

Bought and Sold at Camden Market
By Shannon Reville

Sweat dripped down my temples as I noticed how hidden from the world I was. After being forced to move to the back of the tiny t-shirt store, I could no longer see the sidewalk or other Camden Market shoppers, which meant they could no longer see what was happening to me. I was surrounded by piles and piles of Korn and Kiss t-shirts and could feel my worst nightmares coming true.

The second I looked the shop owner in the eyes, I knew I had to get out of there. Or else, I feared, a gothic t-shirt shop along Camden Road in Northern London would be the place my bright future came to an end.

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Camden has the third highest crime rate of London's 32 boroughs. Its 2013 crime count came in at 2,125 crimes, and a rate of 9.64 percent—a far cry from its sister boroughs, which hover mainly around 5 percent.

Camden Town, near Primrose Hill in particular—the area where the Camden Markets are located—is known as the most dangerous ward in the Camden borough. Most of Camden's 2125 crimes have occurred there. Crimes include residential burglary, vehicle theft, business robbery, and “other theft”—like pick pocketing at the bustling market—but in most cases it means “violence against another person.” This could include assault, murder, kidnapping, and more.

The Metropolitan Police study that produced this information has put links on the side of Camden's crime stats page to “safer neighborhoods” and helpful “crime prevention” links. It is clear that members of London law enforcement wouldn't suggest spending too much time in Camden.

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“In the back!” The foreign owner shouted at me. “Stay in the back!”

I knew he was the owner because he was the oldest person inside, and the only one not dressed like some wild, Marilyn Manson crazed freak show. The rest of the employees were dressed in black leather and lace, two busty women with neon hair and drag queen makeup, a young man with a Mohawk pulled so tight that it lifted the corners of his dark eyes.

The man yelling at me was fat, old, and dressed in nothing special, sitting in a chair at the front of the narrow, one-aisle shop. I couldn't figure out his accent, but I knew it was Germanic. I studied German for several years and could pinpoint familiar words as he spoke quickly to one of his t-shirt store employees.

"Gehen Sie," I thought I heard him whisper to the Mohawk man, which I recognized from the "Commands" section of my freshman German class as "Go."

My friends Katie and Steph stood behind me, closer to the small, dirty, "Employees Only" doors. I felt like I was getting swallowed by t-shirts, and wondered when the ski-masked men would emerge from those dirty doors and grab us, or which wild-eyed employee would pull out a handgun first and hold it to my sweating back.

The Mohawk man was now blocking my only path out, standing strong, his hair now looking like a blade that might cut me if I try to pass. I began to wonder if this little t-shirt shop was a little t-shirt shop at all.

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Human Trafficking is a \$32 billion business. It is the third largest international crime industry, beat out only by illegal drug and arms smuggling.

In 2013 there were over 20 million human trafficking victims worldwide, most of which were women, and many of which were white. While London isn't known as the hotspot for human traffickers—typically trumped by Middle Eastern destinations—the scope is worldwide and doesn't exclude the British city.

Havoscope is a database filled with information about the “Black Market”, which includes human trafficking. According to their human “price list” a Caucasian baby—often taken from America, Canada, or Britain—is worth \$17,500 in Russia.

Purchases of foreign children are also made in the United Kingdom and America, with most going for about \$25,000.

Girls are the most common victims, getting taken at all ages and sold as sex and labor slaves all over the world. Their price varies depending on whether or not they are virgins, pretty, and submissive. In Mozambique, girls are bought and sold for just \$2, while a Canadian virgin is worth almost \$6,000 dollars in Cambodia, and a Roma Child Bride can be purchased for \$270,000.

Most human trafficking in the UK comes from the outside, with victims being brought to London and surrounding cities from other parts of the world. Last year there were 946 reported victims of human trafficking brought to the UK. In many cases they were promised a better life here—good jobs, wealth, clean homes—but that better life ended up being sexual exploitation and forced labor. Similar trafficking trends can be found in America, another place not known for its human trafficking issue but still part of the problem—this fact came as a surprise to me.

