

Oregon woman traces abuse, fights demons with faith and love

Bruises that aren't skin deep

Maria Stockbridge of Keizer, Ore., put her trust in society's caregivers — orphanages, adoption agencies and foster families. But in most ways, they failed her. This is her story.

By Stacey McKenzie
Senior Reporter

His sagging effigy, nailed to a cross, hangs high above the altar at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Salem, Ore.

"Look at the cross and tell me what's wrong with it," Maria Stockbridge says. "Jesus isn't there any more," she says with a laugh, and she means that.

Her smile straightens and her round, brown eyes narrow as she explains.

"People aren't using their heads, you know. They go to church, but they are still thinking that Jesus is hanging.

"We celebrate Easter because he rose from the dead, so if he rose from it, why is he still hanging?"

This tiny-boned, 22-year-old woman from India loves the Lord. She attended St. Joseph's Church when she was in grade school.

But church — its crucifixes, Bibles and devils — is forever tainted, and sermons are no comfort when they fall from the mouth of a man.

Faith is her savior, Maria says, because it has provided her with the only unconditional love of her life — self-love. Faith, she says, has helped her fight the demons of abandonment and abuse.

In the mid-1970s, when most American children her age were being dropped off at nursery school, Maria was abandoned by her mother at the gates of a white-bricked, Roman Catholic orphanage in Patna, India.

Maria remembers, "After she walked away I started to get lonely. The pain in my heart made me almost stop breathing. I felt as though I was going to die.

"My heart was beating slow like a drum, and my mind was almost like a vegetable." The nuns at the orphanage found her, let her sleep, fed her and clothed her.

"I felt reborn." Maria was one of hundreds of orphans. Three church services, school and chores filled her day. She had few clothes and sometimes had to share her bed, or sleep on the floor.

Life was redundant, with little play and frequent nightmares.

Darkness came to mean danger.

"I can remember sometimes at night, I would wake up screaming, and no one would be there to hold me or talk to me."

One hot Christmas Day, when 7-year-old Maria was playing outside, a priest picked her up and took her inside the building where he lived.

"At first, I did not care because I was having too much fun, but it did not make sense why he took me somewhere else.

"Then he put his hand under my pants. I told him 'No,' but he would not stop. I could not scream, because there was hardly anyone around, and I thought I would get in trouble.

The priest tried to calm her: "Be quiet, just be a good girl."

"I knew the priest was doing the wrong thing, so I tried to get down from him but it was too late. The other priest and him ganged up on me. They both kept touching me and playing with my private places.

"They were hurting me so bad, the pain felt as though somebody was poking me inside with a needle. Today, it is hard for Maria to remember her childhood in India. Some memories are blocked, others have faded. But the horrors of sexual abuse — distrust and guilt — will never be erased.

She remembers selling herself for clothes, and

Her first glimpse at television, "Happy Days," spawned a TV addiction. To determine where Maria should be placed in school, her parents took her to a doctor, who looked at her bone structure, size and teeth, and determined that she was about two years behind American children her age.

So Maria picked out a new

birthday — June 25, 1971 — and was enrolled in the third grade at St. Joseph Elementary School.

School rules weren't hard to figure out, but family rules were — at first. One evening as Maria dried the dishes, some plates slipped from her hands and broke on the floor.

Dorris came into the kitchen, and changed into a woman Maria didn't recognize. "She just grabbed me and hit me and dragged me in my room, just screaming at you, you know. I tried to tell her that, hey, it was an accident, but an accident was not enough for me to stop her."

Abuses like that continued until Maria was filled with fear. She stayed overnight with friends to escape it.

Mary Luyet was a neighbor and friend of the Stockbridge's. She worked with Dorris in the cafeteria of St. Joseph Elementary School. She's a robust woman with four daughters, but looks a little tired from all her maternal duties. Her daughter, Catrina, became best friends with Maria when the two girls met in third grade.

Mary remembers when she first saw Maria — it was her second day in the United States. "She was just really tiny — those big brown eyes. She was just real shy at first. But it didn't take her long to bounce back. She learned the English real fast."

But there were problems in the Stockbridge home, Mary says, and she feels guilty about not doing more to help Maria.

