

LIFE, AFTER



"I love being outside in nature, it really heals me." Amanda Lindhout in Calgary's Lindsay Park

IN AUGUST 2008, Alberta's Amanda Lindhout—an intrepid traveller trying to break into freelance journalism—was abducted in Mogadishu by Somali extremists, along with her Australian travelling companion and former boyfriend, Nigel Brennan. For the next 459 days, Lindhout endured horrific physical and sexual abuse as her family desperately tried to raise enough money to free her. In December 2009, after a payment of \$600,000, both Brennan and Lindhout were released; now, for the first time, she tells her story in the heartbreaking new memoir, *A House in the Sky*.

MAUREEN HALUSHAK: When you were finally released, you write that it felt "unreal yet utterly vivid." What was your first impression of coming home to Calgary?

AMANDA LINDHOUT: I remember the plane touching down and seeing a Canadian flag and becoming very emotional.

MH: If there was a movie-of-the-week about your experience, it might end there. In reality, what came next?

AL: Freedom was difficult to grasp, like at any moment I was going to lose it. I went to an intensive trauma therapy centre in Arizona for six weeks, where I did everything from EMDR [eye movement desensitization and reprocessing], which is kind of like a light hypnosis,

AMANDA LINDHOUT talks to **MAUREEN HALUSHAK** about being kidnapped in Somalia and writing the book that finally brought her back

to meditation. I continue to work with a wonderful psychologist, Katherine Porterfield, who's based in New York and who specializes in working with survivors of torture. She checks in with me every day to see how I'm doing.

MH: What was it like to reunite with your family, after not knowing whether you'd ever see them again?

AL: Time with them now has a meaning that it never would have had before. We have so much more appreciation for daily contact, and for being able to pick up the phone and talk.

MH: Most governments, including Canada's, will not pay ransom. Instead, it was up to your families to raise it. [In total, Brennan and Lindhout's release cost \$1.2 million, which included the fees of a private negotiator.] Your parents really struggled to come up with their share of the money. Have they recovered financially?

AL: My dad had to remortgage his house down to the last penny. My mom dedicated an entire year to fundraising, and so many people gave to bring me home... There are very, very generous individuals in Alberta who stepped up to help my family—my father in particular—get back on their feet again. Emotionally, they're still recovering, like I am. But financially, we're OK.

MH: Was it hard to fall back in step in with your friends?

AL: Yeah, and not just friends, but everybody—immediate family aside. That experience changed me on a foundational level. I came out of it in many ways a different person, and in many ways a better person. But maybe I was unrecognizable to people who had been part of my life before. And my focus in life [became] different, it was the Global Enrichment Foundation [the charity she founded in 2010, which offers education and empowerment programs for Somali women and children], and I was talking about things like forgiveness, and it wasn't necessarily where >

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“People who have the ability to inflict suffering on another human being are able to do so because of their own state of suffering”

other people around were at in regards to what happened to me, and it might have made some people uncomfortable even. But that's all been OK over time. Friendships that don't fit my life anymore have faded away and new ones have come in.

MH: What about dating?

AL: I have dated a little bit, but the most important thing right now is my recovery. I'm still working through a lot of layers of emotional baggage.

MH: Back at home, were there any little rituals that you found yourself revelling in—the freedom to get a coffee, or read the paper?

AL: In the book, there's a part where everything is awful, and I'm still thinking about my eyebrows. I've always been a very girly girl, so being able to put on nice, clean clothes and wear a bit of makeup and curl my hair was something I really delighted in. And I still really, really appreciate that.

MH: You visited dozens of countries on your own prior to Somalia. Do you still travel by yourself?

AL: I love being out in the world alone. I was in India for the last month hiking and exploring on my own, and I felt as confident as I ever did. I have had a worst-case situation unfold in my life, and I don't let it hold me back. But I'm probably a little bit more aware than I would have been before.

MH: When you're travelling and you meet someone new, do you tell them your backstory?

AL: No. I mean, it's not like I hide it, but it's not the way that I define myself. Sometimes it's nice for people not to know anything about me.

MH: Now, with the book, the world is going to know intimate details about your darkest days. What prompted you to write it?

AL: I wasn't sure when I came home that I wanted to do a book. I spoke to a number of writers and publishers but I wasn't interested in telling the story they were interested in, which was really, you know, [focused] on the sensational things like what I'd been through in captivity, like, 'Did I have a baby?' [she did not] and 'How was I

tortured?' So, I thought, *Well, maybe I won't do a book.*

MH: What changed your mind?

AL: Through a friend, I was connected to [co-writer] Sara Corbett. She was as interested in my travels around the world as she was my kidnapping story, which was really appealing to me.

MH: What was your process?

AL: We would go away to places like the Bahamas or Mexico and rent condos and spend time together mapping out the book. She came to Canmore [Alta., where Lindhout now lives] many times, I went to her home in Maine many times. There were sections of the book I wrote. There were sections of the book she wrote. A chapter would go between us up to 30 times.

MH: Did you ever just not want to think about your experience anymore?