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I was petrified to come to London. My flight didn’t leave until 7:45 p.m. on New Year’s Day, allowing me plenty of time to get ready and recuperate from typical New Year’s Eve festivities, but I chose to go home on New Year’s Eve instead of partying with my closest friends. My anxiety would not have made me a fun beer pong partner.

“Stop worrying,” my friend Lee told me. She was hoping I’d change my mind. “It’s not like you’re going some place scary. It’s London. You’ll be fine.”

I wanted to believe Lee. *She's been to London*, I thought. *She knows*. But still I sat up in my bed on New Year's Eve, hours after the ball had dropped, worrying if I'd make it home from my first trip abroad. I had never left the United States before, let alone without my family to protect me, and instead of getting excited I let my mind wander to all the movies about human trafficking I'd seen. I opened my laptop; shedding light in to my otherwise unlit room, I asked Google, "Is London a safe city?"

"London is a relatively safe city for its size," the first link told me. "Violent crime is not as prevalent here as it is in some other travel destinations."

The only thing I had to be wary of, many links told me, was pick pocketers and outdoor ATMs. It was my money I needed to worry about getting taken, not my body or life. This allowed me a few hours of sleep, and strength to put my suitcase in the car the next day, say goodbye to my Dad and check my purse for my wallet and passport. I told myself I was overreacting the night before, but a twinge still lived in the back of my mind.

Then, when I got out of my boyfriend's car at the airport, I couldn't hold back the tears and fears. He pulled me in for a hug, assuming I was just scared of flying, and I wondered if I'd ever see him again.

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The first area of Camden Market, as you ascend the hill that is Camden Road, is all the same junk over and over again. Every tent has the same London telephone booth tank top, British flag magnet, and cheesy variety pack of souvenir English tea. In one tent the magnet is two pounds, in the next tent it might be three, but in either case any buyer can talk the seller down to just one pound. If you're willing to buy, he's willing to sell.

I walked this section of Camden Market with Katie and Steph, two friends I made while studying in London for two weeks. Our first week was over, and we spent most of the morning looking forward to an afternoon buying trinkets for family back home. In one tent I

found a dress that I had seen two tents before and loved, but the swindling tent owner wouldn't budge on the fifteen-pound price tag, so I moved on. In this new tent, the price of the dress was just ten pounds, and after little effort I talked Saheed, the tent-owner, down to eight.

"I've been doing this for four years," Saheed told me, clearly surprised I asked him about his life and work. "It is my shop. I do like it very much."

I remember walking away from Saheed thinking about how nice he was. He was a young Middle Eastern man, tall and skinny with bright eyes and a smiling face. What I liked most about him, though, was that he didn't follow me around his tent like the rest of the swindling tent owners before him. He didn't start making deals with me the second I touched an item. Before Saheed, it seemed as though I couldn't get through a tent without hearing, "You like it? Price is twenty pounds, but for you I'll do sixteen. It is very high quality. You want? You want? Okay, fifteen pounds."

Saheed just let me shop; let me weed through ten version of the same dress without having to keep my guard up—and it was refreshing, like shopping at home in a department store. And after convincing him to come down two pounds on the price, he laughed at my persistence with a genuine smile, not a salesman's smile. His passive nature made him seem so gentle, and I felt truly comfortable around him.

After wishing Saheed the best of luck and the brightest of days, I thought that London really was a safe place, filled with the same hopeful shop owners and other cheapskates I'd see back home on any American Main Street. *There are good people all over the world, I thought. I'm just as safe here as I am anywhere else.*

There is another Section of Camden Market that includes handmade, more expensive goods. Leather satchels for fifty pounds, hand knit scarves for twenty or thirty, all the things my family would love. There was a particularly expensive jewelry stand inside a

barn that caught my eye as my friends and I walked through, filled with big, amber earrings and turquoise bracelets.

Abby, a student at King's College London, held a conversation with me just long enough to realize I couldn't afford her 150-pound broaches. She works in the market on the weekends and studies English Literature during the week. She likes to listen to me speak, she said, because of the way I pronounce things differently than she does, and she has an interest in Linguistics. She told me that an English degree is prestigious in England, with over 300 people in her classes and many job openings for after graduation. Then an interested customer stepped up to her table, and Abby moved on from me.

