

A Great Escape!

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She couldn't find a hero, so 13-year-old Dria Davis became one, devising a plan to leave a father she says kidnapped, beat and held her captive in his native Saudi Arabia for two years.

This is the personal story of 13-year-old Dria Davis, an American girl who became the youngest child ever to engineer her own escape from Saudi Arabia. And she did it while Congress, the State Department and the White House placidly sat on the sidelines knowing that Dria faced possible death from the daily beatings she endured. Their response — as in other cases involving the kidnapping of American children to Muslim countries that have refused to sign the Hague Convention, an international treaty requiring signatory countries to obey child-custody orders — is that the United States must honor Muslim law. Under that law fathers always get custody regardless of U.S. court orders; women and children have very few rights.

Saudi Arabia is a strategic U.S. ally in an unpredictable part of the world. As such, the U.S. government has been reluctant to pursue these parental-kidnapping cases on the ground that they could harm international relations. As one federal agent told Insight, “There was little we could do in this case.” But Dria was a survivor who took matters into her own hands, refusing to remain as one of about 1,000 American children held hostage in the Middle East by a foreign estranged parent. Indeed, thousands more are held against their will worldwide (see “Justice Ignores Stolen Kids,” Nov. 29, 1999).

The outline of Dria's story first appeared in the recently published *Ribbons of Hope* by Steven Nunnally, but here for the first time Dria tells her own story, in an exclusive interview with Insight, about her captivity and daring escape that ended in April when she was reunited in Miami with her Cuban-American mother, Miriam Hernandez-Davis. Dria no longer uses her Saudi name of Yasmeen Al-Shalhoub because she wants to be known as an American. She tells Insight she wants “to help every American child who is being held against her will.”

For two years the story languished while this American child was imprisoned and beaten. Her family in the United States didn't want to endanger her life while they plotted her escape. Repeatedly they appealed for assistance from official channels, but to no avail. Politicians such as Sen. Bob Graham, a Florida Democrat who knew of Dria's ordeal, dodged questions from Insight last March when this magazine first learned of Dria's tape-recorded telephone conversations detailing the abuse. The Clinton/Gore administration, which was provided copies of the tapes, also ducked the issue. Nor was there the backlash that might have occurred if TV-network news had aired the secretly recorded telephone conversations in which Dria called for help and described in graphic detail how she was being tortured in Saudi Arabia. But no one cared to listen.

Consider this transcript of a plea telephoned by Dria to her mother while trapped in Saudi:

“He’s such a bad father; he always hits me for no reason, and he says bad words about me and about you. He says in Arabic, ‘Your mom is such a bitch. You are the daughter of a donkey. You are a stupid fatso. Go to hell! May you drop dead one day,’ and stuff like that.

“That fat lady [Dria’s stepmother] treats me so horribly. If she falls in the Grand Canyon she will probably get stuck. She hits me. She locks me in the house and throws pineapple juice at me and scratches me. I have marks all over. I’ve told my dad that I want to go home because I need you and want to be with you because I was happy there and I had a better education. He says, ‘Shut up,’ and hits me. They scare me.”

Dria’s father, Khalid Shalhoub, could not be reached for comment and his whereabouts are unknown. He faces an international arrest warrant on kidnapping charges should he ever step onto on U.S. soil.

The Saudi Embassy’s first secretary, Adel Al-Jubier, insists his country must follow its own laws which, under Islamic law, regard child custody as a paternal prerogative. “We cannot take Saudi children, who are legally Saudi citizens irrespective of the fact they have an American passport, remove them from their fathers who have a court order from a Saudi court and deliver them to their non-Saudi parent. Period,” he told the San Francisco Examiner in reference to similar cases.

Meanwhile, Dria remains in counseling and is recovering from her wounds and trauma. “When I came back [to the United States] I had bruises everywhere,” she says. “Sometimes I wanted to go to the hospital but [the father] wouldn’t let me. I would get beat up for no reason. If I mentioned anything about Mommy, he would hit me,” she claims.

Hernandez-Davis says she long feared that Shalhoub would kidnap Dria. When she met him while attending the University of Miami, “he was a perfect gentleman.” After a whirlwind romance they married in 1985, and Dria was born a year later. But he changed. “He began treating me like property,” Hernandez-Davis says. “His mentality and views were different. He said the Holocaust never happened, and all American women are whores, and it’s evil to drink liquor. I was living with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.”

First Shalhoub urged her to move to Saudi Arabia, promising it would only be for two years. She went for about eight months in 1985, but returned home to give birth to Dria. When he started building a \$300,000 home in Saudi Arabia she realized he planned to stay there permanently. In 1988 she filed for divorce and was granted custody of her daughter. But Shalhoub was allowed unsupervised visits with the right to take his daughter for visits out of the country.

