a child's Broken drawing

By Raymond Howell

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Authors Note

This short story is based on true circumstances and is about an academic writing a paper and then a book covering the crimes committed by the United Nations Peacekeeping Force, but one of the talks to publicise her book and hopefully increase the sales did not go quite the way she intended...

Regretfully, I cannot say let's hope this is not true...

Section One

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Daily, stories concerning the sexual abuse of young children and women by personnel in the United Nations Peace Keeping forces operating in the DRC briefly crossed an academic's desk. Then like a round-robin file, they were passed on to another and so on, until one-day curiosity stirred her conscience and she held back a file. Reading it more attentively she recalled a similar situation involving UN Forces elsewhere in the world causing her to wonder, surely, there's a paper in this for me?

So, with her universities backing she began investigating the claims.

In the month she spent amongst the women of the Congolese she documented hundreds of cases of abuse. All of which, in one form or another were enacted against the poor desperate woman by the very people who were meant to protect them - most often using food or their obvious poverty as a means of persuasion.

Returning to academic life she wrote a paper which she followed with a talk, both of which were well received and much lauded by her colleagues, where her status within the university rose substantially.

Then she collated her work into a book.

To publicise it, she took to the road giving talks in community halls, colleges, and WI meeting rooms around the country.

“I found children” she declared at each gathering, “who, as young as ten
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are coerced into sexual acts by UN personnel using gifts of food, or if they refuse the offers, they are simply raped. I found mothers as young as twelve-years-old along with young teens encouraged to grant sexual favours in return for a handful of rice, or a packet of soap powder. I would suggest that in one community alone, close to half of the children were the result of rape, or as the women call it, survival sex."

At each meeting, she would let the unfairness and horror of her words sink in, before revealing.

"Some of the abusers promise marriage, only to disappear once the women fall pregnant. In the woman's society which values virtue and virginity, they are treated as outcasts and many are pushed to the point of suicide. As for the UN, they openly discourage the woman from locating the fathers and do not assist with legal action to obtain child support. Neither do they provide shelter, food, or counselling for the socially stigmatised, the sexually traumatised and those abandoned by the men to raise their children in severe poverty. In fact, the UN does its uppermost to both deflect and therefore ignore the issue. As for the men's forgotten children, many are bullied, or simply ignored by their community as non-people, and quite often by their own mothers too. Such children yearn to meet their father who they hope will give them a better life. But more importantly to the children they can point to them and say, that is my father - see you bullies, I do have one and he cares for me."

At that point, she displays slides of children's drawings. "I encouraged them to do these as a way of showing me what they think a family is. I was particularly moved by this drawing done by a six-year-old child. As you can see, it features a man without a face, feet or arms. When I asked her why that was she explained tearfully as she pointed to each part of her drawing. 'See, he has no face because I don't know what he looks like.' And then pointing to where his arms ought to be, she said, 'he doesn't have arms because he has

never hugged me, and he doesn’t have feet cos he has never stood beside me.’ So there you have it, life for the women of the Congolese”, the researcher said at one fairly well-attended meeting before concluding.

“Frankly, due to the sheer number of those abused and the way their poverty is used against them, I would suggest that the women of the Congolese are the most abused and traumatised women in the world.”

Section Two

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"I have to agree wholeheartedly with your closing statement", a man shouted over the rippling applause, which came to a ragged end when they noted his firm tone - clearly suggesting an objection was about to follow.

“First of all, let me ask”, he stated strongly, “what is the purpose of your book? And secondly, exactly what would you have us do about this issue?”

“Thank you for the question.” She ventured, although noticeably a little wary of his tone. “As for my book’s purpose”, she suggested with a patient smile, “it is of course to raise awareness. And as for what you can do to help, you could start by writing to the UN and your MPs.”

“Yes! We certainly could do that!” He replied with feigned patience. “But you know as well as we do here, that such would be a useless exercise without obvious purpose and organisation. Recall, that a person raising the issue in the House would merely be told by another minister, ‘Whilst I’m sure we all support the honourable members’ concern for the woman of the Congolese, and rightly so, it is nether-the-less not a matter for this house to consider, but should properly be dealt with by the UN. We will of course at some opportune moment pass on your concerns, along with those of the house but…’, I am correct in that aren’t I madam.”

