

# Hague Mothers

'My crime is being a victim  
of domestic violence in  
a foreign country'

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*The words of Hague mothers  
from across the world are  
shared here in the hope that  
you will work with us to end  
the abuse and heartache  
they have suffered, and  
continue to suffer.*

Within the context of child custody cases, there exists multi-layered violence that has yet to enter the collective conscience of the international community as a human rights issue.

*Reem Alsalem, UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls*

On the current operation of the law, once a woman conceives a child, regardless of the father's subsequent level of involvement or conduct, she has unwittingly traded her right to liberty of movement and the freedom to choose her own place of residence if she wants to retain custody of her child.

*Anna Kerr, Feminist Legal Clinic*

Through the Hague lens, legally, fatherhood has nothing to do with love, kindness, support, stability, nurturing and encouragement. It is merely a values-neutral concept based solely on DNA. The act of impregnation is what the court considers important, not the effort made to positively raise a child.

*Grant Wyeth, columnist for Diplomat APAC*



# Abused

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I suggested we take a walk. I was almost eight months pregnant and sitting down was no longer an option. He said he knew of somewhere an hour away from the city. I was trying to find some sense of joy with him again, but the conversation towards the end of the trail turned nasty and he was angry when we got in the car to return home,

He floored the gas, sped through the gravel parking lot. Frightened for myself and for the baby, I begged him to stop. He yelled at me, abruptly slammed on the brakes. He punched me and threw me out of the car. I held my stomach as he dragged me, crying, across the gravel off to the side of the parking lot.

Getting back in his car, he drove off.

I crawled over to the field, ashamed of my situation and my emotional state. I sat there streaming silent tears for hours. The entire left side of my body was sore and was beginning to bruise. Hours later he returned to pick me up, still angry.

Somehow it was all my fault.





He didn't hit me, but he would get up really close and scream in my face. Or if I did something wrong, he wouldn't speak to me for weeks. I never knew what it was I'd done, so I'd be walking on eggshells.

*It was total control.*

*If I wanted to go out for coffee, I couldn't; he wouldn't give me the money. It was really embarrassing - like being imprisoned. I wasn't allowed to do the grocery shopping. He would never give me petrol money so I had to walk everywhere with the pram. I was literally surviving on Salvation Army food vouchers.*

I was getting abuse - not only physically but mentally too. I never told anyone. I was embarrassed this was happening to me. I'd make up excuses for my black eyes, lie to doctors if I was worried something was broken.

*When I was pregnant with my daughter, I was in his country. He'd insisted. He beat me up so badly at seven months, I went into labour. Alone. I kept thinking it would calm down, it's just tightenings. It's fine. Then one knocked me on to all fours. I crawled past the broken elevator down the stairs, out the gate, into the gutter. It was December and cold.*

*It's like your body is running on constant adrenaline, like you're always in this flight or fight survival mode.*







For years I tried to do better, thinking I must be doing something wrong, my self confidence chipped away at over the years of our marriage, made to feel I was going mad when actually he was deliberately manipulating me, lying to me to hide his other life.

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*No one denies he hit me, not even him. He says he has changed. I don't believe him, other people do. Important people like judges and social services. My opinion doesn't seem to matter much. The punches and the kickings, the premature birth, the rapes and STDs, the financial abuse - of no interest to anyone.*

I lived in a country where I had no friends and no family, without work and unable to speak the language. I was traumatised by the court system, the unjust laws. Every single government sector I went to, pleading for help, failed to assist me.