"Being a friend of Cliff and Dorris . . . I knew there were some problems there, and Dorris had told me that there were some problems. She was pretty blunt about it and pretty open about it. She really didn't try to hide it."

John Stockbridge was in his late teens when Maria became his adopted sister.

When he talks about his childhood, his pleasant, pale face hardens. His eyes look piercing, his forehead creases in the center, and his hands cut the air with emphasis.

John says he saw his adopted sister abused by his parents, and he understands what she went through.

Dorris Stockbridge says Maria is lying about being abused.

"That kid was never mistreated," Dorris says.

Maria ran away, Dorris says, because she wanted to live with a bigger family.

"She loves my husband, and why she doesn't love me, I don't know. I would try to hug her, I would try to talk to her . . . She would not get close to me."

One day, Maria says, when she was 16, her father gave her "whips after whips, until I couldn't sit down any more."

Consequently, Maria became the fourth Stockbridge child to run away.

She never came back.

Willamette Valley winds are crisp today. Maria wears an oversized gray sweatshirt over a black turtleneck and black leggings.

Black is her favorite color. It's the darkest, just like her skin is when she compares tans with girlfriends.

Maria's black, curly hair swings across the middle of her back as she walks into Pay Less Drug Store.

She has some cash today and will buy cigarettes for herself and a card for a friend.

"See, my problem is, when I have the money, I spend it so fast and it is gone. I mean, I get the money for a reason, but I end up using it for somebody else or something else."

"I always feel like I owe people money, or I owe them something."

When Maria ran away, she pedaled a stolen bicycle about eight miles to downtown Salem and called 911. The police picked her up and called her parents.

The Stockbridges arranged for

especially for food, because the nuns punished children who fell asleep in God's house by not feeding them.

One time, as she lay in bed, her stomach in knots from hunger, a priest picked her up, took her to the cemetery behind the church and raped her on a tombstone.

A nun walked by but never stopped.

"I can remember sometimes at night, I would wake up screaming, and no one would be there to hold me or talk to me,"

- Maria Stockbridge.

October rains are fading the bright summer colors of Oregon's capital city.

Maria wants to visit the house where her adopted family used to live. It was her first home in the United States.

She stands on the front lawn where she pulled weeds after school.

"I wonder if anyone is home?" She knocks on the door, no one answers, and she wants to leave. Her stomach hurts, and she wants a glass of water.

"I can hear her voice . . ." she says. Maria always will remember August of 1981.

She was a scrawny and scared 11-year-old adoptee on a plane to Portland, Ore., from New Delhi, India.

Her new family, from Salem, picked her up at the airport. The adoption, arranged by PLAN International Adoption Agency of McMinnville, Ore., saved Maria from poverty and an arranged marriage to a 16-year-old boy.

"I said to myself, 'maybe I'm wrong, but I got the feeling that there was something wrong with this family . . .'"

Cliff and Dorris Stockbridge had four children, three from Cliff's first marriage, and an adopted girl from India named Joji.

Maria made five.

The first month in the United States was a mixture of confusion and awe. Maria understood little English but was impressed by the family's car, radio, swimming pool and flushing toilet.

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Maria to move in with another family, a foster family with about 20 children — 15 boys and five girls. The family was not certified with the Oregon Children's Services Division.

During her six-month stay, Maria says she was raped twice by one of the young men living in the home.

She told her school counselor what was happening and was removed from the home.

In December of 1986, Maria was made a ward of the state, a foster child.

During her time in the foster care system, Maria lived in four homes — two for short periods and two for longer periods.

In her first real foster home, Maria found a woman — Stephanie Peters — who would become a mother figure.

Stephanie gave Maria attention and love. "There was something between us, you know, really nice, mother-daughter."

But Stephanie's husband didn't want children in his home, and Maria sensed it.

During this time, things were growing worse for Maria at Cascade Junior High School.

"Girls would beat me up and throw me in the locker and throw me in their garbage and take me and dash my head in the toilet."

"And the boys, oh gosh. I was known as a 'dog.' Every time I came to school, there would be a bunch of people standing there, 'woof, woof, woof,' barking at me, you know. I mean, I was a very ugly kid."

Her grades also suffered.

After eight months with this family, Maria got herself kicked out by threatening to kill herself with a kitchen knife.

"She just grabbed me and hit me and dragged me in my room, just screaming at me . . ."

