



unnoticed
NEIGHBORS

*a
pilgrimage
into the
social justice
story*

ERINA K. LUDWIG

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Copyright 2011
by The House Studio

ISBN 978-0-8341-2738-8

Printed in the United States of America

Cover Design by Arthur Cherry
Interior Design by Sharon Page

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This book is for everyone who made it possible—
those both near and far.

Especially for Kendall.

SAMPLE

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**RECONSTRUCTED
BB GUNS**
and
AK-47s



“Our lives begin to end the
day we become silent about
things that matter.”

—MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.¹

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A machine hammers a single sheet of metal until it makes a small, brass bullet. The bullet rolls along the machinery belt and is picked up and inspected. The bullet is placed with others and checked again by a Ukrainian soldier before being packed onto a ship. The container is opened again in West Africa and is carried on the back of a pickup truck among a group of armed men. The bullet is picked up, loaded in a firearm, and fired—straight into the head of a thirteen-year-old boy.²

So begins the 2005 film *Lord of War*. The rest of the film chronicles the international work of Nicolas Cage's character, Yuri, as he becomes an arms dealer to meet the demand of providing firearms. But the film goes beyond the simplistic and into the largely undiscussed foray of weapons and their unruly power over and effect on us.

We barely have to skim our online newspapers or radio news sound bites before we learn about wars, threats of wars, suicide bombings, friendly fire, drive-by shootings, high school killings, and gang warfare. We see guns in plenty of popular movies; in fact, the better the special effects explosions, the more tweets the film may get. We see them in TV shows and in video games, where we can be the armed combatants.³ The game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* did this so well its makers faced criticism from both war veterans and the families of soldiers. War conflict video games have grown so popular that this particular one sold five million copies on its release date, totalling \$310 million in twenty-four hours.⁴ By January 2010, the company had had made \$1 billion.



The games are slick and are designed to look like the real thing. When you start the scenario with your avatar soldier, you are immersed in a world that looks exactly like Afghanistan, with dust, locals, and the native tongue of the enemy being spoken. You have a team and a mission, but better yet, you have a powerful and cleverly created weapon that will kill your enemy on the spot. You can even swap places and become one of the opposing forces and shoot at American soldiers.⁵

It is the crisp realism that makes these games so popular, but it is also what has offended both AMVETS and Massachusetts' Gold Star Families, among other groups. For those who have lost family members in the recent wars, the rise of these games must be confusing and heartbreaking at the same time. And yet we're fascinated and thrilled by having control of some virtual arms and being involved in virtual fights that closely resemble the real ones happening everywhere. We seem to like guns.

Guns and all that is connected to them have become ingrained in our society in the same way technology and social media are. They are seen as the norm rather than the exception and are part of life as we know it. The question of arms is old stomping ground in the States; the Second Amendment saw to that. They are a part of history, culture, security, and for many have nothing to do with the heinous war crimes that have seen Charles G. Taylor, the former President of Liberia, on trial for fueling atrocities in Sierra Leone.

As unrelated as the firearms in the recent Tucson, Arizona, shooting seem to those used in Kono, Sierra Leone, during the civil war, the results of these small arms are identical. Most of us assume and connect the world's greatest wars and their sins with tanks, bomber jets, or submarines, but the truth is it is

the pistols, handguns, and submachine guns that do the most damage as they are cheap, easily accessible, and portable.⁶ I learned that not only does this mean small arms are perfect for illicit trafficking, but they are also simple and small enough for children to operate.

There are approximately 300,000 child soldiers in the world.⁷ Although Africa's child soldiers have become common knowledge due to movies like *Lord of War* and the scores of non-profit organizations working on the ground, it is Asia that has the single highest number of warring children. Burma has the highest number of child soldiers, with 75,000 being trained and kept in the country's deepest jungles.⁸ Burma's long-standing ethnic divisions and competition have meant that a number of groups, from the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) to the Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF), have taken to using children as soldiers.⁹ But perhaps more disturbing is that it's the State Peace Development Council, or Burma's national army, that "recruits" the most children.

It's not difficult to understand why Marcus Young began Project: AK-47 to take on the daunting task of finding and rescuing as many of those boys and girls as he and his team could. Six years later they are still calling for freedom, negotiating with the Burmese government to release the children, and running restoration homes to give the children who are demobilized a tangible afterlife. They work with partners and local volunteers who serve as house parents and counselors, teachers and guardians. They have sponsorship programs to make education a possibility again and a 200-acre farm for those who want to inherit five acres to be able to provide for their family. They do all of this for little ones like Sanan, who was sold to the army by his uncle when he was nine years old.



