

# A Single Smile

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There are some people who can pirouette six times in a row without falling over. There are some people who can recite every line of dialogue from the Harry Potter movies from memory. There are some people who can ace every single calculus test without studying at all. As far as I know, my hero cannot do any of those things. But she can smile the biggest, brightest, most genuine smile I have ever seen.

I met her six summers ago on a visit to Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity Orphanage in Ville Parle, Mumbai. An Indian nun wearing the simple blue-edged, white sari of Mother Teresa led me into a room with more cribs - and toddlers - in one place than I had ever seen in my life. I wandered through the babbling mass of children and saw sights that remain in my memory to this day. I saw a 3 year old child reach out, mesmerized, toward the shiny strap of my dad's wristwatch. I saw a little kid on the ground strapped into a child's car-seat, rocking *itself* to sleep. I saw two siblings sleeping peacefully, the older one's arm wrapped protectively around the other. And I saw a girl. She was standing up in her crib with one hand placed cautiously on the rail for support and the other fingering the pink heart embroidered on her bright orange corduroy skirt. As I drew closer, she reached out to me, her small hand groping in the air between us. I stretched out to her and she wrapped her tiny, little hand around my pointer finger and watched me. Her deep, inquisitive chocolate brown eyes searched mine. I gave her a small, tentative smile and she responded with the most breathtakingly beautiful smile I have ever had the good fortune to witness. But it wasn't beautiful because she had flawless teeth or the perfect shade of lipstick. What made it beautiful was the sincerity with which it was created. Her smile made me want to stay with her forever. It made me want to abandon my common sense and absorb her innocent view of the world, a view in which there were no terrorists, rapists, and mass murderers; a view in which everything could be solved with a single action: a smile.

Later, I learned about that angelic little girl's past. I gathered that her parents had lost their lives in a devastating car crash a couple years previously. I understood that she had two older siblings living at another facility. I was told that her chances for adoption were slim because most families are not interested in adopting more than two children,

especially older children, at once. I thought of her radiant, trusting smile and my heart broke into a thousand little pieces. I don't know where that little girl is now. I don't know what she looks like or what she likes to do. I don't even know her name. All I have is my memory of her on that hot, humid Indian summer day. And for now, that's enough.

I think of that little girl often. I see her in my mind and I'm struck by the simplicity of her life. She lives with nothing: no iPod, no closet overflowing with clothes, no fridge filled with food, and no parents to love and protect her. She has none of the items that we, in our modern, technological society, think are absolutely necessary for survival. And yet, she has everything. She has innocence and kindness, a big heart and an open mind. Despite her miserable circumstances, her heart is not hardened and her mind is not overcome with bitterness and hate. Though she has virtually nothing, she can still *smile*. This is what makes her my hero, the person I remember for strength. In her little heart, she has so much that we inadvertently lose in our frantic efforts to keep up with the latest fashion trends or update our homes with the most recent gadgets. Every now and then, I catch myself succumbing to materialistic obsession and I remind myself of that little girl's bright, unrestrained smile. Recalling her smile, I am able to remember what she knew inherently: that what is truly important in life is not the designer clothes or the expensive electronics, but the moments we have with the people we love, the moments that take our breath away, the moments like that little girl's single, stunning smile.