

This is a truly important book and a must-read for anyone who cares about justice for the poor and vulnerable. Matt takes us into the darkest of places, shining an unforgiving light on a horrendous tragedy, involving girls as young as ten trapped in a cruel adult world. Prepare to be heartbroken by their stories, angered and appalled at the evil being done to them. Like me, you will be gutted to read of the suffering of these most vulnerable of victims, but you will also be heartened and inspired by Matt and his team's creative attempts to bring them hope. Over the next few years Brazil is going to be a focus of the world's attention. The scandal of child prostitution on the country's longest motorway can no longer go unspoken. This book should be the start of an international effort to bring it to an end.

Steve Chalke, *UN Special Advisor on Community Action Against Human Trafficking*

Compelling and poignant reportage that painstakingly exposes Brazil's darkest secret. Matt Roper is that rare journalist who didn't turn his back on the trauma and misery he witnessed for the adrenaline rush of the next deadline. In parts heart-breaking, in others uplifting, this is a story that needs to be told.

Oliver Harvey, *The Sun*

Few journalists remain this committed to exposing an issue. Once you get your headlines it is all too easy to move on to the next big expose. Not only is this a dark side of Brazil that Matt continues to highlight with passion, but his writing takes you so vividly into children's lives. You are unable to stop thinking about them. Few books can do that.

Chris Rogers, *BBC Panorama, newsreader and investigative journalist*

By the same author

Street Girls

Remember Me, Rescue Me

HIGHWAY TO HELL

The road where childhoods are stolen

MATT ROPER

MONARCH
BOOKS

Oxford, UK & Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

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Foreword

I have a daughter of my own; I think that's why I was so moved by Matt's previous book – *Remember Me, Rescue Me*. The nightmarish accounts I was reading of girls exploited at the most vulnerable of ages drew both anger and sadness from me. But I had only read a book. When I actually met the girls – it rocked my life to the core. Suddenly, the stage and the hectic world of recording and touring and stardom became background noise to the plight of these girls.

In the pages of *Highway to Hell*, Matt describes a journey that ultimately leads to hope and healing and restoration – a conclusion that is full of promise. But before that are the pages that are difficult to read – the accounts of injustice, heartbreak, scandal, brutality, and the very living nightmare of child prostitution in Brazil.

It may be hard to read sometimes but if you enter the world of these precious kids, you might discover the most amazing thrill of life – that there is an awakening from that world, and we can be a part of helping them find their way out.

Dean Brody

Prologue

This book started as a journalistic work, a way of documenting a situation which I felt needed to be told. Canadian country singer Dean Brody and I planned to travel up the BR-116, a motorway which we had discovered had an alarming incidence of child prostitution. We would tell the girls' stories, expose some of the perpetrators, hopefully bring the problem out of the shadows.

But it quickly turned personal as the true depth and scale of this tragedy began to impact us in ways we had never expected. Within days we were both experiencing a sense of despair and brokenness deeper than anything we had ever had to deal with. Our lives changed forever as we came face to face with precious, beautiful young lives being torn apart before our eyes. And the book became the story of another journey, of an attempt to rescue them, and of the stirrings of hope amid the darkness.

Now much more than ever, I believe the world needs to hear about the BR-116. I truly hope and pray that what you are about to read will affect you just as deeply and irreversibly. For, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr, "the greatest tragedy" is "not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people."

Matt Roper



BR-116 motorway

Chapter 1

The Girl in the Lilac Dress

She came into our lives in the blink of an eye, a brief moment in time which suddenly, unexpectedly, pierced the pitch-black gloom. For one split second she was illuminated in our headlights, the next once again swallowed by the shadows.

We'd been driving for hours, straining through the darkness just to make out the faded white lines and rusting green road signs ahead of us. The BR-116 motorway twisted and dipped through dense forest and wide-open plains, although both were equally black in the dead of night. Occasionally we'd be blinded by a monster truck that roared past, spewing thick black fumes, or hurtled up behind us, braying and snorting like a stampeding bull. Most of the time I was leaning forward in my seat, gripping the wheel with both hands.

The dashboard clock flashed 01.23 as we went over the crest of a hill and the lights of a town – and our hotel for the night – shimmered invitingly in the distance. The mere thought of a bed instantly brought on the weariness that our bodies had managed to hold off until then.

And it was then that we saw her: a tiny young thing, standing motionless at the side of the road in front of us.

She was wearing a pretty lilac sundress which hung loosely on her small bones. It fluttered in the breeze as she began to wander towards the traffic, balancing herself on a raised concrete verge between the motorway and the clumps of tall grass which rose twice as high as her.

She looked no older than eleven.

As we drove past her face flashed towards us, a look of innocence, her jet-black hair neatly tied back and carefully parted on one side, a big purple ribbon in the other. She looked so out of place there – a child, dressed as if her mother had fussed over her – just inches away from that roaring river of traffic. Then, as quickly as she'd appeared in front of us, she was just a shadowy figure in my rear-view mirror.