AL: All the time. There were so many emotions involved. Recounting the early travels was fun. But reliving [other] details was really hard. It took us three years to write the book because there were times when I just didn't feel like I could do it. I have post-traumatic stress disorder and I still suffer from nightmares and flashbacks and all of that, so if I was having a particularly bad week, going back into those memories wasn't in my best interest.

MH: Did you leave anything out?

AL: Yes. I never felt an obligation to say every single terrible thing that happened to me. Some of the worst stuff isn't in the book. It doesn't need to be.

MH: You had asked me if I could avoid using words like kidnapping or rape or victim when we spoke. Instead, you prefer to be called a survivor. Why is that important to you?

AL: I think it's a choice that I made when I was in captivity: I'm going to survive. And then I did survive, and therefore I am a survivor. I've always had an adverse reaction to [being labelled] as a victim... I got that a lot when I came home and it didn't feel very empowering to me. I also felt like the media victimized me in some ways too, with headlines that would really call out the sexual abuse. There's a real fixation in the media on sexual abuse. >

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MH: Did the book help in terms of giving you control of your story?

AL: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's why for the last three-and-a-half years with the media, when these kinds of questions came up I would always shut it down because I thought, *I don't want to talk about what happened in a three-minute interview*. In the book I had the space to say exactly what I wanted to say, and nothing could be misconstrued.

MH: Can you describe what the house in the sky refers to?

AL: It was the place in my mind that I could go to, to escape the horrors that I was living. I went there to reflect on the life that I had lived, and to think about the life that I hoped to have.

MH: And it was in this mental space that you decided that, if you were freed, you would set up a foundation to help the people of Somalia?

AL: I started thinking about it in the Dark House. [Lindhout and Brennan were moved frequently; at one point they escaped and ran to a mosque, where a Somali woman tried to save them from their captors. The Dark House is where they were taken after they were recaptured, a rat-infested place where "the most terrible things happened."] I thought about the woman at the mosque who I think lost her life trying to save me. And then also about the conversations I'd had with my captors, [and] their fascination with the fact that in countries like Canada, everybody went to school. I wondered if they would've made different choices if education had been an option. These young people didn't have any direction, so when extremist groups come in and offer them that sense of purpose and belonging... it's not so surprising that they join.

MH: It's clear you feel compassion for your captors, most of whom were teenagers. Was it hard to get there?

AL: I came to the conclusion in captivity—and it's a universal truth, I think—that people who have the ability to inflict suffering on another human being are able to do so because of their own state of suffering. So from that starting point, you can begin to feel

compassion. But some days it's easier than others. I'm still recovering physically; I still have a compromised digestive system. [As a result, she usually eats vegan.] There are days I don't feel good and it's because of what happened to me. Those are the days when it's easy to slide into [feeling] sorry for myself...

MH: What was the first step in creating the Global Enrichment Foundation?

AL: Meeting with the Somali community in Alberta who were—and



Above: Lindhout at the Rajo Literacy School in Nairobi, which is run by the Global Enrichment Foundation. Inset: *A House in the Sky* (Scribner, \$30)



continue to be—really supportive of the foundation. Once I decided what I wanted our first project to be, a university scholarship program for Somali women to honour the woman at the mosque, I started fundraising. It was really hard to get that first program off the ground. Then donations were easier to come by because I had some success to speak of. And [we] really came into a lot of funds in 2011. Because we were one of the first organizations to respond to the East Africa famine, we got a lot of attention. We had one particularly big donation of \$1 million that came in from an American yogurt company, Chobani. Their CEO saw me on the *Today* show.

MH: When you started the foundation, you never intended to return to Somalia. Then, the famine struck while you were working in Kenya.

AL: There were thousands of Somali people coming across the Kenyan

border every day in search of food, and I went to our board of directors and said, "I think we need to respond to this." We agreed to change our mandate to include emergency relief, and I started fundraising. I was able to raise about \$100,000 in 10 days, which allowed us to bring food to 14,000 Somali people.

MH: Were you mentally prepared to return to Somalia?

AL: I hadn't thought I would ever go back. And then I was seeing all these starving kids. I went with my parents' blessing and lots of security. Psychologically, sure, that was like crossing a line. But on some level, I think that it was also freeing. To be clear, that's not the reason I did it. But I hadn't even known that I was feeling the restrictions of that fear until I faced it.

MH: Was there anything specific during that trip that transported you back to your captivity?

AL: Not on that first trip. But in follow-up trips... different things—sights, sounds, smells, the foods they're eating—it could be a million different things. It's important for me during those visits to just be really in touch with what I'm feeling and with what's coming up for me and being able to step away if I need to and just process or have a cry. And at the times I went back, I was OK to do that. But right now, at this point today, I wouldn't go back.

MH: For emotional reasons or security reasons?

AL: For emotional reasons—but that could be different two months from now. Also, I don't need to. We have staff and great partners on the ground there.

MH: People say everything happens for a reason, but at times that seems like an attempt to justify the unjustifiable. Do you feel that anything positive has come out of your abduction?

AL: I've had times where I wondered, *Why me?* But it is what happened, and there has been an equal amount of good that has come out of that situation for both the people of Somalia, through the work of the Global Enrichment Foundation, and for me, too. I just try my best to focus on the gifts I've been able to receive from it. ♦

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