



A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE
SARA CORBETT (LEFT), IN J.CREW AND HERMÈS, AND AMANDA LINDHOUT, IN DONNA KARAN NEW YORK. PHOTOGRAPHED BY NORMAN JEAN ROY.

FREE SPIRIT

Kidnapped in Somalia, Amanda Lindhout spent fifteen months in terrifying captivity. Only after meeting journalist Sara Corbett did she feel ready to tell her story. By Rebecca Johnson.

Every life is made up of a series of decisions—good ones, bad ones, opportunities of a lifetime, and those, in retrospect, that look extraordinarily ill considered. Five years ago, Amanda Lindhout, a struggling 27-year-old Canadian journalist hoping to make a name for herself, decided to visit Mogadishu, Somalia, a gorgeous wreck of a city perched on the Indian Ocean along Africa's east coast. Once a sparkling jewel of the continent, Somalia had descended into lawlessness, with constant fighting by factions of Islamist militants and a fledgling government powerless to stem the violence.

Even seasoned journalists hesitated to go there. Lindhout was not a seasoned journalist. She grew up in a poor, rural area of Canada and, after graduating from high school, went to work as a cocktail waitress in Calgary. Whenever she amassed enough money, she would quit her job to travel, inspired by the old copies of *National Geographic* she'd pored over as a kid. She started in the Western Hemisphere—Venezuela, Guatemala, Nicaragua. When the money ran out, she'd return to waitressing until she had saved enough to travel

again. As her confidence grew, she became more adventurous. Latin America gave way to Thailand, then Bangladesh, followed by India and Pakistan.

Roaming the world, Lindhout found a joy and expansiveness in her life she had not previously known. Traveling was, she says, like a “narcotic.” As she began meeting journalists who made their living on the road, she grew restless with waitressing and yearned to make more of an impact. Journalism seemed just the ticket.

Like other ambitious young reporters, Lindhout made her way to such post-9/11 hot spots as Iraq and Afghanistan. To prepare, she read the equivalent of *TV Reporting for Dummies* over and over. Her employers were dodgy at times—she was an on-air reporter for the Iranian state-sponsored news service; she was briefly on assignment for *Combat and Survival*—but she also sold a few pieces to more legitimate places like cable news channel France 24. In Baghdad, however, she found herself frozen out by the more conventional members of the press corps, many of whom seemed inexplicably cold to her. *up front* >444

One night, a friend told her why. Early in her brief tenure with the Iranian news channel, she had criticized the press corps for staying inside the safe zone of Baghdad to report. Someone had posted the commentary on YouTube. Lindhout was mortified. No wonder the other reporters were aloof. She realized she needed to get away from Baghdad and start fresh. Her role model was Dan Rather, once a nobody reporter at a second-rate television station who defied all warnings one day and stayed in Galveston, Texas, to report a dangerous hurricane. It made his career.

Lindhout needed her own Galveston, a story so stunning nobody would be able to turn her down. She decided on Somalia, the reporters' no-man's-land. What happened next is like something out of "The Monkey's Paw," the children's cautionary tale that warns us to be careful what we wish for. Within 72 hours of landing in Mogadishu, Lindhout and Nigel Brennan, a photographer and former boyfriend she had persuaded to make the trip with her, were kidnapped by a group of Islamic militants and held for ransom. Over the next fifteen months, she was beaten, starved, tortured, and raped. After months of negotiations and failed bargaining, Lindhout's and Brennan's families were finally able to raise more than a million dollars to secure their release. She had found her Galveston. But it had nearly killed her.

Almost from the moment Lindhout was out of the hospital and back home in Canada, she was inundated with offers from publishers to tell her story. As she slowly worked to recover her mental and physical health—despite how malnourished she was, for almost a year afterward she could barely eat anything but potatoes—she spoke with a series of potential ghostwriters. Again and again, she heard the same pitch—what did it feel like to suffer hell on earth? Lindhout, who could barely bring herself to think about what she'd been through, let alone contemplate reliving it, declined all offers.