On his first day, he was gang raped by the other boy soldiers, under the watch of the “boss” (another older child soldier), then sent to collect bottles and cans that could be recycled or resold. That was his first day. Every day after was spent being a personal slave, keeping watch, collecting firewood, training, and when allowed, sleeping without a blanket in the frigid night winds. Project: AK-47 rescued him when he was eleven years old. He now lives in one of the rehabilitation houses and is back at school where he hopes to learn a lot to help “his people and guarantee a better life for them.”¹⁰

Michael Oyella’s story is a little different, and yet the same. When he was nine years old he was kidnapped in a raid by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Kitgum, Uganda. He witnessed the beheading of his seven-year-old brother when the little boy told his captors he was tired from the long hike to the border of Sudan. He was trapped in the LRA for seven years. He was trained and brainwashed to kill and fight, to ambush and torture. He became a “husband” to the female Lieutenant Atto and suffered humiliations he still won’t talk about. When he escaped, he hid in a hut in Amira’s (a small town in Acholi land, north Uganda) Internally Displaced People’s (IDP) camp.

He calls his escape “luck from God” because he was able to slip between the Ugandan and LRA’s crossfire and finally made his way to Kicuw’s (another small town in Acholi land, north Uganda) reception center. It was there he began his slow rehabilitation process. It was also there he met the boys who killed his brother. I remember expecting to hear anger in his voice and a demand for revenge, but I heard neither. To Michael, they were all child soldiers being forced to kill—there was no difference.

Guns and children is a phenomenon found a lot closer to home too. A British actor named Ross Kemp made a documentary series called *Ross Kemp on Gangs*, which explored the effects of gang violence on countries around the world. His episode “Ross Kemp on Gangs: USA” put a magnifying glass on arms in the States. Kemp went to St. Louis, Missouri, one of the five most violent cities in the US, and spoke to mourning families, girlfriends, the local police and even gang members while they toyed with loaded guns.¹¹

The episode starts off in Walnut Park, an inner-city neighborhood, where Kemp meets the mother, grandmother, and sister of a seventeen-year-old boy named Robert Walker. Robert was killed on May 5, 2006, when he got off his school bus with his cousin. He was shot six times from his head to legs. It’s disturbing partly because he was so young and that so little was done to find the killers, but mostly because of what his mother says about no one caring when a child in their area is shot “because that’s what they do—shoot each other.”

It shouldn’t matter that this mother is a single parent, African-American, and in a low-paying job. It shouldn’t matter that when she speaks she uses slightly different words to make her point. All that should matter is that she’s grief stricken, that her only son is dead and she is no closer to justice than she was on the afternoon he was shot. But most won’t get past the neighborhood where she lives and the things that happen there because they don’t go there. Some don’t even know where her neighborhood is in their city.



Whether I was in Nashville, Indianapolis, Chicago, or Los Angeles, separation among people was apparent, even after all these years. We eat in the same restaurants and shop in the same grocery stores. We use the same libraries and work for the same companies. We live together now, but in so very many ways, we don't. Maybe most of these gaps are due more to socioeconomic differences than the prickly race issue, but the point still stands that we're divided. Though things have changed in legislation and rights, too often there's still awkwardness, or alienation between different ethnic groups. The relationships are still strained.

There was a video going around Facebook and YouTube for a while that had everyone who heard it mimicking the young man on camera. It was a news report about a woman whose house was broken into and how the burglar tried to climb into her bed. Her brother was there and fought off the intruder. When he told the news reporter this story, he became very animated, except it wasn't clear if he was joking or serious when he said, "Hide yo' wife, hide yo' kids and hide yo' husband too becós they's rapin' ervbody up in here." This one line is the reason the video became viral; it's the line that has been mimicked and laughed at countless times by its viewers. It's also the line and our response to it that cries so much more of that yawning gap between us.

The tragedy is how we've used our neighborhood, city, and county lines to mark our territories. We withdraw into our safe zones and what's familiar until what's different only becomes more different and more difficult to relate to. Until we can't understand, can't appreciate, don't fully get involved in what it must be like to live in a place where seventeen-year-olds are shooting each other. Gang culture (its violence, in particular)

is not a new topic. It's been discussed and picked apart, studied and turned into films, but it's also slipped into a social tragedy that most of us want to be as far away from as possible.

