

Perilous Journey: A Mother's International Quest to Rescue Her Children

Patricia C. Sutherland

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This book ought to carry a warning on its cover: "Mothers of Small Children Should Approach With Extreme Caution." The author's wrenching first-person account of trying to rescue her young daughter and son from their powerful, sadistic father is the kind of story that gives parents nightmares-or at least keeps them up late turning pages.

The tale begins as a sort of Bridget-Jones-meets-National-Geographic-meets-Walt-Disney story. At age twenty-eight, suffering from a serious case of ennui, Sutherland accepts her friend's invitation to join her in a low-budget trip to see the world. She empties her modest bank account, sells her car, and before you can say "typhoid shot" she's waved goodbye to her Michigan home and is following her whims through Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia.

In Malaysia she meets Mahmood, who's not only charming, but an actual prince. Bliss ensues. Sutherland sheds her backpack and settles into the pampered life befitting the wife of a prince.

These early chapters have an insouciant, naïve quality. "We opened a bottle of champagne, Mahmood proposed, I said yes and he gave me a stunning emerald and diamond ring," Sutherland writes. "He shared his thoughts about how to proceed, I sighed in agreement and we went to bed to make glorious love."

All that perfection might be insufferable if the reader didn't already know what Sutherland later learns-that it's too good to last. After their second child is born, Mahmood turns neglectful, then abusive, banishing his wife and refusing to allow her to see the children.

Her fight to get them back pits her not just against her husband, but against a Malaysian bureaucracy and legal system that have little interest in helping a Western woman-especially one who is challenging a member of the royal family. Once the battle begins, readers will be hooked until they know if Sutherland and her children are safe.

Sutherland is a teacher by profession, not an author, and her writing style is neither elegant nor polished. Its appeal lies in how it reveals her personality-funny, despairing, vulnerable, courageous. Many passages are in the form of letters home, and the book has the breathless tone of someone telling a story for the first time.

The author doesn't bother with introspection, doesn't question why she was so quick to melt her identity into Mahmood's-even converting to Islam-and so intent on averting her eyes from the warning signs foreshadowing her husband's cruelty. But that's understandable given what she's been through. The malleable young woman who surrendered everything for her prince hardly seems like the same person who took on a formidable enemy, powered only by a mother's obsessive instinct to protect her children.

KAREN HOLT (January / February 2003)

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