Then one day, a journalist came to visit from Portland, Maine. Sara Corbett was a 42-year-old mother of three and a contributing writer at *The New York Times Magazine* who was well respected for her thoughtful and empathetic reporting on subjects ranging from the Lost Boys of Sudan to child-trafficking in Cambodia. When a friend of Corbett's suggested she meet with Lindhout, she initially dismissed the idea. "I've never been interested in those genre books that get churned out whenever somebody has been in captivity," Corbett says. Nevertheless, she Googled Lindhout's name to find out more. A YouTube video—"Amanda Lindhout in Happier Times"—changed her mind. "It was a compilation of videos posted by a friend of hers that showed this young, healthy woman jumping across streams in Pakistan's Hunza Valley, walking through the slums of Calcutta, on top of a bus in Afghanistan. She was the epitome of what it means to be young, female, and free.

It made me ask, Who was this woman, and what led her to where she ended up?"

When Corbett made her pitch, Lindhout knew immediately that she had found the right person. To understand her mix of independence, bravery, and folly, you had to know about the nights she spent watching her mother fight with her hard-drinking boyfriend, the afternoons spent rummaging around in Dumpsters with her brother, and the tantalizing allure of those yellow-bound *National Geographic* magazines hinting at a wider, better world. "As a reader," Lindhout says, "that was a book I would want to read."

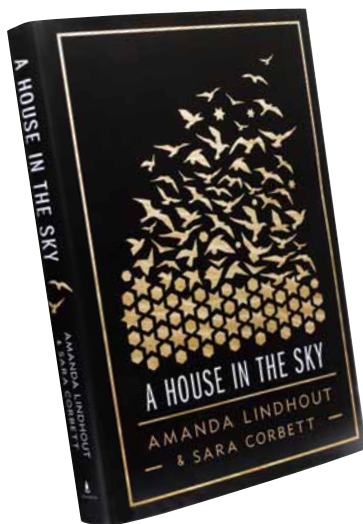
A House in the Sky, the result of their extraordinary collaboration, took more than three years and 1,200 pages of notes to complete. It involved thousands of e-mails and texts between the two women, as well as weeks spent in faraway places like the Bahamas, where they would hole up for days at a time to relive some of the most horrifying abuse. "We wanted this book to have meaning," says Corbett, "not to simply recount the sensationalism. Bearing witness to a tragedy is such a human impulse—we process things by making art." The result is a poetic, profound, and thrilling exploration of one woman's misadventure set against the backdrop of global terrorism. It is better than a hurricane in Galveston because it captures so vividly the way that, no matter the depths of its suffering, the human spirit will always swim back to the surface.

As lucky as Lindhout was to find such a talented and devoted writer, Corbett was equally lucky to find a subject who could recall her experiences with such clear-eyed

precision. The resulting prose is both elegant and evocative, as when describing those early Dumpsters: "The interior, even on the crispest days of October, was soft and damp like an old leaf pile, smelling like sour milk. The two of us slid between mounded bags, their skins greased by leaked liquids and loose trash."

The traveling years are a joyous riot of golden empanadas, swishing palm trees, the purpling light of a Caribbean dusk, and the growing confidence of a young woman starting to see herself as a citizen of the world. The contrast between those happy years and the mixture of the dullness and terror of her captivity is devastating: "As the weeks passed, I wished for things that were large and abstract—freedom, comfort, safety. Beyond that, my most specific longings involved food—plates of medium-rare steak, bags of candy, a cold beer in a frosted mug. . . . More than anything, I craved . . . the chance to fall into the arms of someone, anyone, who cared about me."

It was Lindhout's innate pluck that got her out of Red Deer, Canada; that same pluck fuels her efforts to survive, from a daring escape attempt to everyday coping strategies, including the inspired decision to earn her captors' sympathy by converting to Islam: "I used my captors' names every chance I had. It was intentional, a way of reminding them that I saw them, of pegging them, of making them see me in *up front* >450



WORD BY WORD
THEIR ACCOUNT OF LINDHOUT'S EXPERIENCES WILL BE PUBLISHED ON SEPTEMBER 10 BY SCRIBNER.

return.” The conversion also meant she had something to read. As the months dragged on, her captors grew angry with the delays over the ransom and took everything but the Koran away from her. She spent hours reading the text, looking for a passage that might augur better treatment (“A believing slave is given more lenience than an unbelieving slave”).

Lindhout had kept extensive journals throughout her life but was initially shy about sharing them, self-consciously reading selected passages to Corbett over the phone. As the trust between the women grew, she began to share more and more. By the end, the urgency of needing someone to understand took over, and she would call her collaborator, urging her to imagine the prison of her days. “Try lying on the floor,” she once told Corbett, “have a tall man stand over you and talk down at you.” Another time, she gave her specific instructions on how to tie up her legs so she could experience what it feels like to walk in chains.

