, I would have paved the way for a better life through academic excellence.

The studying paid off. My PSLE results were on par with the top percentage of students in the country. I was part of the cream of the crop, which would be considered a huge step for anyone, but I was numb to the achievement. My mum and dad were still separated. My future was still swallowed by a deep, dark tunnel. One without an end in sight. One without light.

Still, I scored well enough to be given the opportunity to rank three choices for secondary school. My decision would affect my future in ways I couldn't imagine just yet.

But instead of ranking the top school in the Yishun area as my first choice, I did the reverse. Maybe I wanted to rebel, in frustration that my parents were not getting back together. If I had to live life the hard way, then it would be on my terms. I chose the newest and most unpopular schools in my neighbourhood. That one simple decision was the pebble in the pond. It caused a ripple effect I have had to grapple with to this day.

TWO

MY FAMILY ENDED up losing the smaller flat after a mere three months and had to move in with Aunty Zainab. In all, her three-room apartment in Khatib held eleven people, including Aunty's adult children and my grandmother. Every square foot was worth its weight in gold.

As if the tight living quarters wasn't bad enough, Aunty Zainab's razor-thin patience made the situation worse. Although she became our family's rock during the divorce process, now that we lived under her roof, she was a lion, ruler of her jungle. She was at the top of the food chain and had no qualms about stretching her claws.

I did have one ally while living at Aunt Zainab's: her twenty-seven-year-old daughter Sabariah. Living with cerebral palsy, she could not walk and her family could not afford a wheelchair. So she usually lay on the floor; Aunt Zainab had taken away her mattress when Sabariah kept soiling it. My cousin slept on the cold, hard tiles in the storeroom, wearing a diaper. Her muscles often stiffened and she felt cramps all over her body. She couldn't lift her hands at all and needed us to feed her during mealtimes. She wept often. Still, she was not spared her mother's short temper. Aunt Zainab periodically hurled insults at Sabariah.

"You're useless!" she would yell while beating Sabariah's legs or body. "You are such a nuisance. When will you die? I am at my wit's end! Taking care of you is not easy!"

I made it a point to be by my cousin's side whenever I returned home from school. I wanted to let Sabariah know she wasn't alone. The two of us often chatted and laughed until one or the other fell asleep. But there was no escaping the brunt of Aunt Zainab's wrath.

Her anger usually unleashed when the house was in a mess and when she had to do most of the cleaning. If someone put dishes in the sink without washing them, she found the culprit and smacked their arms.

"Do you guys think I'm your maid?" she would shout. "Ungrateful children!"

In our darkest moments, Sabariah and I held on to our

friendship as a beacon of light.

On a day as normal as any, I was daydreaming in class. As my attention kept wandering, I kept getting a whiff of jasmine. A thin, floral note danced in the air and tickled my nose. It drove me nuts—I was indoors and the class had not even a slight botanical trace. I nudged my seatmate to check if she had picked up the smell too. I looked around at my other classmates. Nobody was acting as if anything was amiss. I wondered if perhaps I was hallucinating, possibly due to boredom. But the aroma didn't dissipate. It lingered after school and got stronger as I approached my aunt's home.

At the doorway of the flat, I found a crowd of people—the sight of which made my heart leap. I spotted many of my aunts and uncles among them. As I wended my way through the group, my fears mounted and the scent of jasmine grew stronger.

Sabariah had passed away. Apparently, my other cousins had paged me while I was attending remedial lessons, but I hadn't heard the beeps because the pager was in my bag. Now Sabariah's body was no longer in the house. She had been buried after the Zohor midday prayers.

Upon hearing the news, I stood still in the doorway. I had lost my beacon, my best friend. As the pain settled in, I realised that I hadn't even had a chance to kiss my cousin's forehead in a final goodbye.

RESOURCES

For those seeking help and those who want to help others

AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research)

Provides counselling for women and offers free legal clinic services

AWWA (Asian Women's Welfare Association)

Transitional Shelter Provides temporary housing for displaced families facing financial difficulties

Beyond Social Services

Dedicated to helping youths from less privileged backgrounds break away from the poverty cycle

Crisis Centre Singapore

Provides shelter for men who are homeless or at risk of homelessness

FaithActs

Provides casework, counselling services, financial assistance, and free basic legal advice

Family Service Centre (FSC)

Provides support to individuals and families with personal, social and emotional challenges

Habitat for Humanity

Works with vulnerable families who need help to transform their homes into a safe and sanitary state

Homeless Hearts of Singapore

Provides support for those who are displaced/isolated and helps the homeless re-integrate into community

New Hope Community Services, Shelter for Displaced Families and Individuals

Provides temporary housing and helps families regain their footing without breaking them up

PERTAPIS Centre for Women & Girls (PCWG) / Children's Home (PCH)

Provides residential care for those who are from dysfunctional families and are in need of shelter, care and protection

Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO)

Offers free legal advice and women's shelter

Social Service Office (SSO)

Offers consultations with social workers and assistance on ComCare applications

TOUCH Community Services, Family Enablement

Helps vulnerable families with personal, financial and emotional issues

“A human face to important questions Singaporeans should be asking about meritocracy, deservedness, dignity and care.”

Kirsten Han, editor-in-chief of *New Naratif*

“A must-read account of how one woman chose to rise above her struggles.”

Sarah Bagharib, founder of Crazycat and women’s advocate

FOR LIYANA, HOME WAS OFTEN UNSTABLE.

At 22 and pregnant, she found herself homeless with no one to turn to—how did she get here? Soon she discovered a community of homeless families on a beach in Sembawang, sleeping in tents just like hers. She learnt that in prosperous Singapore, the homeless are not always identifiable by appearances alone. Months later, journalists uncovered Liyana’s story and how she navigated a bureaucracy of obstacles.



Liyana Dhamirah is the founder of Virtual Assistants Singapore. Her first entrepreneurial venture was MommaMiia, which made and sold handicrafts and cake pops. She also volunteers with the National Library Board to help children find joy in reading and distributes necessities to families in need.

NON-FICTION

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