

Plan A

How To Abduct Your Own Children

To abduct your own children from under the nose of your ex-wife on day one of a supposed pandemic, you will need the following:

1. A sturdy off-road vehicle full of gas, with extra fuel tanks prepared.
2. A well-planned and pre-rehearsed 'get out of dodge' road route.
3. A layered script of falsehoods to hide what's actually going on.
4. It's also super-handy if the abduction is on a 'sleepover' night.

This is what my dad, the author of his own pandemic survival guide, rather turgidly entitled *SURVIVE*, had worked out.

It all began at 05:03, on the morning of October 12th. I'm crap with numbers but Dad was obsessed with them. Like: you can survive for three days without water and three weeks without food. Like: two hundred and twenty-three trillion was the size of the debt bubble in dollars and I don't even want to get into that whole argument about the real number of humans who died during the last pandemic. And, like: the spread of virus is exponential and when you put it and the globalised economy together, you get a 'mutually reinforcing positive feedback loop', which means basically a 'species-threatening event'.

Dad used to be a journalist, and he taught me all this stuff. 'Stats can't be trusted,' he said, 'like the people who use them.' And that was the problem. No one believed him, or listened to his warnings – especially not Mother – and so that's what made him do the things he did at 05:03 on that first morning.

You could say he lured us or placed us under extreme psychological pressure, but he didn't hold us at gunpoint – that sort of came later, under Plan C. He definitely lied with the offer of a surprise, so we'd get up, dressed, out the door and into his crummy old SUV.

'Hey, Haley-Boo,' he whispered as he shook me awake, because being sentimental and waking us up at crazy hours is his schtick. 'Hurry, I've got a really cool surprise for you,' he said. You know, the kind of cutesy Santa Claus crap you'd say to a little kid, like Ben – who's my little brother, by the way.

So, me and Ben got up off Dad's 'blow-up camping mattresses' – which Mother had of course condemned as unsanitary living conditions. Ben was already jumping around Dad's crappy one-bedroom rental like a lardy space hopper, and I was doing my sleepy-best to cover my lady-bits with the duvet. I reached for my phoney-o, as it wasn't even light yet, but Dad was giving it, 'Don't text your mother! No Snapchat either, get dressed. Quick!'

Six a.m. would have been normal-ish for Dad, but five was weird. Ben was already half-dressed and giving it, 'Haley's on her phoney, Haley's on her phoney!' The beloved blimp was fond of getting me into trouble, especially on the subject of my 'anti-social phone habit' – which was the only one thing my deeply divorced parents ever agreed on, though, ironically, never face-to-face and only over their own phones.

Don't get me started. Seriously, 80% or 60% of all the kids at my school had divorced parents. I'd given up trying to mend it when I was ten. I'd put a total ban on ALL emotions by the time I was eleven. I was so over saying 'I'm so over it.' I'm pretty convinced their divorce made me the indecisive, choice-averse, two-faced, sarcastic, passive-aggressive, asthmatic, whining, overthinking, ADHD, Hamlet-ish brat everyone here in lockdown knows and loves.

Dad was dragging something out of the closet that looked like a cross between a small engine and a computer, and yelled, 'Right this minute, kids! We're leaving NOW!'

Ben gave me that look that said, c'mon Haley, we have to pretend to be excited for Dad's sake! Because we have this secret agreement, me and the Benster, to always pretend everything we did in the twenty-three hours we saw Dad every week was fun, so he wouldn't feel rejected.

It's Better To Be One Year Too Early Than One Day Too Late

When you abduct your children, you will need a 'grab bag' with essential survival items. It should contain the following:

Multi-packs of climbing socks, mountain bars, pepper spray, antibiotics, a rope, a first aid kit, water sterilisation tablets, a compass, flint or some other flame-making device, and a hunting knife which may or may not be for hunting.

Dad had three such 'grab bags' – one each for Ben, me and himself – but we didn't know that either. Neither did we know his old SUV and roof-rack was pre-stuffed with five plastic boxes containing eighty packets of dried peas, a Sundström pandemic respirator kit, twelve HEPA filters, three N95 gasmasks, three Mylar emergency blankets, three fake IDs, a bottle of chloroform, three four-litre gasoline tanks and an illegal weapon.

Just to show you how completely oblivious I was on that fateful five a.m., while Dad was trying to rush us out the door, the most important thing in my world at that juncture was my choice of footwear.