Her belief in the English major was refreshing, though, as back home in America I feel my English major has only gotten me quizzical looks and questions like, "So, *what* are you going to do with *that*?"

I thought, after talking to Abby, *perhaps I'll take my degree to London someday*. I had a wonderful first week in the city, exploring all the historical sites and buildings London has to offer—Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London, various cathedrals and bridges. *America just doesn't have as much history to appreciate*, I thought every time we came to a new tourist attraction. I really liked it abroad, and had already started dreaming about my next trip across the pond.

And after hearing from Abby, I wondered if my boyfriend would ever consider spending years here. We'd buy our groceries in the food section of Camden Market and send those glorious, cheesy tea bags back to friends in America. We'd be that international, roaming couple. *We'd be living in London*, I dreamed. I told my New Year's Eve self that I was silly for thinking London would put me in danger.

Night was falling; suddenly tents were being packed up while neon lights turned on outside of brick and mortar shops. The food section of the market started to steam up with

dinner orders and flocks of shoppers herded towards the Underground station. Steph bought a dress and Katie bought a coffee mug, and we decided it was our time to head home, too.

“I don’t know what to get for my dad,” Katie had said throughout the day, and I think it really started to eat at her as the number of shops between us and the Underground station got smaller. Steph and I had learned earlier that Katie’s dad liked the Ramones, but the three of us had yet to see anything related to the band that Katie could afford. If Katie was going to buy something for her father, it would have to be soon—we were almost back to the Underground station, and many stores and tents had already locked up.

That’s when she saw it. A big, black Ramones t-shirt hung above the entry to some unnamed t-shirt shop, just a few doors away from the Underground station.

“Oh!” Katie stopped on the sidewalk, pointing at the shirt. “Can we just go in here quick?”

I looked up at the shop. It was covered, plastered with black shirts of all different kinds, each with a different band name. There was not one band I knew well, one song I could start singing that went with any of those shirts. It was rock-n-roll, dark, gothic, and through a small window I could see that the inside of the store was tight and lit with fluorescents—my subtle claustrophobia kicked in.

“I don’t know; this store kind of scares me,” I said, and Steph laughed, agreeing.

“I know, but it’ll be quick,” Katie assured us. “And I don’t want to go in alone.”

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I won’t say I was stupid for feeling comfortable in London—the city is well kept, I found most people to be welcoming, and some mornings I even ran around Hyde Park by myself. I also still find the idea of living abroad to be a good one. However, I will admit that I should have never let my guard down.

The truth is, Lee had no idea what she was talking about when she said, "It's London. You're fine." Human trafficking is a global issue, even in our most up-scale and civilized cities. Even in my red, white, and blue homeland, and the city I came to love over the course of a few weeks abroad.

Yesterday I read about three women who were rescued from a South London home last month, after being enslaved for over three decades. Elderly now, the women came from Ireland, Malaysia, and Britain, and are so traumatized and unable to speak, the investigators still have no idea how they were captured and held for so long.

Perhaps, thirty years ago, the three went to Camden Market, just classmates enjoying their last weekend in London. Then one saw a shirt she wanted to buy for her father, and the three entered a t-shirt shop out of which they would never emerge again.

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I decided the best thing to do was continue to act oblivious. *If they really are dangerous, and they know I know they're dangerous, it will escalate quickly*, I thought.

At least that's what I knew from all the scary movies I'd seen. When you go abroad, everyone has suggestions as to what to bring, how not to get pick pocketed, and how much money to leave in your hotel room versus bringing out in your purse. Take a picture of your passport. Hide your extra cash in a safe place. Don't go anywhere alone.

There really isn't much advice given as to how to get out of a scary situation once you're already in it, and I wonder if that's because it's seldom ever done.

The Mohawk man still stood in front of me, blocking my only pathway. *It's time to leave*, I thought, and I walked right up to him. He didn't budge.