*I left to save my life.*

*My first escape was when my first baby was born. He lost his temper because she cried. He lost his temper because I tried to push him off me when he raped me just after having a traumatic birth. I held her in my arms as he punched me, sending the two of us flying over backwards. I waited until he went out to work, I packed a backpack with diapers and wipes, put the baby into a sling across my chest and I took myself out of the country with her.*

A domestic violence organisation arranged for us to go to the airport during the night so no one would see us leave. I had to leave everything behind, just take a suitcase for my son, a suitcase for me, and go. And I was panicking. 'Just get me on a plane, get me on a plane, get me on a plane'. It was very emotional. I cried the entire flight. *I remember my mum saying 'you were like a shell, like this shell of a human'.*



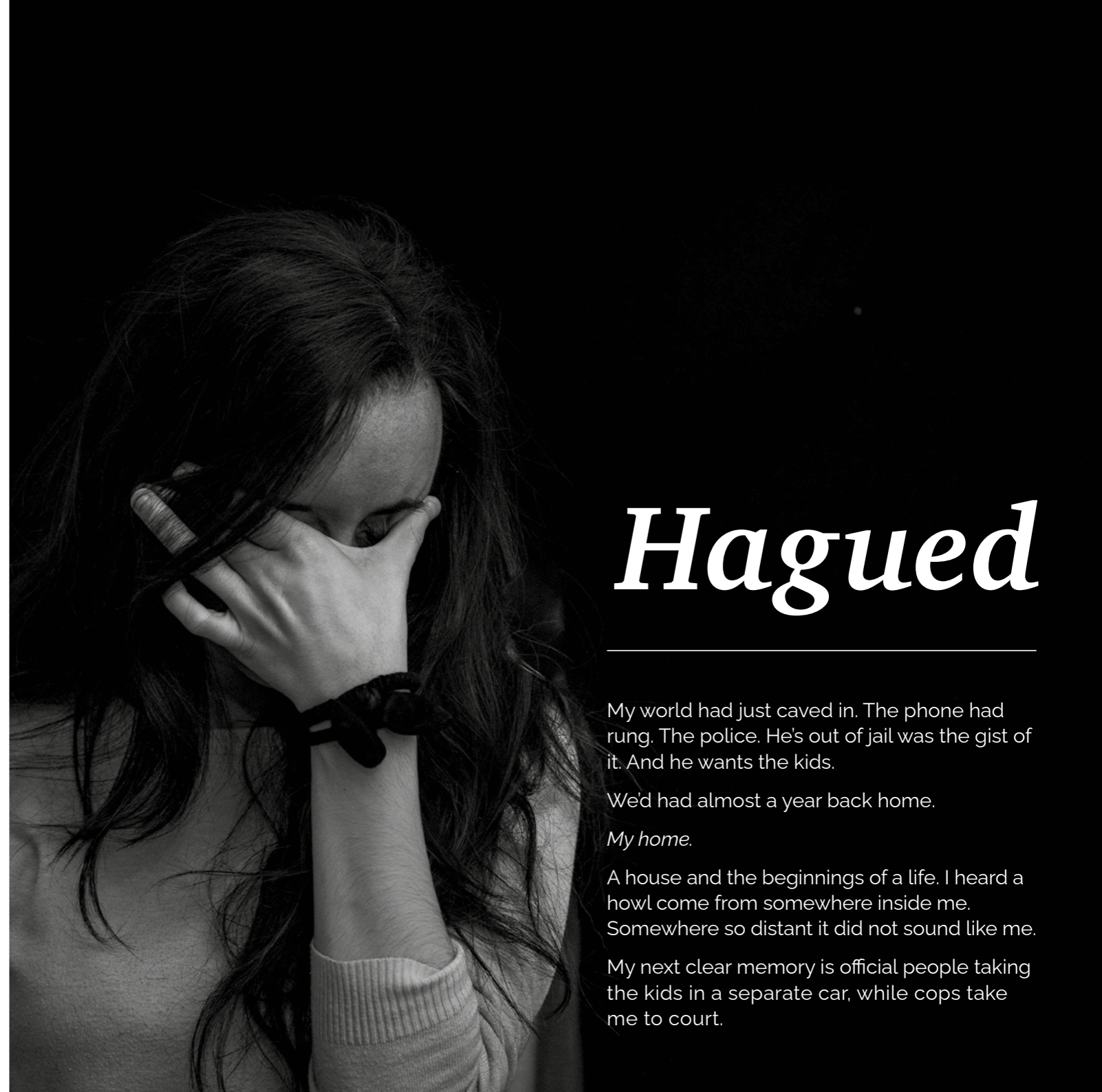




I wrestled with being meaningless as far as any 'help' went. The children perhaps mattered, I did not. My broken bones, my cuts, my head injuries, my deaf ear, my messed up eye, none of it mattered. I ceased to matter. I was a golem that only existed to protect the children.