He asked rhetorically before asserting dismissively. “And you know, just as we do, that will be the end of it. So I ask you…,” he continued almost
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accusingly, as his glittering but penetrating eyes searched her now worried face. "...What are *you* personally going to do to solve the problem - especially now that you have raised it?"

"I will keep on with these meetings to raise awareness and most likely I'll visit the women again." She answered with less assurance than she had shown when delivering her lecture.

"You mean, you're going to keep plugging your book, a book which I cannot see has any anthropological merit other than to serve your own immediate cause" he retorted without any wish to make her moment easier. "And then if you can, I'm sure you'll persuade the publishers to fund a second trip so you can gather more material for a follow-up. Right?"

"Well…," she flustered. "I think you are being unfair and you're putting a harsh slant on things. But let me remind you, it's how these things work. Isn't it."

"You mean, it is accepted practise to meet these women and rile them up to get their stories, which may or may not be true. And let's be honest you have not substantiated any of their claims. You've merely accepted their versions, which you have now relayed to us as fact. An outcome, which in my opinion will not help them. It could even serve to harm their cause if others decide there is no proof and therefore dismiss your work. Or suggest even that you have exaggerated their claims."

Then, anticipating her need to respond, he suddenly raised his hand calmingly, but compellingly, to suggest silence, where he then quantified his assertions. "Although, I do admit that I agree with you in the main, as the sheer number of claims suggests a likelihood that many are true."

There were nods of agreement from the audience which he

acknowledged with a smile, before returning his attention to the researcher.

“It might also be said, that your presence there and your questions could not help but raise the woman’s expectations - suggestive even that their lives might change for the better because of your visit. Which as things stand won’t happen will it.” He stated sternly in a way that forbade argument - not that she had one ready for him…

Section Three

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"And before you try to object," the man said firmly, "and understand you have stated your view already, let me on behalf of this audience explore my proposition further. In my opinion, there is nothing more wicked than teasing those who are starving and living in poverty with promises of food and shelter and safety and then not delivering on it. Which is exactly what your presence did. By interviewing them you have raised their expectations, only to drop them once you received what you wanted." Where once again to the amazement of the audience, his penetrating steely gaze held her firmly and silently in place.

“Nevertheless” he continued accusingly, “while they struggle, you receive accolades and a book deal, plus the income from it. But what did they get? Nothing! So yes I do agree, they are the most abused and traumatised women in the world, and you glibly and for your profit and reputation are merely adding to their plight. You could even say…, such research without suitable action points and a conclusion is highly irresponsible.”

“But…, but…, that was…, and is not my intention”, she blustered angrily, “as I think you well know… but…”

Again he raised his arm while turning his palm towards her strongly suggesting, ‘do be silent’, where astonishingly mid-sentence she stopped speaking, allowing him room to state. “I did not say that was your deliberate intention…, did I? But it is surely a likely outcome. But now then…” he said dropping his hand, as well as his lecturing tone to one that was more
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instructive and consolatory.

“...Return here and present us with a well-thought-out campaign to bring the UN to heel and you will most certainly receive my support. In the meantime, please do not present me, or these other caring folks here, with an ineffectual list of interviews which you in effrontery are calling, research. As any of us here today could have compiled those, except we do not have the luxury of a university paying for our flight, accommodation, food and expenses, now do we…?”

Again he acknowledged the audiences flusters and trickled applause with a slowly released satisfied smile before concluding.

“We are not privileged like you are - a position which I sincerely hope you will learn to use and do something more positive and helpful with. And please next time be better prepared to properly finish what you started.”

Somewhat brought to heel, she stammered, “Err, err, yes,… err… I’ll…, I’ll get back to you as soon as I can, on that…, just leave me your name and contact details.”

“You can call me conscience - when or if you ever find me”, he said lightly. With that he rose smartly from his chair, where in a few strides and without ever reaching the exit, before her startled eyes he simply disappeared. But not so from her mind where it is hoped he will remain for a very long time to come.