"Hello," I smiled and said as sweetly as I could. "How are ya?"

He said nothing, and I wondered if he even spoke English.

"Stay in the back!" the seated fat man yelled again. "She will bring you the shirt!"

When the three of us had first walked in to the store, we were quickly greeted by the fat man. By greeted, of course, I mean shouted at. He asked us what we wanted, and Katie mentioned the Ramones t-shirt hanging outside.

“In the back, way, way in the back,” the man had yelled as he pointed down the narrow walkway, lined with hanging shirts. At first it wasn’t odd—handfuls of shop owners in London are foreign and tend to mumble English words, or shout them for lack of understanding. We didn’t want to seem discriminatory or not accepting of this man. Americans are commonly viewed as rude, so we hoped to dispel the stereotype by trusting him.

When we got to the back—a darker area lined with more shirts and those employee doors—a leather-wearing and black-lipped woman with bright blue hair was standing there. She asked what we wanted, and then disappeared.

All three of our eyes darted around, waiting for the blue-haired woman to come back with the Ramones shirt and get out of there, but I think I was the first to realize this place was off. My stomach twisted in on itself and I felt an intuitive need to get outside—the same way I feel right before a party gets out of control, when a fight breaks out at the bar and it’s time to grab my drunken friends and leave, when I have anxiety about my first trip abroad and make the choice to do some research rather than ring in the New Year.

It just wasn’t that easy now. I looked down the barrel of this Mohawk, still being told—forced—to stay in the back of this rotten store, and I had to think quickly. I saw a pile of studded belts at the front, by the exit.

“Oh, I just want to look at those belts,” I said to the fat man, as sweetly as I could.

He paused and stared at me. “Okay, look at the belts, but then you come right back!”

The Mohawk man moved to the side, just barely enough for me to get buy, and I walked with determination. Past the endless shirts, the belts, and emerging in the fresh air

outside. Standing freely on the sidewalk, I remembered my friends and looked back at the small window I had looked through before. *You can barely see inside from out here*, I thought. *No one would know if anything happened in there.*

I kept a close eye on my friends, and watched the fat man look back and forth from me to the back of the store. *Yeah, that's right*, I thought. *If you do anything, I scream.*

It wasn't long after that when Katie and Steph emerged from the store, wide-eyed and as scared as I was. Katie didn't have her shirt. Apparently after I left, the fat man told them to get out and said, "We don't want your business!"

We all agreed it was scary, got to the Underground station and hugged one another. And then our imaginations went crazy, just three emotional girls coming up with ideas as to what *could've* happened. Maybe they wanted to rob us? Maybe they were just weird? Maybe if we hadn't have left we'd be stuffed and gagged in the back of a van right now?

I could feel myself spiraling out of control while on the packed Underground train to our hostel. I tried to think about Abby, Saheed, my dress and other parts of the day, but when we emerged in our home borough of Kensington, I had to hold back tears.

It can happen anywhere, I thought, and even when I got to my bedroom I didn't feel safe. Just that morning I had run the streets of our hostel neighborhood alone, feeling invincible and silly for thinking London could hurt me.

But this beautiful world is also a scary one. In a tiny pocket of a small ward in a borough of a major city, three girls could have gone missing and the cars would've kept driving by. Abby would still go to English class on Monday, and Saheed would sell the same dress I bought for eight pounds to someone else for ten the next weekend, and the owner of that t-shirt shop would put anywhere between \$6 and \$750,000 in his pocket.

One more moment of doubting my intuition could have been the difference. Can we ever truly revel in the beauty of Buckingham Palace? Put our face to our camera lens and let

the world go on behind us without someone's hand slipping in to our pockets? Can we get a drink at a local pub and feel safe enough to put our drink down without it getting touched, drank, or tainted? Can we shop at an open market, laughing with our friends and buying frivolous souvenirs, without accidentally entering a bad shop?

I'm not saying we should hide from foreign wonders, but knowing what I know now, I don't know if there's ever a time and place to truly let go when traveling. There's a difference between learning to love a place and learning to live in a place, and if you can't do both then you shouldn't do either.