

## **GOLD COSTS MORE THAN MONEY**

### **The young man on the train**

I am so confused. My world has just turned upside down. This only happened a few hours ago and my head is still spinning. Where do I begin? I was on the train coming home from work, and was enjoying a beautiful pink summer sunset over the city. There was hardly anyone else on the train where I was sitting, it was just me and a young man in his 20s who seemed deeply involved in the book he was reading. But after a few minutes I happened to notice that he was crying, silently.

‘Excuse me, are you OK?’ I asked him quietly. ‘Is everything all right?’

He looked up, his eyes full of tears. ‘Oh sorry, yes I’m fine. It’s this book. It’s really upsetting, I had no idea...’

‘What’s it about?’ I asked.

‘Slavery.’

‘I know how you feel,’ I thought to myself.

I’d studied history at university and I’ll never forget learning the truth about transatlantic slavery. Twelve million people forced from Africa to the Americas, but only eleven million arrived. Eleven million people lost their freedom. One million lost their lives on the way. I cried for days.

‘Yes, it is time we faced up to our past,’ I finally said.

‘Our past?’ he replied. ‘No – you don’t understand, I’m not talking about the past. This book is about slavery today.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Slavery today. Modern slavery.’

‘What are you talking about? Slavery is illegal.’

‘Well, it may be illegal, but over 40 million people are in slavery today, and 10 million of those are children.’

‘What are you talking about?’ I felt like someone had just hit me.

‘The things we buy and eat and use every day like chocolate, fish, coffee and clothes might have slavery in the supply chain.’

‘Forty million people in slavery?’ I repeated.

The young man continued, ‘But the thing that really upsets me is gold. Thousands of people working in gold mines are treated like slaves. The mines are deep in the ground - they’re often illegal and extremely dangerous. Working conditions are terrible. The workers are beaten, they don’t get paid, they are lied to, they get sick from the poisons that they are exposed to and some die from illness or accidents.’

‘Gold?’ I said.

‘Yes. I’m reading about a worker called Ibrahim. The author is interviewing him. Ibrahim is very ill from all the dust in the mine that he’s been breathing in for years. His lungs

are full of liquid. He was just nine when he started working in the mine - now he's twenty-three, the same age as me.'

'And the thing that upsets me is that my dad was a jeweller - he owned a really successful jewellery business. When I was a kid I loved going to his store. It was like a magic place with all the sparkling diamonds and beautiful smooth gold and silver. But where did all that come from? Did my father ever ask himself that question? He made so much money, so much. Now I am wondering if slavery paid for our beautiful family home - and is it paying for my college education?'

'Why don't you talk to him about it?'

'It's too late. He passed away two years ago.'

Silence.

Suddenly the young man got up. The train was coming into the station.

'This is my stop. Here, this is for you - read it then pass it on.'

Before I could answer, the doors had shut. The young man had left the book lying on the seat, still open at the page he'd been reading. I picked it up. What I read has changed my life.

Ibrahim was talking to the author...

"I feel good that you are listening to me, for the first time someone is letting me talk about my pain. I am happy that I have been listened to and understood. But it also makes me feel very sad that all this is happening to me, and I do not have a clue about how to get out of it. I know from what we have talked about that I am a slave."

Then Ibrahim, tears running down his cheeks, said that he wanted to ask something of me. "I want to be remembered," he said. "When my story is written and your book is ready, will you send me a copy? I want to show it to others, to show them that I am not completely useless. I just want to show that something good can come from my life."

*Blood and Earth: Modern Slavery, Ecocide and the Secret to Saving the World*,  
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