There are several gangs in St. Louis, the largest two being the Bloods and the Crips. Some say they're copycats of the L.A. gangs, others that they're real and brought the unforgiving drug trade to St. Louis in the 1990s. Either way, they are filled with children. It's estimated that every two weeks a child dies in St. Louis, and plenty of teddy-bear-covered trees mark their deaths.¹² The streets look like battlegrounds with bullet holes and gang names tagged on walls and on the sidewalks. A radio presenter in Ross Kemp's documentary distills what's happening into "kids killing kids."¹³ I wonder where these kids even get the guns, and I learn they may be received, stolen, or bought for protection.

When I read more on the prevalence of and access to guns, I find public opinions that leave me wondering how this great divide became so entrenched. Some comments that hit the hardest are the ones that blame gun crimes solely on African-Americans and Mexicans or the comments like "if any hood rat or welfare mother had a baby they should imprison the baby to prevent future crimes."¹⁴ There is no denying the disconnect, the chasm that divides us even though we're living in the same city, in the same district, in the same country with the same basic needs. It's us and them, here and there. How many times have we thought of gang violence as the bearer's fault rather than the gun's? How many of us have blamed the ills of crime and social breakdown on these "others?" How many of us have uttered the phrase: "Those who live by the sword . . . ?"



In January of 2008, Jireh Sports merged with Shepherd Community Center and moved to Shepherd's facility on East Washington Street in Indianapolis. Shepherd works in a low-income neighborhood and provides food, clothing, a health clinic, mental and spiritual guidance and tutoring, job skills and even college mentoring to those who live nearby. They work with the marginalized, the ones we don't notice unless we know them personally. And they've done so well that even the Indianapolis Colts football team is joining their efforts.¹⁵

But it's Tim Streett's story, the founder of Jireh Sports, that most captures me. It reads like a twenty-first century parable in its tragedy and redemption. Tim started Jireh Sports to live among those whose poverty is harsh, where windows are boarded up in derelict homes and the grass grows too high. In 1978, when he was fifteen years old, his father was shot in the head in an armed robbery while he and his father were shoveling snow in their driveway. Tim was left to live, grieve, and spiral downward, wandering around lost until it dawned on him that the boys who killed his father were many things, but mostly they were the urban poor.

After that he became fixed on one thing—racial reconciliation. He didn't want to just preach about the long-fraught tensions between people groups in America; he wanted to be part of the change. And so he wrote letters to the men who killed his father—one was serving a ninety-year sentence while another was on death row—to tell them he had forgiven them. But he didn't stop there; he befriended one of the men and went on to visit him in prison and build up a friendship. He worked with the case's prosecutor to see the sentence reduced from ninety years to twenty-three years. The man was freed in 2001 and now works as an auto mechanic.

Tim's story shakes us because he lived out Jesus' words of mercy. He went to prison to visit a man who was part of the armed robbery that ended his father's life. He became a friend to the lonely and a defender of the lowly. None of this is to say we're meant to be saints, but we do need to try to understand, to go behind the crime to see the homes and families that have released so many broken, hurt, and struggling people outside.

When I lived in Nashville, I had no idea that the farther up Gallatin Pike I drove, the further into the "ghetto" I went. People used (and still use) that word with an odd mixture of fear and bravado that they had to go only a few blocks and they would be in the thick of it. I heard of shootings and car chases. I was told I had to be cautious and should stay in my car whenever possible. But when I would drive down Gallatin, I just saw people living their lives. Sometimes they would jaywalk in front of my car or strike up conversations at the neighborhood Wal-Mart, but they were just lower income people living their lives. Maybe the real problems of drugs and prostitution are more prevalent on smaller streets rather than the main roads. Maybe the bad things that do happen, happen at night, but how does creating a bogeyman out of an entire area help us connect or help us stay together?

It seems Tim asked himself similar questions because he moved his family from a middle class setting to be among those he wanted to minister to, and he started Jireh Sports. I visited Jireh Sports a few years ago, before it merged with Shepherd Community Center, and I was able to walk around the facility. I remember seeing computer rooms, the gym, the squealing children, and a huge room full of school supplies that were ready for the children's new school year. I remember thinking that it wasn't saintly ministry pushing Tim to work, but a



strong hope for and belief in the children who lived in poverty, who were locked into generations of poverty.

Tim talks about generational poverty being its own culture just as much as the middle class and old money are distinct cultures. He talks of generations of families living below the poverty line. He talks about how they're able to stop the cycle only when individuals choose differently, are presented with an opportunity, or participate in an activity that causes them to believe they can break out of the cycle.