You see, Dad had got me these tomboy-ish mountain boots, and Mother had got me these girlie, sparkled hi-tops. The problem was how to choose one pair without making one parent feel I preferred the other. Dad was supposed to be dropping us back off at Mother's later that day, as per always, and if I turned up wearing the shoes he'd bought me, it would hurt her feelings. Mother and Dad had both been having this unsaid competition to try to out-do each other with commodities in the battle for my affections, since I was a little divorceling.

Dad was yelling, 'What's keeping you, Halester?'

So, on the day Dad abducted us, I was fussing over the epic choice between mountain boots or femme fashions. Mother or Dad? Choose (a) or (b). Who will I reject today? Can't I just make both sides happy? This is my basic problem – I just can't make any choice, ever. I hate it. Screw it. It's so unfair.

But Dad had that all figured out in advance and wasn't going to let me or Ben have any choices at all. Nada.

Dad grabbed Ben by the hand and literally pulled him out the door, yelling back, 'Haley, if you don't come now, I'm going to leave you here to starve.'

Starve? Wow! I grabbed the first sneakers to hand and ran after Dad and Ben, into his filthy, ten-years-out-of-date, family-sized off-road vehicle. It was still dark outside and as I hopped into my shoes I bemoaned the utter randomness of my non-primary custodial caregiver.

Do Not Tell Your Abductees About The Evidence Or The Plan

It's essential to map human pandemic behaviour data so you can time your escape perfectly. You don't want to get the early-warning signs wrong, after all. Or to be caught too late when a city is put in lockdown with police roadblocks. Don't waste any time explaining to your kids what you're doing. Stick to Plan A.

It was like, five-twenty or something and the streetlights were casting eerie shadows of Dad's speeding 4x4 on the empty roads. The streets started thinning out and trees popped up like adverts between the suburbby bungalows. All the traffic lights were on green, like they were sneaking us through on some secret mission. We passed a play park and the kiddie swings and plastic hippos were empty, everything spookily still. A fox dashed across the road before us and hid in a hedge. It was that surreal hour before people get up, when all the secret animals scour the streets and everything looks like an abandoned film set.

Dad was more wired and tired than usual that morning. We didn't know it then, but he'd been up all night on his computers mapping the spread of CHF-4, or what, he said, would later

become known as Virus X.

If Mister Deadbeat-Dad Ed Crowe is to be believed, he'd watched the sunrise over China, as the first cases of an unexplained viral disease that caused your lungs to basically turn into purée, were reported in Hong Kong. Here's what he later said he'd discovered:

1. Five hundred and four people had already died and the incubation period could be as long as a month.
2. Over the past four weeks, two hundred and eighty thousand people from all over the world had been in the infection-centre-city, and these happy tourists had all flown back to their home nations.
3. The info had been leaked late because the govt had hoped to contain it to stop precisely the viral and economic meltdown that we'd come so close to with the Covid pandemic five years ago.
4. The politicians were just so, so sorry, because they'd done it again, only worse, cos this virus killed little kids as well, and this time around they were deeply, deeply sorry that, yes, this virus had come from a laboratory.

Had I known Dad had been up all night gathering his scary data, I was under strict instructions to report his behaviour back to Mother. 'Now, Haley, if you hear your father going on about anything weird from any fake news channels,' she said, years back, 'you must tell me immediately.' But Ben and me had been blissfully asleep.

Dad, as he later claimed, watched the hysteria spread online through Asia and Australia, then Russia and India, as they each woke up to discover they too had people wheezing with unexplained symptoms. And so they struggled to shut down their borders to contain the contagion, before each economy went into panic and then into the aforementioned mutually reinforcing

positive feedback loop that, according to Dad, would lead to global war, what with it already being too late to stop the virus. That would end the lives of one billion people for starters, and basically return us to the medieval plague era.

But if he'd told us any of this, it's very doubtful that we'd have got into his 4x4, let alone stayed in it.

Anyhow, as we learned from the last pandemic, divorce and shared custody don't go at all well with lockdown, cos the parents have to decide who gets to keep the kids, and kids don't get to see their other parent anymore till the virus all-clear is given. Like 90% of the time divorced mums win this argument. And Mother did and that's why we didn't see Dad for a whole six months last time this pandemic shit hit the fan.

Actually, when you think about it, Dad was pretty lucky that the end of civilisation coincided with the October school-break, because it meant we had a double sleepover with him, for two nights in a row. If it'd been just one night, like usual, then the end of civilisation would have started on the wrong day and he'd have had to come and snatch us from Mother's house. She'd have resisted and accused him of having a paranoid delusion so he'd have had to use a gun or something, and that would've been pretty embarrassing.

