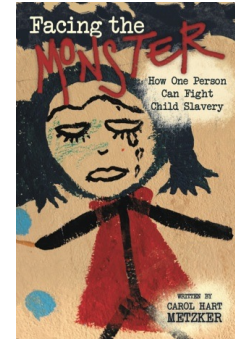


***Facing the Monster:
How One Person Can Fight Child Slavery, excerpt***

By Carol Hart Metzker

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Mark and Maina, 2004

Walking to the front of a bus while bumping along back roads of India was no easy task. Big potholes in the hardened dirt and cracked concrete created a noisy, jolting ride that bounced our band of international travelers up and down and jostled us side to side. So we stayed in our seats.

Except for one. Hanging on to seatbacks, one man worked his way to the front of the bus. He began to address my fellow travelers and me, a group of tourists and volunteers who were spending a vacation visiting humanitarian projects between sightseeing jaunts—the magnificent Taj Mahal and a sublime bird sanctuary.

“Our visit today is to an ashram—a center, this one for children,” he announced. Not recalling the stop on our tour, I checked the itinerary. “Project visit” was all it stated. I shrugged, almost accustomed to the constant changes in schedules and seemingly complete disregard for appointment times that began the moment we arrived in Delhi. I supposed I would figure out where we were going and what we were doing when we got there, wherever “there” was.

Mark Little, the Englishman who valiantly made it to the front of the bus, described services for recovering children—medical and psychological treatment, education, vocational training, and returning home. I half-listened and jotted a few notes in my journal, distracted by exotic scenery outside the bus window: tropical plants, passing motorcycles that carried families of four, carts pulled by animals.

The road narrowed, eventually forcing the bus to stop. My fellow passengers and I disembarked on a lane that was now completely blocked by our behemoth bus. No matter, it seemed. By this time there were no other vehicles, not even a cart.

We walked the length of a long, tall wall, homing in on the sounds of children singing and clapping. We bent forward as we entered a campus through an open metal gate. Little girls decorated us with necklaces of marigolds and blessed us with red thumbprints of vermilion on our foreheads. Once adorned, we joined in a dance with the children.

Our laughing and smiling international band gathered with local humanitarian workers, teachers, and two teen-age boys under a thatched-roof pavilion. A woman introduced the young men. “This is Huro, and this is Shivji,” she said. “They lived here at the ashram for six months when they were younger.”

Their harrowing experience began when six-year-old cousins Huro and Shivji were playing by a stream and a car pulled up beside them. A man got out and offered them candy, a rare treat for boys who lived in a desperately poor rural village. Huro and Shivji accepted the sweets and the man's invitation for more. Deceived and whisked into the back of the car, the young boys were forced into the world of slavery.

Hundreds of miles from home Huro and Shivji were separated. Each was locked in a dark room with a carpet loom. Abused, given only a tiny amount of beans and rice, and provided with a tin cup for a toilet, each boy wove carpets for eighteen hours a day, never leaving his room.

From a village without modern communication, the uneducated, poverty-stricken parents were nearly helpless to find their sons. Without money, a car, or other resources they had no way to search for or publicize the loss of the boys. They were unable to fight corrupt officials who—in return for money—turned a blind eye to children's slave labor.

Never giving up hope, the parents appealed for help from local representatives of an international organization that rescued children in captivity. Five years later, humanitarian workers rescued Huro and Shivji, reunited them with their parents, and then brought them to the ashram to heal.

My half-listening was over. I scrawled notes in a tablet at a furious pace. My attention was now captive, my focus centered, every ounce of my brain's capacity fully tuned to the boys' story. I scribbled down the stages of recovery and the process of aiding a former child slave relearning to play and live in freedom. I scratched out notes about the significance of reading and writing—a marvelous game learned by children at the ashram and passed along to other children when they returned home—skills that help inoculate families against further enslavement. I observed Huro's deep-set eyes and dark expressions—he was now a young man studying to become a teacher.

A layer of dust and sweat from my hands coated my pen and camera. As the sun began to set, I slung my camera over my shoulder and strolled away from the group. I gazed at my surroundings. Boys played on monkey bars in front of a dormitory. Palms thrived around a low, concrete structure that held latrines. Huro and Shivji continued talking to members of our team under the thatched-roof gazebo. Away from the others, I allowed the scenery to absorb my thoughts ... until something in the corner of my eye caught my attention. Young girls in matching red-and-white-checked outfits, under the watchful eye of a motherly figure, stood in rows and watched my every movement.

I wandered over to them as though pulled gently by an invisible string. The woman—their teacher and caregiver—greeted me. She interpreted my hello for the

girls and noticed that one of the smaller girls and I were looking at each other, smiling, connecting without saying a word.

“This is Maina,” she said. Two weeks earlier, the eleven-year-old girl had been rescued from the circus, where she had been enslaved, the woman explained.

“Would she like to see a photo of herself?” I asked the teacher.

She translated. Maina’s nod followed. I pulled the camera off my shoulder and held it to my eye. I snapped one last photo in the dimming daylight, and the automatic flash kicked into action. Before checking the photo myself, I turned the camera so Maina could see her image in the tiny screen. She grinned up at me as one of my fellow travelers nudged my elbow to herd me back to our bus.

It was there for a moment; its likeness was captured in pixels for eternity. Maina’s beautiful smile, a result of her rescue and current safety, showed no trace of her previous trauma. It was illuminating. I rode the rays of her smile back to the ashram’s gate.

Shock and disbelief, however, took hold as we retraced our steps down the lane. I began to shiver, and on the dark bus ride back to our quarters, I sobbed. Surely this experience was not real. Was it possible I had misunderstood? Could the ashram’s sign, No More Tools in Tiny Hands, be a prop, a trick, a fake? Where had Mark Little taken us? Did my history books lie or lead me astray by omission? Hadn’t Quakers and other people of faith who conducted the American Underground Railroad—covert connections of escape routes and safe houses to help nineteenth-century slaves to freedom—ended this abomination?

How had such a dirty secret—a conspiracy of deceivers, thieves, sellers, buyers, users, abusers, and consumers—remained hidden from me for so long? My brain and heart searched for an answer that would bring peace and reassurance, but the truth remained solid and unwavering. Child slavery had never been abolished. It was alive and well. Human trafficking—a conduit for bringing people into slavery—slithered stealthily in shadow ... strong, powerful, and hungry for victims.

At my tenth consecutive hour of tears, I vowed that I would do something to help Maina and millions of children like her. But how does one person stop or even put a dent in slavery?