Tim recalls a boy named Corey who became part of Jireh Sports during his junior year of high school. He was a brilliant gymnast but was a little too old to enter the competitive level. The staff at Jireh still encouraged him to take up a sport, so he chose diving. A year or so later Corey won the Indiana State Championship, the first Indiana public school system student to do so since the 1950s and the first African-American ever. But with a family riddled with poverty, he was barely encouraged by his family and friends to continue education and dropped out of college in the middle of his freshman year. He tried again, later on, but quit within the first week, and he now has two children to look after.

Corey's story isn't unusual. In fact, it's so widespread that some commentators fear that by dropping out of high school and keeping only low-paying jobs individuals like Corey will single-handedly ruin America's future chances as a global power, which equates to an outsourcing of American jobs to Chinese and Indian graduates. However, when we look at the United States's future on this grand scale and in these terms, we miss knowing who these individuals like Corey are; we fail to appre-

ciate that they might actually want a different life with a future for themselves and their children too.

Tim calls what's happening the "tyranny of the urgent." When you're financially, emotionally, and relationally stable, you tend to focus on your tomorrows. You think about increasing your savings so you can take two vacations instead of one. You think about what car you'll get next when this one has had enough years on it. You decorate and landscape your house because it means you'll get more for it when you want to sell it to buy a bigger one to display and store all the stuff you've acquired over the years. You encourage your children's education because it ensures a bright future for them. You save and invest for your retirement—and maybe a trip to Europe.

These middle class decisions and desires have become the norm for most of us, but if you're stuck in a cycle of generational poverty, the money you have is limited. It's not for the future; it's for now. You spend time working out how you will make it through this week when, once again, your needs and expenses are greater than the funds you have to cover it all. You live in each moment because you're not sure what the next one will bring. You buy food with questionable nutritious value because it's cheap and will suffice to keep the hunger pangs at bay. You send your children to school because they get a free meal there, and it serves as a day care that allows you to work. You plan where you might move if you're evicted, and TV is one of your few pleasures.¹⁶

To grow up living in the moment in the same way your parents and grandparents did creates a mold that is difficult to break. But even in these harsh and severe situations there is a flicker of something different. Jireh Sports calls it "a future



story”—something they try to instill in all the children. They don’t promise that all the kids will go on to play professional sports but that their future can be better than their today. There’s the idea that their future can be promising with high school graduation and college, that they can achieve a new kind of future through relationships, role models, and support systems that tell them they haven’t been overlooked and that they are important. They teach children to have a hope in their future. Without hope there will be gangs, drugs, and other temptations. I believe them when they say children don’t join gangs because they want to be criminals but because they’re looking for understanding and a place to belong.

There is hope, but there is also a cutting reality facing these children. Tim speaks of children who grow up aware that the world sees them merely as poor, black, the ones who go to public school, the ones who live on the wrong side of the tracks, the ones who aren’t as special as other kids. He speaks of overcoming these limits, which when I see how deeply they run, honestly sounds like the most difficult thing to do, and I realize we all bear a responsibility in this. Perhaps we haven’t ever said anything derogatory or prejudiced, but perhaps we simply haven’t thought about them at all. We don’t *see* them because we never cross paths until we read about shootings and deaths that make it into the news.

* * *

In the Old Testament God doesn’t shy away from war. He uses it several times to demonstrate to Israel why he is the one true God. However, there are some unbelievably violent stories in which babies are killed, daughters of enemies are taken as concubines, and cities are plundered. And God is there all along. I

am left wondering how a God of peace can ever be reconciled with so much bloodshed—until I remember I need the whole picture. The Bible is one gigantic story of humanity and our God. Who God is in the Old Testament cannot make complete sense without who God is in the New Testament.

Jesus fills in the picture of who God is—a God who loves all of his creation and wants to see us thrive. A God who is saddened by war and injustices and wants us to love each other as we claim to love him. Jesus certainly wasn't surprised by wars. He tells us, "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed" (Matthew 24:6). But he didn't mean we should be apathetic to what's happening around us. Instead he tells us to turn the teaching of revenge into one of peace—that we should take the insult rather than strike back (see Matthew 5:38-39). It's easy to think Jesus' advice here is a bit too idealistic for the time we live in now—a time of revolutions, drug cartels, and terrorism. But to dismiss these words would be to miss the rest of what he means.

I don't think Jesus wanted us to be defenseless against those who hurt us, but instead, to change the whole mindset of how to deal with things when they go wrong—to set a different standard. Maybe even to lead the way into habits and practices that will save lives in the end. Jesus told us to turn our love for our neighbors into a love that can also include our enemies (see Matthew 5:43-44). He spoke of a love that doesn't lash out or avenge or demand a return of affection or service, but will keep on giving, over and over again. Peter talks about the same peace where we bless when we've been insulted or hurt. He goes even further by suggesting that people aren't usually harmed for doing good and that even if we are we shouldn't be afraid (see 1 Peter 3:9-14).



