

Journey Into Darkness

A memoir of a young wanderer's brutal ordeal in captivity, and how it was transformed into spiritual triumph.

By **ELIZA GRISWOLD**

AMANDA LINDHOUT GREW UP rough. Born in Alberta, Canada, she spent childhood nights lying in her top bunk, listening to her mother, Lorinda, being beaten badly by her boyfriend. By the fourth grade, Lindhout was Dumpster diving for bottles and cans with her older brother. Flush with recycling money, she haunted a nearby thrift store to buy National Geographic. Between the yellow borders, she studied "the mossy temples at Angkor," "skeletons brushed free of volcano

A HOUSE IN THE SKY

By **Amanda Lindhout and Sara Corbett**

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ash on Vesuvius," Palestinian refugee children squatting "in tents the color of potatoes." She trained her mind to escape from the violence around her.

Grounded in chaos, her childhood becomes a disturbing template for the life that followed. On Aug. 23, 2008, along with a freelance photojournalist named Nigel Brennan, Lindhout, then 27, was kidnapped in Somalia. She spent 460 days in hellish captivity. Her tale, exquisitely told with her co-author, Sara Corbett, a contributing writer for *The New York Times Magazine*, is much more than a gonzo adventure tale gone awry — it's a young woman's harrowing coming-of-age story and an extraordinary narrative of forgiveness and spiritual triumph.

Lindhout began her extreme travels at age 20, heading first to Venezuela. She financed her peripatetic lifestyle by saving the tips she made as a high-end cocktail waitress, taking off for months at a time, roving on a shoestring budget through Central and South America, Asia, and Africa. Seeking excitement and counting countries, she vowed from a mountaintop to "always push forward, no matter what." This wasn't simple thrill seeking, she argues. It was a calling. Each border she crossed "felt like a revelation. It was better than school. It was better than church."

The Amanda Lindhout of the book's first 100 pages is almost all action, little reflection. Epiphanies here are a bit too tidy. Facing a rare twinge of fear before entering Afghanistan in 2005, Lindhout turned to Eckhart Tolle's "Power of Now." She took its teaching to mean she should listen beyond her mind's incessant worries to the voice of her spirit, which urged her onward. Six days later she was robbed in a crowded market, a pistol's muzzle jammed beneath her ribs. The lesson she derived is void of self-criticism and disappointingly pert: Don't

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Amanda Lindhout

mess with Afghanistan.

Once the bruise from the gun had healed, Lindhout remained convinced of her invincibility. Eight months later, wandering through Ethiopia, she met and fell in love with Brennan, a 35-year-old Australian trying to jump-start his photojournalism career. When he eventually confessed he was married, Lindhout's plans to join him in Australia disintegrated.

She moved on, but decided to try paying for her travels as a novice photojournalist like Brennan. She returned to Afghanistan, then journeyed to Baghdad after landing a dodgy job as an on-camera correspondent for a television channel financed by the Iranian government. This earned the guileless Lindhout the disdain of the Baghdad-based press corps. When other reporters discovered her live stand-ups for the Iranians on YouTube, in which she, "quick-talking and naive," had criticized their work, she decamped to Kenya, a jumping-off point for journalists covering the war in Somalia.

Lindhout hoped to make her bones in Somalia, "the most dangerous country on earth." She also persuaded Brennan — now divorced — to join her. She missed him, she writes, but "the reality was that I was starting to need Nigel, or somebody, to come with me and share the costs." At this moment in the memoir, Lindhout is not an especially sympathetic character. She seems more interested in the rush

than in the work she's doing, and it's unclear what besides ego and adrenaline are propelling her. Yet absolutely nothing she does or has done up to this point renders her responsible for the brutality that followed, or can explain how she emerged with unfathomable grace and wisdom.

In mid-August 2008, when she and Brennan landed in the wrecked city of Mogadishu with no clue what they were doing and no assignments to speak of (other than a travel column Lindhout was writing for her hometown paper, *The Red Deer Advocate*), their already tenuous situation took an immediate turn for the worse. Their experienced guide fobbed them off on an assistant. After a few frustrating days, they set out one afternoon to visit a hospital and camp for displaced people, led by a singular Somali doctor. On the road, disaster struck in the form of heavily armed gunmen, who dragged them into captivity.

IT'S HERE that the narrative begins to gain its tremendous power. As Lindhout's external landscape turns upside down, her inner one sharpens and deepens. From their first hours as prisoners, she and Brennan were forced to negotiate their uncertain survival with a shifting array of captors possessed of differing manners and agendas. Heartbreakingly, Lindhout called each man "brother"; she hoped that through her scant command

of Islam she could connect with them. She dreaded being separated from Brennan and raped. Her illusion of control had yet to shatter as she racked her brain for ways to communicate: "If only we could hit upon the right strategy for talking to the men holding us."

There was no such strategy. On learning she was being held for a ransom of \$1.5 million, Lindhout despaired. She knew her impoverished family could do little to save her. So without Brennan's assent, she announced to the militants that the two of them wanted to convert to Islam.

Conversion was, at first, a gambit to save their lives. Reading and memorizing the Koran, however, became a form of solace. They studied not as believers, but as prosecutorial lawyers looking for chapters and verses with which to make a case for their safety. As Lindhout puts it: "I read the book in hopes of using their religion to talk my way out." She searched desperately to find words that forbade her captors from violating her. Instead, she discovered verses that suggested the opposite. The first of her rapists arrived.

There's no self-pity or grandiosity in these pages. The rage and self-hatred born out of bad decisions and bad luck have long since burned into a clear-headed attempt to record the cruelties Lindhout endured. (She has since created a foundation that seeks to educate Somali youth.)

In the cleanest prose, she and Corbett allow events both horrific and absurd — like Lindhout's diligently translating, from a smartphone, a message to jihadis from Osama bin Laden — to unfold on their own. Lindhout's resilience transforms the story from a litany of horrors into a humbling encounter with the human spirit.

To withstand her anguish, she recited a catalog of the small gifts for which she was grateful: "my family at home, the oxygen in my lungs," the fact that "Jamal set my food down on the floor instead of throwing it at me." She practiced compassion for her captors even after they gang-raped her, an episode she recounts with characteristic restraint, rendering it all the more terrible for what is left unsaid: "Together, they crossed into a darker place, where there was no retrievable dignity for anybody. They became guilty, one the same as another. I bled not for hours or days but for weeks afterward."

Most remarkably, in total darkness, Lindhout transcended her starving, feverish body. She built first stairways, then rooms in the stillness of the air above her. She built, as the title suggests, a "house in the sky," where "the voices that normally tore through my head expressing fear and wishing for death went silent, until there was only one left speaking." This voice asks, "In this exact moment, are you O.K.?" She answers, "Yes, right now I am still O.K." □