Between 1988 and 1997, Shalhoub took Dria to Saudi Arabia three times — each time returning her to her mother and always letting Hernandez-Davis know where they were. But in the summer of 1997, when there was no word from Saudi Arabia, Hernandez-Davis says, “I started feeling something was wrong.” On June 25 the phone rang with a call from Shalhoub and her worst fears came true. “I am keeping Yasmeen

because she wants to stay,” he told her. “She’s staying with me indefinitely. I don’t know when I’ll allow you to see her.” He hung up after 30 seconds. “He did it because of his ego, because I divorced him and embarrassed him in front of his family and friends,” she says.

When Dria started asking her father why she wasn’t going back to Miami, Shalhoub first said he wanted to spend a little more time with her. “He kept lying to me,” Dria says. “And when I told him, ‘You have been lying to me and I want to go home,’ he slapped me and slapped me until I fell to the ground.”

Hernandez-Davis filed a police report of kidnapping, but the Miami authorities ignored it when they learned the daughter was with her father. The mother went to the FBI, which first said there was nothing they could do. After she learned the FBI could file an international warrant against her former husband for parental kidnapping, she brought a copy of the law and demanded the FBI do its job. It was a year before they filed the warrant.

Meanwhile, Dria says, she was locked inside the house in Saudi Arabia and not allowed outside except to be accompanied by her father to school. The stepmother hit her frequently, she says, and was adamant that she couldn’t sleep with her doll, insisting “You will go to hell if you sleep with your Dolly.”

When her father left and the stepmother stepped out, Dria figured out how to make an international telephone call, called her mother in Miami and told of the daily beatings and her father’s plans to force the little girl to marry a cousin. Soon afterward Hernandez-Davis began plotting the escape and taping the calls. In March 1999, Hernandez-Davis knew her daughter had to be rescued.

One of the last recorded conversations, reviewed by Insight, spelled out the danger. What follows is from the transcript:

“My Dad broke my [hair] clip right on my head because he hit me in the head,” Dria says, her voice trembling. “He hurt me so much I couldn’t breathe. I was crying so much He always hurts me, and then he pulled me by my hair. I could feel pieces of my hair falling off. And then he threw me on the floor and kept kicking me and hitting me, and then he carried me by the T-shirt and pulled me back down. I have a big bruise in the back of my arm — it’s like blood and it’s big. . . . The teacher came and stopped him and then tried to calm me down.”

“He just goes crazy all of a sudden?” asks Hernandez-Davis.

“Yeah, you should have seen the look in his eyes,” Dria sobs. “I don’t know what’s wrong with him. I can’t stay here anymore. I’d rather die than stay here.”

“Be patient. Be patient,” Hernandez-Davis comforts.

“You tell me to be patient,” Dria responds, “but it’s been almost two years.”

Armed with the explosive tape recordings, Hernandez-Davis began a private campaign to free her daughter. She sent tapes to Sen. Graham, to Florida Republican Reps. Lincoln Diaz-Balart and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, to the State Department, to U.S. ambassadors and to Florida Republican Gov. Jeb Bush.

Citing the International Religious Persecution Act, which focuses on parental kidnapping of minors taken abroad, Hernandez-Davis begged Congress to enforce the law. Dria, a Catholic, had told in one of the conversations recorded on tape of her desire to be faithful to Jesus Christ but said her father would have none of it. He demanded she convert and become a Muslim. “When I refused he beat me up because I said ‘I am Christian,’” she says.

Many politicians did not even respond. Some referred Hernandez-Davis to the State Department, which did nothing, she says. Diaz-Balart helped her get a visa to visit her daughter for a month. A U.S. official in Saudi Arabia secretly provided Dria with a U.S. law-enforcement personal portable phone number to use if she were to need emergency assistance.

There was nothing more. Hernandez-Davis turned to the president and first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. The White House returned her letters and the Dria tapes unopened, she says.

But Hernandez-Davis’ trip to Saudi Arabia in 1998 proved worthwhile. Even though her visits with her daughter were restricted as to what she could say — nothing about the United States — they managed to speak freely in Spanish, a language that her husband did not understand, and she managed to slip Dria a telephone calling card. In February 1998, Hernandez-Davis’ visa ran out and she had to leave Saudi Arabia. “It was the hardest thing to leave her behind,” she says.

Dria tried to escape once by picking a lock on the door to the house but was caught by her father. Hernandez-Davis once attempted to sneak into Dria’s school during that 1998 trip in the dress of a Muslim mother to pick up her daughter but was caught and turned away by the principal. The failed escapes prompted a stiff warning from the father: If she tried again, he said, he would kill her. And she believed him.