And so the dross of human suffering becomes the gold of art. “I lay in nothingness,” the narrative recounts, “drifting deeper into a state of half-being, the stale darkness eating away all boundaries. I saw skeins of blue thread, little plumelike spinnakers that floated in front of me, whether my eyes were open or shut. Sometimes I wondered if I’d gone blind. Other times I wondered if I was alive at all. Was this hell? It was not an unreasonable thought.”

When, finally, she and Brennan are freed by a group of strange men, it is the smell of smoke on a man’s skin that tells her freedom is near: “A realization bubbled from the recesses of my rational mind: A fundamentalist wouldn’t smoke.” It is the kind of telling detail that makes a scene pop—and that can’t be taught. “Amanda just had that kind of mind,” says Corbett. “It was such a gift.”

Almost four years after her ordeal, Lindhout looks the picture of health, with long beauty-queen hair, superwhite teeth, and carefully plucked eyebrows, a vanity that irked her fundamentalist Muslim captors. Her shoes are flat, and her skirt hits just above the knee. She exudes confidence, but there’s also an understandable wariness to her as she gets ready to take her story out into the world. It was one thing to talk with Corbett, a woman who became more like a sister than a collaborator, about the multiple rapes she endured, but when she tentatively stepped out into the world a few months ago to talk about her experience at a violence-against-women event, she was devastated by the headline the Huffington Post used to describe her speech: CHAINED STARVED RAPED.

“Maintaining my dignity is so important for me,” she said, her voice thick with outrage. “That headline was like being revictimized. I would never, ever present myself that way.” Her sense of personal dignity is so important she has a hard time even admitting that going to Somalia was a mistake. “Would I do it again? Yes, I probably would, actually,” she says. “Somalia is an important story in the world, and it needed to be told. Was I the best person to tell it? Was it the best time to go? Maybe not. But I tried.”

Lindhout has gotten on with her life in many admirable ways. When she was at her darkest time, lying on a mattress,



BRAVE HEART
LINDHOUT RETURNED TO SOMALIA IN AUGUST 2011 AS THE FOUNDER OF A FAMINE-RELIEF FOOD PROGRAM.

her legs shackled, in a room without light, fed a starvation diet, and forced to lie on her side so that she wouldn’t develop the strength to attempt another escape, she made a vow to herself: If she ever got free, she would go back to school, help people, and find love. Within a year of her release she had made significant headway on two of the three by enrolling in classes at a local university and establishing the Global Enrichment Foundation, an organization that runs education and food-relief programs aimed at women in Somalia. Her donors include the Chobani yogurt foundation, which has given \$1 million.

Nearly two years after her release, Lindhout returned to Somalia for the first time to deliver food during the famine of 2011. Operating a small, nimble outfit, she saw that she could move food more quickly than some of the larger organizations, which can get tangled up in bureaucracy. While she was in Kenya, arranging transportation and customs declarations, it became obvious that she herself would need to be on the trucks crossing the border. “It was an emotional day,” she says. “I faced a deep fear, but mostly I was proud of my organization. We served over two million meals in that crisis. Turning all that negative energy into something positive was so important for me.”

Part of what kept Lindhout sane all those months in captivity was her awareness that the ragtag group of young men working as her jailers were themselves victims of circumstance. “You could see these scars on their bodies from the violence and all these horrible experiences,” she says. “I don’t know if I had sympathy for them, but I had an understanding of how they were shaped by the violence around them and the sadness of having no education or opportunity to dream.” Even the title of the book harbors their reality as well as hers—the house in the sky is the place she built in her dreams to escape her brutal surroundings, but it also evokes the Muslim belief in the transcendence of the afterlife.

In a perfect world, Lindhout would be as healed on the inside as she is on the outside. Unfortunately, life doesn’t work like that. Some days are better than others, but the kidnapping is always with her. “Putting my experience on the page was cathartic,” she says, “but is it out of me? No. I live with it every day in a multitude of ways. In some ways, it has gotten easier, but in some ways it is harder, because I had this hope that I would do all this work, and I would get through it and move on. But now I am in this place where I have to accept that this experience lives in the cells of my body and I will have this condition for the rest of my life. That is hard.” As for her goal of finding love and possibly starting a family, it’s still there, but distant. “Maybe,” she says. “Someday.” □