Dean was the first to say something. "Did you see her? What was she doing there? Do you think she was...?"

"Prostituting? Oh, no, I don't think... I'm sure she's not," I said, my eyes still fixed above me as the little girl shrank away into the distance.

Dean sat back in his seat, apparently satisfied by my response. After all, I was his guide for this journey, the one who had travelled this route before, who knew Brazil, its people and its problems better than he did. He gazed out at the lights which were beginning to fill the blackness on both sides – yellow street lamps, illuminated shop signs, billboards. And I watched as the girl in the lilac dress finally disappeared into the distance.

The subject of child prostitution was what had brought us to this obscure Brazilian town in the first place. Governador Valadares was one of the many places I had visited during a journey around Brazil ten years before, researching the issue for what would eventually be published in a book. What I'd found had shocked me, particularly in Brazil's biggest cities like Rio and Recife, where young girls openly

offered themselves to foreign tourists. Back then I'd visited Valadares because, although remote, it too received plenty of tourists – competitors in and spectators of international hang-gliding championships regularly packed the town's hotels, restaurants, and bars. And I'd left in no doubt that, like those other major tourist centres where outsiders arrived with money to spend, child prostitution was also a problem here.

But there was another aggravating factor – a major motorway which pulsed through the town's heart, bringing development and growth but also exploitation. Thousands of trucks would rumble through Governador Valadares along the BR-116 every day, bringing many more men than the chartered tourist flights that touched down at its airport. I'd met some of the girls, many from problem-afflicted families in the impoverished slums, who would stand beside the motorway, offering themselves for a few reals to the drivers passing through on long, lonely journeys.

None, though, were like the girl we'd just seen by the side of the road. They were young but hardened by life – tough, rebellious, cynical, scarred by their suffering. They didn't wear pretty ribbons in neatly combed hair. And besides, it's quite common in Brazil to see children walking alone, even by the side of a busy road late at night. The sight would have been more alarming for Dean, who'd only been in the country for a few days; but few Brazilians, I imagined, would have paid her a moment's glance.

I don't know what made me turn around and go back. Everything inside me told me there was nothing sinister about what we'd just seen, that she was just a young country girl making her way back home. I saw a broken gap in the central reservation, checked behind me and swung round onto the other side.

Even as we drove another half a mile back up the motorway to find somewhere to turn around, I fully expected not to find her there again. But there she was, at almost the same spot, meandering along in the same way, her eyes fixed on the ground as if ashamed of the spotlight lighting her up every few seconds. This time I indicated and slowed down, and she immediately changed direction and walked straight towards us.

I rolled down the window and she peered inside.

“Hi... you’re not doing ‘programmes’, are you?” I asked. I never liked the phrase – it made paying a person for sex seem like a perfectly acceptable transaction.

“Yeah,” she replied softly, her bony elbows now resting on our window-frame. Even up close, the tiny girl’s body was skeletal, emaciated, her sunken eyes big in a gaunt face. She began tugging at the car’s rear-door handle. “Let me in,” she said, “before anyone sees.”

“No, no. We just want to speak to you. I’ll just pull in over there.”

That this child was quite willing to get into a car with two strangers, on a dark motorway at 1.30 in the morning, within seconds of us pulling up, is something I will never get over.

We got out of the car to speak to her. She was guarded at first, folding her arms tightly around her body, her eyes betraying the shy innocence of a child. She didn’t say much, but what she did say revealed a life of almost unimaginable tragedy. Her name was Leilah, she told us. She said she was fourteen, although she looked younger. She lived with her mother, father, and four siblings just beyond the overgrown wasteland behind us. Every night she came to the motorway to offer her body for sale to the truck drivers. But she never sold herself short, she said – she wouldn’t do it for less than 25 reals (£10) a time. The irony was lost on her – it was how much she thought she was worth.

“Where are your parents?” I asked.

“My mum and dad are at home. They know what I’m doing. When I get home I give them the money I make and they go and buy food. They don’t stay up for me. They must be asleep by now.”

I asked what happened after a truck driver picked her up. “When he’s finished he throws me out,” she said. “Sometimes they let me climb down, or sometimes they just kick me out onto the concrete. It’s a long way down. That’s how I got these.” She lifted up her arms to reveal recently healed scars on her elbows.

Suddenly a huge car-carrier truck thundered past us, blaring its horn and deliberately screeching its air brakes menacingly. It jolted Leilah out of her train of thought. “I need to get back. Is there anything else you want?”

I thought for a moment. My heart was breaking for this young girl, who I knew I would probably never meet again after tonight. I placed my hand gently on her shoulder and tried to catch her eye. “Just to tell you... that you’re worth much more than you could ever imagine. Please, Leilah, go back home, don’t do this any more. You deserve much, much more.”