I have no idea how I made it out of those days with any of me intact.

*I couldn't take a single photo album with me because I could not give the game away that we were not returning. I do not have a single baby photo of my children. Not one. My past lives in my memories only.*



# Hagued

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My world had just caved in. The phone had rung. The police. He's out of jail was the gist of it. And he wants the kids.

We'd had almost a year back home.

*My home.*

A house and the beginnings of a life. I heard a howl come from somewhere inside me. Somewhere so distant it did not sound like me.

My next clear memory is official people taking the kids in a separate car, while cops take me to court.





I finally got the courage to leave and flew home. I've never felt so free, so safe. And the kids loved having their nana, grandad, uncles, and cousins around. They were settled in their schools and life was looking positive. Then I was served with papers. I'd never heard of the Hague Convention. My eldest threatened to run away, she started self-harming; the other two begged to be allowed to stay.

*They were so scared  
and I felt so helpless.*

The court ordered their return which meant that the children were separated from each other and my littlest one was now on her own with a man that should be behind bars.

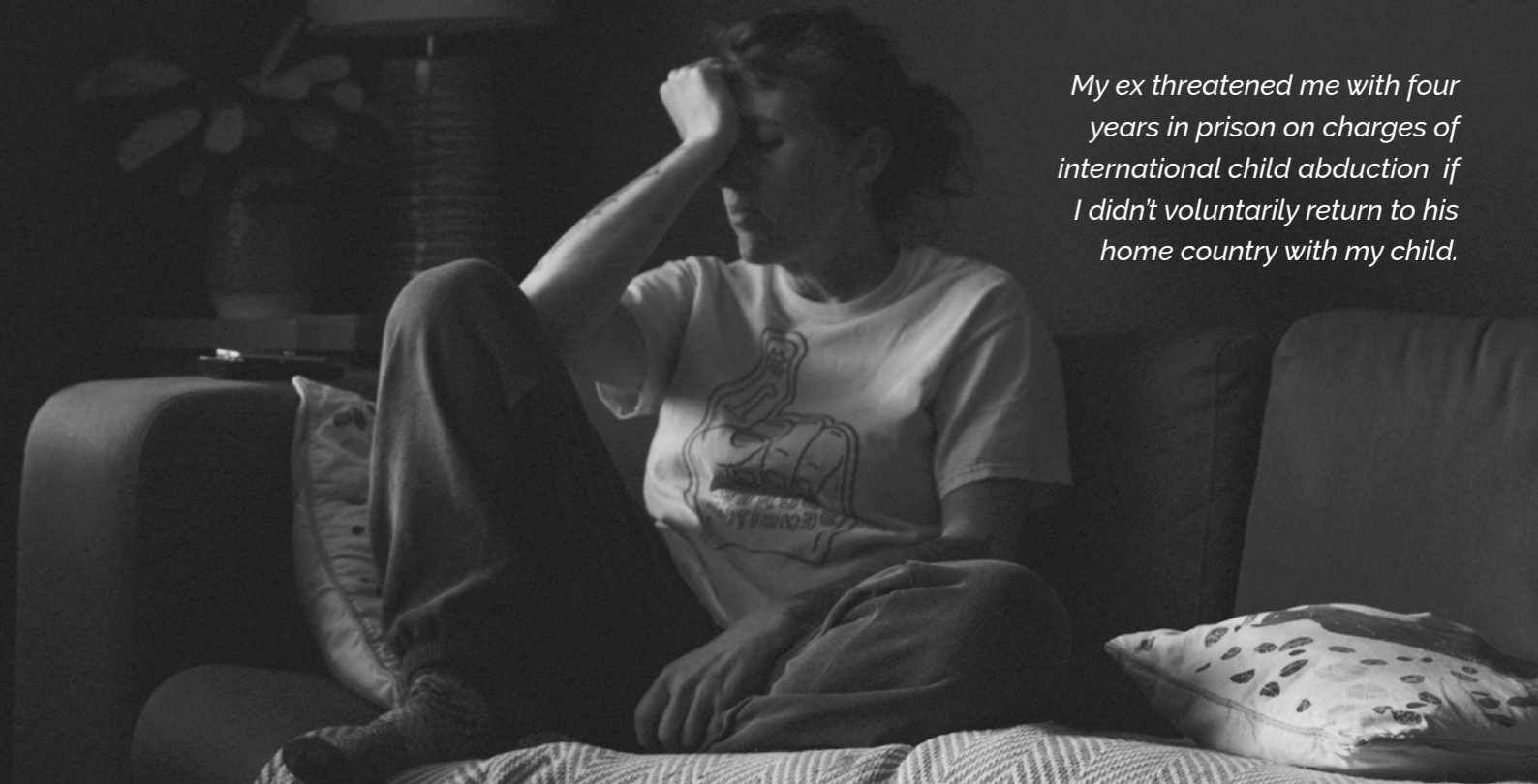


*There are no words to adequately explain how I felt when I received the Hague papers. I was shocked that he could do this, that he could lie to the court and the police with no consequences. I had to pay tens of thousands to defend myself against the charge of child abduction. Meanwhile my country's government paid all his legal fees.*

*In some ways it was a relief when the Hague petition arrived since I was no longer fighting shadows. But it was also terrifying. I had done a lot of reading and knew that the odds of successfully defending a Hague case were incredibly slim. And my husband had filed criminal charges against me for offences which carry a custodial sentence.*

I was devastated, heartbroken. I felt like my life had been taken from me. The court process was soul destroying. I was reliant on lawyers and advocates who had no prior dealings with Hague cases. They said I had no hope of winning, that if I didn't go back with my child they would be taken from me and given to their dad. The proceedings were a shambles.

*No matter what evidence I submitted to show my ex was an abuser and a liar it didn't seem to matter.*



*My ex threatened me with four years in prison on charges of international child abduction if I didn't voluntarily return to his home country with my child.*





*The scariest was thinking I was going to lose my child.*

Would I have custody? Would I get to see her? Would they put me in prison for kidnapping her? That fear, the fear of the unknown, that was the worst, of course, that was the worst by far.

*Eight days before the year was up and a bailiff came at 7.30 in the morning with the Hague papers. And that's when my whole world just crumbled. We only had 72 hours to pull everything together and go to court.*

*I have been buried in court proceedings and terrorised over the phone, labelled a criminal for wanting to end the abuse and provide a peaceful environment for my kids.*

The court hearing was bizarre. I was being treated as a criminal and having to justify why I was trying to give my children a safe, stable home and an education. If I had not had family support and money to fight the case, I believe I would be dead.

*The courts were not interested in justice, only whether I took the child without the fathers' permission. The same man who was beating me, raping me.*



The court case was so terrifying, so stressful, that afterwards I have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome. Feeling powerless and hopeless became part of my character.

*My life became an unsupportable hell.*

*I owe people. My friends gave me fifty thousand dollars and my mum went bankrupt because she sold her house. I paid a barrister and a solicitor. They got nearly four hundred thousand dollars of my mum's money.*



# *Aftermath- Return*

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We had a long flight ahead. He'd gone back to his country, his family. It was going to be much easier to abuse me there. This was not a place where domestic crime went punished.

My husband was waiting for us at the airport, smelling expensive, looking fit and handsome. I smiled, forced myself to kiss him on the cheek. My skin crawled. My stomach howled, 'Danger danger!' I wanted to run, scream...


He scooped up his son, squeezed his scowling daughter and took his family home.

The evening wore on. I was desperate for sleep. 'Are you going to be nice later?' he asked. He was going to enjoy his victory.

Waiting for the fist, the push, the kick, the dick, is worse than it happening. 'Get it over with, survive it, he will rest and go to work. You get to live for the twelve hours he is gone.' I knew I would pay for him going to jail. For leaving him, taking the kids.

At the time I had no idea just how much.





I was forced to return, only to find that he refused to honour his undertakings to move out of the family home, pay maintenance, and to allow the children to remain in my care.

*Instead, he met us at the airport with two police officers and a warrant for my arrest.*

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*My child was made a ward of court. They were almost taken off me and put into care because the judge said the abuse didn't happen, that it was me being emotionally manipulative. I have recordings of my child speaking about the abuse but the judge said that I was coaching them.*

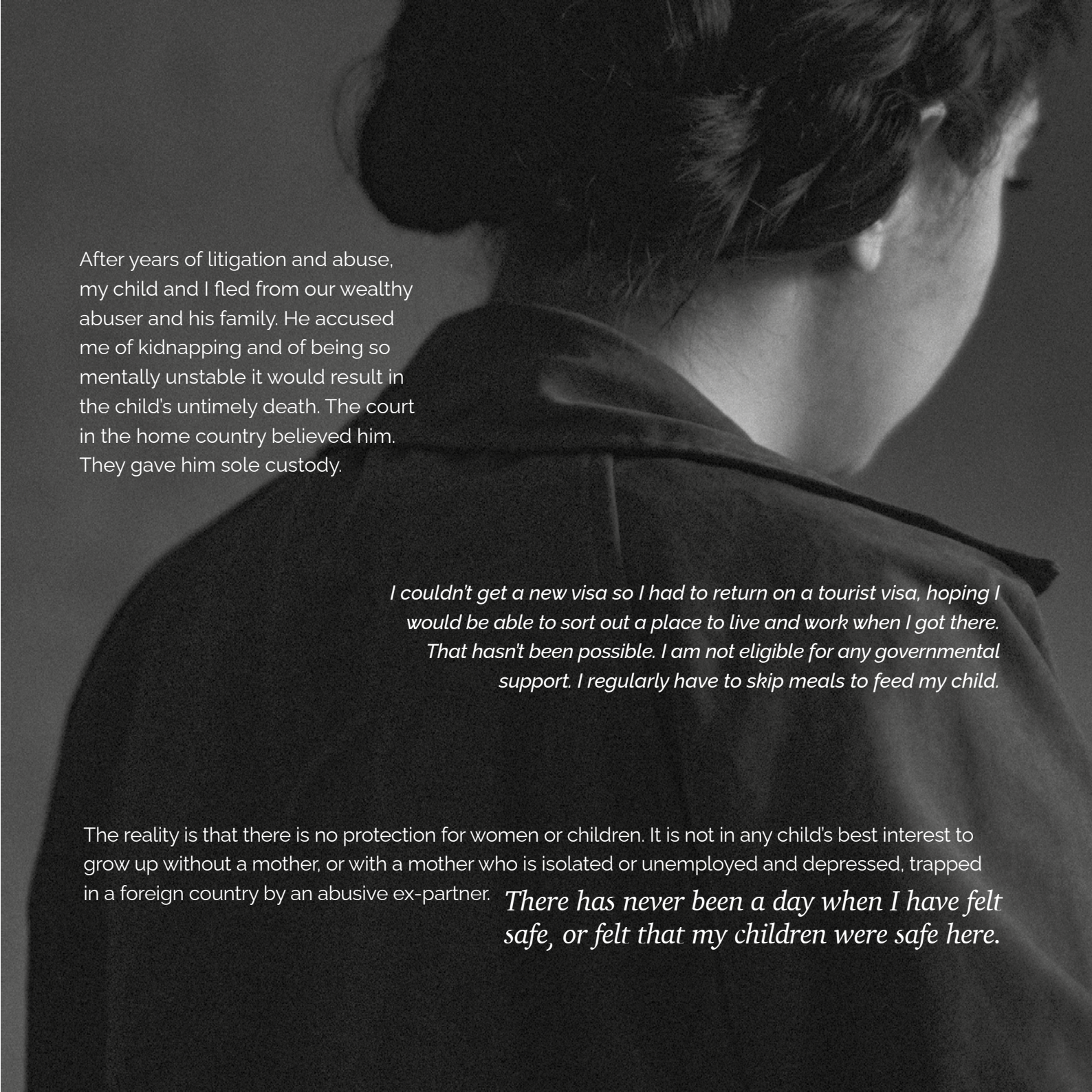
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*I must continue facing my abuser and share custody with him.*

And my child must go to his abusive father even though they don't want to.

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*I had to pay for his attorney, because I had lost the Hague, and I'd lost custody. Then my divorce attorney called me. He said, 'Did you know that your husband was gambling?' He'd gambled millions. So now I was liable for hundreds of dollars in taxes.*



After years of litigation and abuse, my child and I fled from our wealthy abuser and his family. He accused me of kidnapping and of being so mentally unstable it would result in the child's untimely death. The court in the home country believed him. They gave him sole custody.

*I couldn't get a new visa so I had to return on a tourist visa, hoping I would be able to sort out a place to live and work when I got there. That hasn't been possible. I am not eligible for any governmental support. I regularly have to skip meals to feed my child.*

The reality is that there is no protection for women or children. It is not in any child's best interest to grow up without a mother, or with a mother who is isolated or unemployed and depressed, trapped in a foreign country by an abusive ex-partner. *There has never been a day when I have felt safe, or felt that my children were safe here.*



Cassandra escaped to Australia from England because she feared being killed by her children's father, a man who had sexually assaulted and abused her. She told police:

*'He said he was going to chop me up in little pieces and post me piece by piece to my family.'*

Nevertheless, an Australian judge ordered her children to return to England and, as a loving mother, she went with them.

Soon after her return from Australia, and just hours after begging the police in England to drive her to a safe house, she was stabbed to death by her ex-partner in front of her children and her own mother.

*In the days before she was murdered she was, her mother said, unravelling with fear.*



# *Aftermath-* **Loss**

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I receive news that my criminal trial for child abduction is going ahead. Her father will stop at nothing to hurt me, to destroy my life, to keep my daughter from me.

He emails to tell me that my daughter's emotional suffering is due to my instability, I am to blame for her 'problems'. We were due to have the one-month visit that we have been looking forward to all year. Another email. This one informs me that the visit is cancelled due to her current state and my history of child abduction.

I am numb. The days leading up to the trial are heavy. I miss her. There is a void. I need to care for her. I need to make sure she has showered, to know she has slept well, to hold her when she's sad. And I cannot. I am being told she suffers because of me. I am being told I am a bad mother. And I cannot defend myself. I cannot defend her. Nobody will listen.

The trial date arrives; the ruling comes a few days later. I am sentenced to three years in prison. My parental rights are taken away.

My daughter will be an adult before I am able to see her again.





*They took my baby from me...  
I had to go and meet my ex at  
the airport and they took the  
child out of my arms.*

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*My child would secretly call me crying and  
begging me to come fetch them but I wasn't  
allowed near them. My ex screamed at them  
every night for hours, blaming the child for  
leaving him, threatening what he would do to  
them if they tried to leave again.*

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Endless, absurd and oppressive; the Hague  
Convention has been used to perpetuate the  
domination of my daughters' father over me.  
He has taken the peace of two young girls,  
who are growing up under the threat of  
being handed over to their abuser.