Secretly Prepare Your Children For Years In Advance

To avoid arousing suspicion, and so that you don't terrify your kids when you abduct them, prepare your kids with weird and secret adventures over many years.

OK, you'd think that being sped out of the city at five thirty a.m., by a father who looks like what Kurt Cobain would have looked like if he'd joined the Marines, would set off alarm bells. Not with us. Dad had been prepping me and Ben for years, only we hadn't realised it.

Dad always took us on little outings called 'vaventures'. The word came from a cute mispronunciation Ben made when he

was three, based on va-va-voom or something. Vaventures usually meant something ‘exciting’ Dad was sneaking into the schedule before he had to drive us back to Mother’s.

Vaventures from the past included:

1. Dad turning off all the power in his flat and us having eat ‘blackout breakfast’ at four a.m. with candles.
2. A trip to the shingle beach to catch so-called ‘edible molluscs’.
3. A trip to the nearest snow-covered hill forest to hack down branches to make a bivouac – and all before breakfast.
4. One time he even dragged us out to hunt for copper wires from the rubble remains of a freshly demolished tower block, and we had to sneak past the DANGER – DO NOT ENTER signs.

Ben, of course, thought all this was awesome, and I whined and moaned but gave up asking Dad why, why, why because he always said the same thing: ‘I know you’re kicking and screaming now, but in the end you’ll thank me!’

Dad asked us to keep these vaventures secret from Mother. ‘Most people get scared by the truth,’ he said, ‘and your mother has a particular aversion to it.’ And I, of course, told him that asking kids to keep secrets from their primary custodial caregiver is a form of psychological abuse. He patted my head for being ‘older than my years’, which meant, don’t be such a smart-ass, Haley. The upshot was that Mother never knew about Dad’s secret vaventures and if she had, she would’ve most likely legally ended the ‘unsupervised visits from your father’ malarkey.

They had one of those really nasty divorces. I mean, I used to get these flashbacks to them screaming at each other. He’d done a pretty amazing job actually of getting Mother to trust him again, through doing years of therapy, or at least that’s what we’d thought.

We were on this totally empty road winding out of the city. We didn’t know it but Dad had rehearsed and timed his ‘city escape

route' at least twenty times – as he instructs all preppers to do in his manual – so that on the day of our abduction he could drive at speed, pre-aware of any possible blockages, without encountering excessive panic-traffic or police.

Dad sped past the big mall near the edge of the burbs. Usually when we drove past such things, he would deliver one of his borderline rants. Classics like: 'The masses just assume there'll be food on the shelves, fuel in the pumps, money in the banks. The masses have been taught to love their servitude, and they have no idea how this house of cards could fall.' One time he even yelled out his window at these random passing shoppers: 'Wake up, Sheeple!' Yeah, he was always telling Ben and me to 'wake up' and be aware of the world.

'Sheeple' means people who are like sheep, FYI.

But that morning he was spookily silent, and he said, 'Shh, the radio!' The news said, '...reports of deaths have yet to be confirmed ... have broken off diplomatic relations over rumours of a cover-up, meanwhile the World Health Organization...' and Dad turned it down low, smiled to himself and hummed along to a tune in only his head.

In retrospect, this was a massive telltale sign, but I was, as always, giving less than zero fucks, having what Dad's survivalist manual calls 'no contextual awareness'.

Wait, you still don't really know about my dad.

OK, Dad must've been at least kind of normal when he was married to Mother, but when he started living alone he became like the mad inventor dad in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. He ran his SUV on this homemade diesel fuel that was one-part ammonia and nine parts recycled frying fat and urine, or something. He had these huge industrial coffee filters in his kitchen, to drain out all the bits of batter and onion rings. This was essential because the 'fuel' came from all the cafes we used to drive round late at night – after they closed. It wasn't stealing, Dad told us, but 'creative recycling.' 'One man's crap is another man's gold!' he said.

One time Mother smelled fish and chips on me and Ben and accused Dad of feeding us junk food, and I had to make Ben promise never to tell her the truth because Mother could use Dad's illegal manufacturing of potentially explosive materials as leverage to put a restraining order on him. I told Ben it wasn't really lying because sometimes you had to protect people you love from the truth. Which is basically what we all do to Ben, 24/7.

I guess Dad had normalised his weirdness to us, so, for example, when my foot hit the disassembled crossbow under Ben's car seat that morning as we sped out of civilisation, I just went, 'