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The Little Prisoner

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When people talk about evil they are usually thinking of mass murderers like the fictional Hannibal Lecter or dictators like Adolf Hitler, but for most of us our actual encounters with evil are more mundane. There are the school playground bullies and sadistic teachers who turn their victims' days into nightmares, the unkind care workers in the old people's homes or the violent thieves who invade the lives of the elderly or infirm. Our brushes with these evils are usually passing or second hand, but none the less chilling for that.

This, however, is the true story of a four-year-old girl who fell into the power of a man for whom evil was a relentless daily activity. She remained in his power for seventeen years until she eventually managed to escape and turn the tables. It is a story of terror and abuse on a scale that is almost unbelievable, but it also tells of her enormous act of courage which led to the arrest, trial and imprisonment of her persecutor.

Most of us don't usually hear about children like Jane until we read about their deaths in the papers and then we all wonder how such things could be going on under our

noses and under the noses of all the welfare workers who are supposed to be there to help. We try to imagine what can have gone wrong, but we can't because these children live in a world that is unimaginable to anyone who hasn't been there. This is the story of a survivor and we should all listen to what she has to tell us.

Jane Elliott's story is almost unbearable to read in parts, but it needs to be told because the people who perpetrate these sorts of crimes rely on the silence of their victims. If people talk openly about what happens behind closed doors, then evil on the scale of what happened to Jane becomes harder to achieve. Bullies can only operate when other people are too frightened, ashamed or embarrassed to talk about what is being done to them. By telling her story, Jane is making it a little harder for evil to prosper in future.

The names of the characters have all been changed to protect Jane's identity and the identities of those who helped her in her fight for justice.

I was being led back into the courtroom by a victim liaison officer, an elderly lady. Up till then they had been careful to take me in and out of a different door from Richard, my stepfather, or if they hadn't then they had made sure we didn't meet, which was making me feel more confident. Hiding behind my hair, I had still been able to avoid seeing him and remembering his face too clearly. As I came back in through the door with my head down I saw a pair of shoes directly ahead of me, blocking my way. I looked up, straight into a face that made me feel sick with fear. The pale snakelike eyes and the ginger hair were the same, although he looked a little stockier than I remembered him.

'Get me out of here,' I hissed through gritted teeth, feeling his eyes boring into mine and his thoughts getting back inside my head. 'Get me out, get me out.'

'Calm down, for heaven's sake,' the lady said, irritated by such a show of emotion. 'Come through here.'

She led me into a room off the court, which had a glass door. He followed us, but didn't come in, standing outside the glass, just staring at me with no expression.

'Get the police!' I screamed. 'Get the police!'

'Don't be silly, dear.' She was losing patience now. 'Who is it you're worried about? Is it him?' She gestured towards the immobile figure on the other side of the glass with the dead, staring eyes.

'Get someone!' I screamed and she realized there was no way she could calm me down. She walked towards the door. 'Don't leave me!' I screamed, suddenly envisaging him and me in the room alone. The woman was panicking now, aware that she didn't know how to handle the situation.

At that moment Marie and another police officer arrived. Finding me standing in the corner of the room, hiding my face against the wall like a child in trouble, they came to the rescue, furious with everyone and getting me to safety.

'He's going to kill me,' I moaned as Marie put her arm round me. 'I'm dead.'

'No, he won't, Jane,' she soothed me. 'He can't do anything now. You're doing fine. It's nearly over.'