It was the first time that Leilah managed a smile. It was probably the moment she realized we didn’t want to use her like all the other men who shuddered to a halt beside that crumbling concrete verge. She even offered out her arms for a hug. Then she turned around and sauntered back along the motorway, dwarfed and silhouetted by the blinding yellow headlights hurtling towards her. We watched as she walked back into the night, finally disappearing into the haze of dust and diesel fumes.

Our encounter with Leilah had lasted less than five minutes, but it had changed everything. Dean would later

say that it had been a turning point in his life: “It broke my heart that a little girl was out there in the darkness, wandering around in her own nightmare. It made me want to enter that nightmare, to do anything to bring her out of it,” he wrote.

The worst part was having to just stand by as a vulnerable child, whom you instinctively wanted to protect, just walked off into another horrific night of sexual abuse and violence. She would soon be at the mercy of some filthy truck driver, and would probably end up thrown like a rag doll onto the hard tarmac – while we were sleeping peacefully in our hotel beds. Just the thought made us both feel sick to the stomach.

Leilah’s tragic existence wasn’t the only thing that was causing the anger to boil up inside. Just that morning Dean and I had met with the president of the state assembly, the second most powerful person, after the governor, in Minas Gerais state. We told him we were heading out to the BR-116 motorway to investigate child prostitution, and he laughed dismissively. “You’re wasting your time,” he told us. “You won’t find a thing. Yes, there used to be a problem, but Brazil has moved on – that kind of thing doesn’t happen any more.” What chance did a girl like Leilah have if even those who had the power to do something to help her refused to believe she even existed?

It was Dean who eventually broke the silence, thumping the dashboard with his fist.

“How can anyone let that happen?” he fumed. “She’s just a child. I never thought... I mean, to read about it is one thing, it breaks your heart. But to see it, to see this?...” He cursed under his breath. “How could anyone do that to a girl like her?”

Dean pulled at his hair with the same fist as tears blurred his eyes and welled to their brink. I knew what he was feeling – those raw emotions, the anger, the helplessness. I’d gone

through them too, wept and sometimes cursed, as I'd seen for myself the evil done to the "least of these" – young, innocent girls, voiceless and powerless, sold for a fistful of coins.

Dean immediately apologized for his language. He scrubbed his face with his hand and laughed at his fiery outburst. Then we both stared ahead in silence as we drove onwards, through the deserted town centre to our hotel.

The place where we had met Leilah was almost unrecognizable in the light of day. Last night's gloomy backdrop of blackness revealed itself as a squalid mishmash of tin-roofed shacks, rising up a steep dirt hillside. Further up, in the direction where she had wandered off, the metal towers of a sprawling electricity substation rose up into a cloudless sky. Opposite, beside a petrol station forecourt and truck repair yard, there was a row of seedy motels – Dreams, Paloma, La Pointe – their illuminated signs still flickering on and off.

The traffic was also much more intense in the day. Everywhere you looked there were transport trucks manoeuvring, kicking up clouds of dust and spewing out thick black fumes. The traffic hurtling along the motorway was constant, roaring like an angry river, leaving our eyes stinging and our ears ringing.

We had parked on the petrol station forecourt and dashed across the motorway to the spot where, ten hours earlier, we had talked to young Leilah. The sun, almost directly above us, scorched the backs of our necks. As I looked around Dean was pacing up and down, lost in thought, his eyes fixed on the ground, where our footprints were still visible in the dusty red earth. Both of us had spent a restless night struggling with

what we had seen, but Dean had said little since we'd met for breakfast. Eventually he looked at me.

"What if there are more Leilahs? Last night, she was just one girl, and even then we almost didn't see her. This motorway is thousands of miles long. There could be hundreds, thousands more. Don't we need to find out?"

Dean and I intended to make a brief visit to Governador Valadares, spending just one night there. We'd left our wives, and my seven-month-old son, waiting at a friend's house in another town seventy miles away. From there, we'd planned to drive down to the Rio de Janeiro coast and spend our last few days in Brazil lazing on a sun-soaked beach. If we were to go further, we'd have to change all our plans. But Dean was right. For some reason we'd been allowed a glimpse into one girl's living nightmare. The least this demanded of us was to look further, to discover what was really going on, to find out if there was anything we could do to help.

I thought for a while, then turned to Dean: "There are no more large towns for hundreds of miles. I only know one place, a little town called Medina. It's along the edge of the motorway. I passed by there once before, but I only stayed for half an hour. I always wanted to find out more. What do you think?"

I didn't need to wait for an answer: he was already standing at the side of the motorway, waiting for a chance to cross. It was 11.30 a.m. when we left Governador Valadares, taking the BR-116 northwards. We would be on the same road for another six and a half hours. It would be a journey that would change our lives forever.