But on April, 7, 1999, after nearly two years of captivity, Dria made yet another move with the help of one of her mother’s friends. Hernandez-Davis had met an old high-school friend who had married a sympathetic Saudi Arabian who agreed to help bring Dria home after listening to the emotional tapes of the girl begging for freedom. He found he could arrange an escape, but it would be costly. The rescuers wanted \$200,000 but settled for \$180,000. Hernandez-Davis lived on a schoolteacher’s salary, but Dria’s grandmother “sold her house after she had just finished paying for it.” They provided \$20,000 up front and the escape was on.

The plan, much of it directed by Dria, was dangerous — and illegal, according to the State Department, which says Americans cannot go into a foreign country and rescue children, regardless of U.S. custody orders, although no one ever has been charged with re-kidnapping their own child.

The plan had to be changed repeatedly after the father learned Dria was calling her mother and put a bug on the telephone. An English-speaking maid warned Dria about the bug, and the mother and daughter started speaking in code, as well as in Spanish. The father went through her belongings — throwing away anything resembling telephone numbers, as well as photographs of her mother.

On the day of the escape, Dria removed her books from her backpack and stuffed it with an extra set of clothes. Her father dropped her off at school and then drove three times around the building — almost as if he knew something was about to happen. When he left, Dria bolted from the school to a nearby car and rode off with two men.

The men were terrified, she says, because if they got caught “they faced possible execution.” They discussed dumping Dria in the middle of nowhere, dropping her off at the U.S. Embassy or even taking her back to school. But the brave girl stood up for herself. “This is not fair,” she says she told them. “If I am sent back I could be killed.”

It was then that another car approached carrying “two or three” others who were part of the escape plan. They insisted that everyone press on, Dria says. Supplied with a fake passport she crossed the bridge into Bahrain pretending to be a married adult.

Once in Bahrain it was her idea to call her father. “We stopped at a phone and I called my dad at work and told him I was at the American Embassy. I lied because I knew that would buy us some time. By the time he realized I wasn’t there, and he couldn’t get me back, I would be gone.”

They went immediately to the Bahrain airport. “I was scared because we waited for eleven hours,” she says. But once the plane was off the ground she felt relieved. Upon landing in London she found her grandmother and aunt patiently waiting — and then off to Miami to be reunited with her mother. “I was so happy. American life has so much more freedom and I can make my own decisions.”

Her first decision? She called her father in Saudi Arabia to say, “I’m home. Please don’t bother me. I’m happy,” and then hung up.

Meanwhile, the father has left word with Dria’s mother that he will fight the warrant and custody order. But as an FBI agent familiar with this case put it: “If he tries to kidnap Dria again he had better remember he is on our turf now.”

An Open Letter to the Future President of the United States

I am the youngest American child ever to escape from a kidnapper in Saudi Arabia. I may only be 13 years old, but I know there is something wrong in America. I read history books at school, and I watch TV. In the history books they talk about great heroes who stand up for what is right. On television they show people who say they care about children. But I don’t think anyone in government cared about me or any of the other kidnapped children. Mom says there are more than 2,000 American children being held in Saudi Arabia. I was one of them. I hope none of them were treated as badly as I was. I feel so bad when I think about kids like Alia, Aisha, Heidi and Nadia. I wonder if they get hurt like I did.

You see, they don’t have laws there to protect the kids like we do here. My mother tells me that the people in Washington passed a law to make it illegal to hurt a child for religious reasons. She said the law is called the “Freedom from Religious Persecution

Act.” Why doesn’t that law help us? My mom and I are Catholics. When my father kidnapped me he tried to make me become Muslim. When I refused, he beat me. For two years, every time he asked me what religion I wanted to be, and I said Catholic, my father hit me. I wasn’t allowed to eat at the table with the family unless I prayed like a Muslim, so many nights they ate while I watched. Mom says what they did was against the law. But no one cared.

On television they show movies where American children go running to the embassies. The Marines in their shiny suits let the children into the embassy and protect them. But when I wanted to run to the American Embassy in Saudi Arabia my mother said don’t. She told me she had talked to the people at the embassy in Saudi Arabia. Mom told them I had been kidnapped. She told them I was being abused. She told them that I was being religiously persecuted. She even took them a tape recording of me begging them to help me come home. Then she told me they had said that if I ran into the embassy they would turn me over to the Saudi police.

Television isn’t real. On TV, people care. But I found out that in real life, no one cared.

My grandma sold her house to help get money so I could escape. My father had told me that if I tried to escape he would kill me. But I would rather have died than live locked in a house being beaten all the time. And so, although I was scared, I did it. I escaped.

But now I want to help other kids. I want you to help bring home Nadia, Heidi, Alia and Aisha. Please call me and my mom so we can talk about how you can help the other kids.