*I was told I needed court orders to  
speak to my children. I tried calling  
the police for welfare checks but  
no-one would call me back. I was  
hitting brick walls everywhere I turned.*

*Almost a year later  
and I still haven't  
been able to see them.*

I went from being a single mother to childless in  
under 72 hours following a Hague Convention  
case. On the advice of my UK lawyers, I agreed  
to return voluntarily with my children.

When we arrived my ex was at the airport and  
I was due in family court the next morning,  
although I did not know this. I discovered that I  
had missed this initial hearing, which took place  
just 18 hours after I arrived, and was due in court  
again the next day. At this second hearing, at

which I represented myself, the female judge told  
me my children's father was to get everything  
he had asked for because I had 'not bothered to  
appear' for the first hearing.

I had to bring the children to court the very next  
day so that they could be 'given' to their father. I  
was then not allowed to see them until the start of  
costly intensive family therapy. Following this I was  
permitted ten hours visitation per week, supervised  
since I was labelled a child abductor and a flight risk.

With no job, support, family, healthcare, credit  
score, job history, accommodation, vehicle and,  
worst of all, no kids living with me, I was eventually  
forced to come back to the UK.

My children have lost all contact with their maternal  
heritage (I am half-Indian), language, culture  
and family. They have been raised by transient  
girlfriends and au pairs as my ex works out of state.

I am unable to return to the USA as non-payment  
of child support (it now amounts to many tens of  
thousands of dollars) is an imprisonable debt.

*I last saw my two children over 8 years ago.*



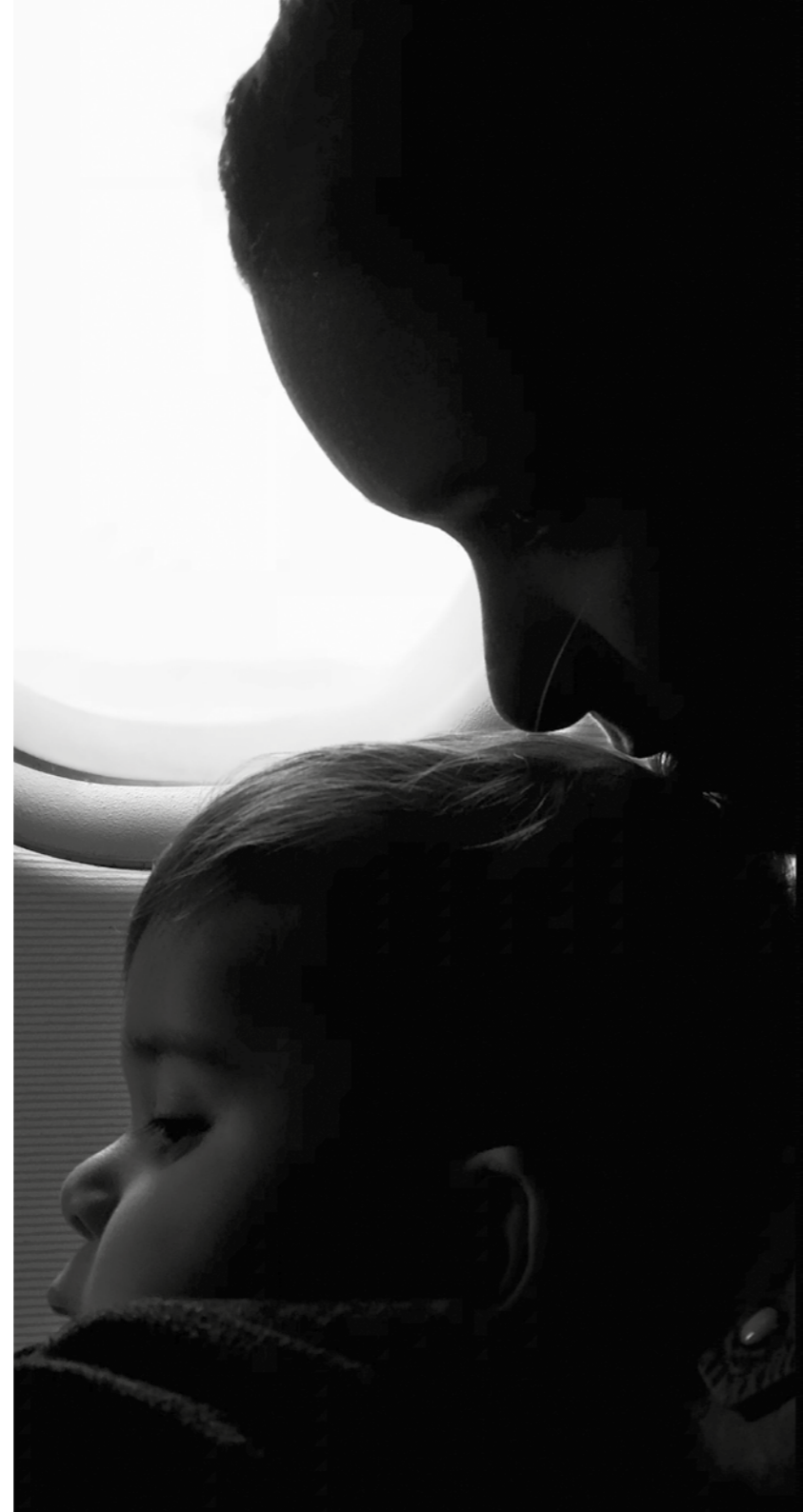
*Many people don't know about the Hague Convention. How do you tell people you have been charged with child abduction and been through court? How do you tell them you are under investigation in another country for child abuse? That's the most upsetting thing for me. That he thought it was okay to make those accusations... **that he was prepared to do absolutely anything to win.***