- Maria Stockbridge.

It was Jan. 14, 1988, Maria's birthday — at least according to her adoption papers from India.

Police took Maria to the Oregon State Mental Hospital, where she stayed two weeks before being put in another foster home.

The police officer wrote in the report: "Miss Stockbridge stated to me that she didn't have any reason to live. I did not feel comfortable leaving Miss Stockbridge in the residence or unattended."

"What I was trying to do there," Maria says, "was trying to have them kind of notice me, talk to me . . . try to help me, that's what I wanted."

Even today, when the world feels like it's crashing in, Maria says, she considers killing herself.

In her next long-term foster home, Maria stayed almost two years. She developed a tolerable, sometimes rewarding relationship with her foster mother.

But once again, there were problems with the foster father.

On Maria's first night in the home, the father approached Maria's foster sister in the bedroom that the two girls shared. He kissed her foster sister fully and slowly on the lips.

"And so he came to me and kissed me, just once. Then he tried to do it again, but I held back. That's when he realized that I wasn't going to be his girl."

As the months passed, Maria fought more and more with her foster family.

She threatened suicide again, this time with sleeping pills.

Foster care case notes from that time state: "Maria gets distraught over thoughts of getting older and the possibility of ending up homeless."

Maria "has a severe inability to

trust and lack of bonding," the notes say.

In May of 1989, Harley Miller became Maria's new foster care case worker.

Maria's comments to Miller during the first few months of counseling made him suspicious of her foster father.

"There were all sorts of kinky games going on in the home that were not going on for the first time. I took her seriously. I knew that she should not be there because . . . she had felt some prejudice."

Almost two years after she arrived, Maria was removed from the home and the family was investigated.

During the investigation, the foster sisters said Maria was telling stories.

In February of 1990, more than three months after Maria had moved out, Maria was told that her former foster father had died of a heart attack during an attempted rape of a foster daughter.

After living for two more years with previous foster mothers, Maria moved in with Mary Luyet and got a part-time job at Myrtle's Chuck Wagon, where she made friends with workers and customers.

After she graduated from North Salem High School in January of 1991, Maria moved to Austin, Texas, where she attended a community college.

Her college grant didn't go far, money ran out, and she moved back to Oregon.

Today, Maria lives with her adopted brother, John Stockbridge, and his family.

The gravel driveway to the one-story home is trampled by children sporting Kool-aid faces.

Maria stands outside in the morning drizzle and smokes a cigarette — Cambridge today. She'll smoke any brand.

"That's the easiest way for me to play it cool," she says.

No one is allowed to smoke in the house because of the baby.

Maria baby-sits the three Stockbridge boys five days a week so John's wife, Denise, doesn't have to hire a baby sitter while she works at the bank. John works for the state, usually at night.

Maria wants no money for baby-sitting her brother's children. She owes him, she says, for letting her stay with his family.

And she still feels like she owes her adopted parents.

"I feel guilty, because they paid a lot of money for me to come to the United States to be their daughter. And I appreciate America very much, but I didn't appreciate what they were doing to me."

To get money, Maria still is tempted to sell her body.

"A lot of things I did in my childhood, I still do . . . I don't want to, but I do it because I hate to go to my brother to ask for money. I feel guilty. And I am trying hard to look for a job. But it is hard to find

a job."

While Maria was in Texas, she wrote a 204-page autobiography, "Victim with Faith."

She hopes one day to have her book, her most precious possession, published.

In fact, Maria says she wants to make writing her career.

"I want to be rich and famous so I can give, so I can travel — give what I've got, and tell people, 'Hey, I was once locked up, now I am free. Here is something I'm going to give to you to remind you that I am free.'"

Mary Luyet has read Maria's book.

"It's too bad she couldn't have somebody help her," Mary says.

"I think she lives a little bit on the edge of fantasy and reality."

"The reality has been so far off, sometimes it's hard for her to decipher — not saying that these things didn't happen to her, because I truly believe that most of them have. But I think sometimes that they might have been embellished a little bit."

On Sundays, Maria, Denise and the children pile into John's truck to go to the Salem Gospel Center, a Pentecostal church.

Maria goes to church to please her brother. She says her faith in God is strong enough without it.