These are incredibly high demands, but when I consider that over 740,000 people die annually from armed violence,¹⁷ millions are forced to migrate to displacement or refugee camps to survive the torture, abuse and death, or that the five permanent members of the UN security council (U.K., U.S.A, Russia, France, and China) are also the world's biggest arms exporters, I know these demands make sense.¹⁸ We live in a world that, whether we think of it or not, is connected. We may use guns for different reasons—for self-defense, protection, or war—but the damage they cause is the same regardless of our intentions. There's an old quote that says, "guns don't kill people; people kill people," but the simple fact is guns make it a lot easier. They make human life expendable.

Lord of War ends with Yuri firmly believing that what other countries do with the guns he sold them isn't his problem. He continues with a play on scripture, saying, "the arms dealer will inherit the earth." But in April 2008 a group of South African church leaders, trade unions, and lawyers banded together to prevent a Chinese arms ship from docking in Durban to then send the rockets, grenades, and mortars bombs on board to Zimbabwe.¹⁹ Despite the fact that the South African government had given the ship a transit license, this group blocked it. Mozambique and Namibia followed suit and prevented the arms from entering Africa through their ports. The ship managed to get rid of some goods in Luanda, Angola, before sailing back to China.²⁰

If you're like me, you cheered when you read this story—because these groups of individuals wanted peace more than anything else. It's a story that gives us hope that violence doesn't always win and that maybe the arms dealer doesn't inherit the earth after all. The arms and gun trade is a difficult topic

because it's so personal and asks so much of us. And I wonder if by having guns, we are hemming ourselves in from outside. Wanting safety is no bad thing, but perhaps the call is really to desire peace and a future for everyone.

SAMPLE



Contact Congress

Cliché? Maybe a bit, but this is important, so stay with me. You remember old Westerns with John Wayne? He always carried a pistol and wore a really sweet hat. Imagine if somebody met up with the “other guys,” the ones fighting John Wayne, and gave them rocket launchers (which weren’t even invented then). The movies would have turned out differently. This is what’s going on in developing countries. Developed countries (such as the one you’re probably a citizen of) are providing arms to the bad guys. Please call or send a letter or an email to your government representative and demand that your country stop providing arms to rebel movements in foreign countries.

Stay informed

Don’t put all your trust in one news source. Remember that they too are businesses and are just as interested in making money as your local gas station. Check several different news sources to balance the information you hear. Neither Fox News, CNN, CNBC, BBC, nor even Al Jazeera is right all the time (nor are any of them wrong all the time).

Provide a Saturday job

Driveway covered in snow? Grass a foot high? Yard buried in leaves? Why not ask one of the children from the neighborhood to take care of it? You'll have more time to do what you want to do, you'll be giving them some spending money, and who knows? They might just do a good job! Even if they don't, you will have given them something to do for a couple of hours that has kept them away from the television, video games, or any bad influences that might roam your neighborhood. Good work!

Adopt a family

Have them over for dinner periodically and see to it they're provided with a good, nutritious meal. Share stories and movies with them. See if you can find something you're all interested in.

Lock it up

If you feel it's necessary to own a firearm, please see to it that it is unloaded and locked securely in a cabinet—preferably with a trigger lock on it as well. Guns are inviting toys for children, and it's best to save their first experience for when they're old enough to handle them.



Be a mentor

Big Brothers Big Sisters is a very well-known mentoring program. They are always looking for volunteers, and it can be a very rewarding experience. If you were a real big brother or big sister at one point, remember how inspiring and encouraging you were to your younger siblings? Yeah, that's what I thought . . . This is your chance to redeem yourself for all those years you beat up on your younger siblings.

Go to:

<http://www.bbbs.org> to learn more about becoming a Big.

Tell people about child soldiers

Many of you have probably seen *Invisible Children* and know about child soldiers in Uganda. If you haven't, please watch it, as well as the other documentaries this organization has created.

The film focuses on the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) who, after having abducted over 30,000 children in the last twenty years (<http://kabiza.com/Lira-Children-Kony-Rebels.htm>), have now finally retreated into the Democratic Republic of Congo.

However, to date, over twice that many children have been abducted in Burma. Project AK-47 is an organization that is committed to rescuing child soldiers all over the world. Drop by <http://www.projectak47.com> or <http://www.invisiblechildren.com> and read up on child soldiers; then share what you find with your friends and family.