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The Hague has defined my life, clouded every single day since I first decided that either I ran with the baby or else he was going to continue hitting me, raping me, that he would eventually kill me. I feared he would kill the children too. His blank rages were not something that were controllable or periodic. I lived under a regime of permanent fear.

*The court took custody of my child away from me; she now lives in the country I escaped from.*

***I can't go back.  
He will kill me.***



Escape never comes without danger: that is the nature of escape.

I have made planned escapes, and desperate hurried rushing running escapes. I have made escapes amid shattered glass. I have made escapes that took years to plan and execute. I have escaped for minutes and escaped all night long on street corners with two tiny children.

I have escaped for days, sitting with my money running out of the door in hotel rooms and no way forward except right back where I started.

Albania America Andorra  
Argentina Armenia Australia  
Austria Belarus Belgium Bosnia  
& Herzegovina Brazil Bulgaria  
Burkina Faaso Canada Chile  
China Costa Rica Croatia Cyprus  
Czech Republic Denmark  
Dominican Republic Ecuador  
El Salvador Estonia Finland  
France Georgia Germany  
Greece Honduras Hungary  
Iceland Ireland Israel Italy Japan  
Kazakhstan Latvia Lithuania  
Luxembourg Malta Mauritius  
Mexico Monaco Montenegro  
Morocco Netherlands New  
Zealand Nicaragua North  
Macedonia Norway Panama  
Paraguay Peru Philippines  
Poland Portugal Korea Moldova  
Romania Russian Federation  
Serbia Singapore Slovakia South  
Africa Spain Sri Lanka Sweden  
Switzerland Thailand Tunisia  
Türkiye Ukraine United Kingdom  
& Northern Ireland Uruguay  
Uzbekistan Venezuela Zambia



# *My voice is a cry for help*

Dedicated to loving mothers across the world whose lives have been decimated by the Hague Abduction Convention.

Your courage is an inspiration.

**HAGUE**  
*MOTHERS*



Hague Mothers is a FILiA legacy project. Our aim is to end the injustices created by the *Hague Abduction Convention*, specifically for mothers and children who are victims of domestic abuse.

[www.hague-mothers.org.uk](http://www.hague-mothers.org.uk)

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