"I don't believe in going to church," she says. "But, as far as having faith in myself and believing in God, I know I can go anywhere and get through a tough time."

Before the family arrives, Maria volunteers to sit with the children in the chapel.

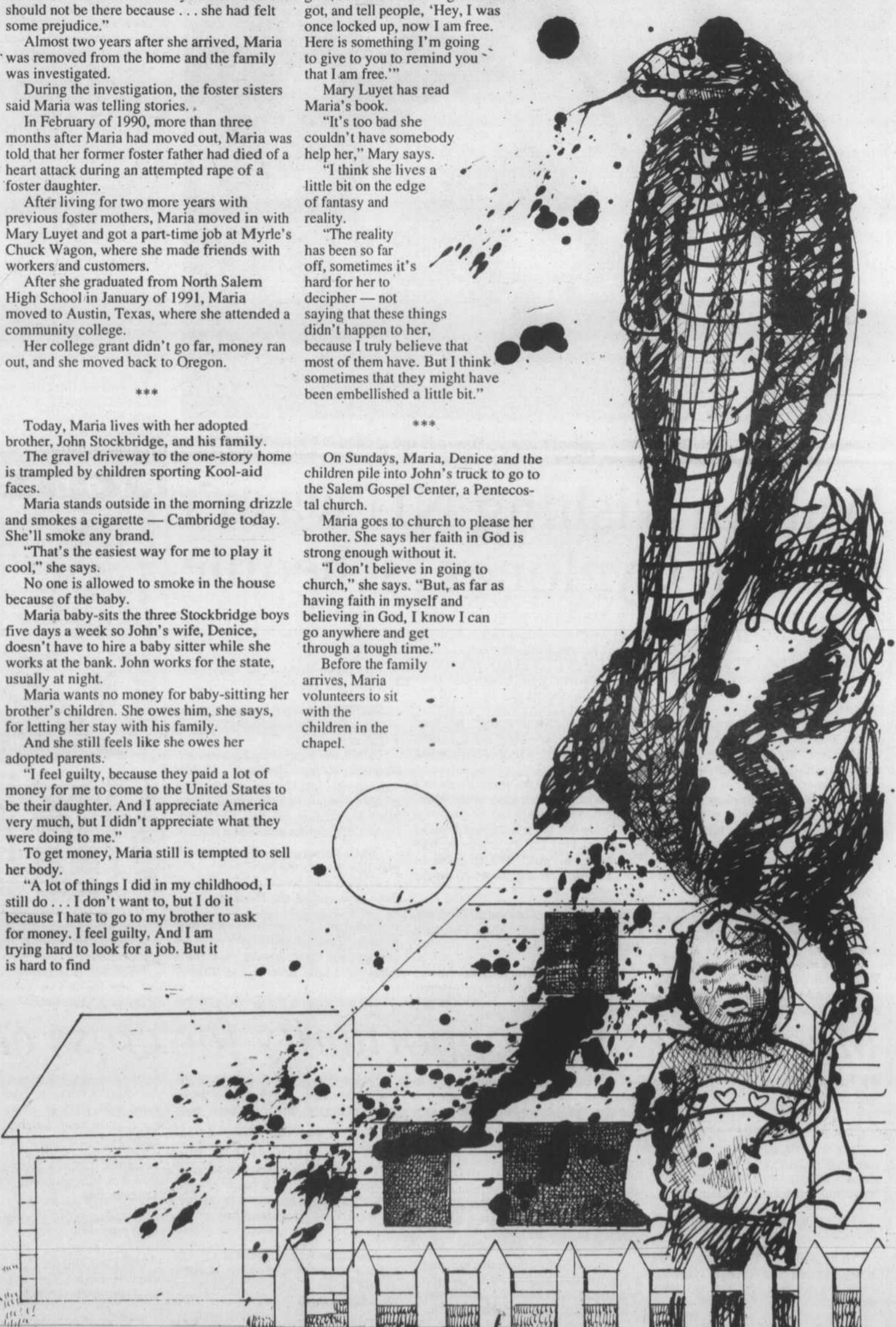
Maria likes it better in the chapel, because the preacher there is a woman.

Once the children are seated and listening, Maria looks around.

There is no cross, no Jesus, just Maria and her faith.



David Badders/DN



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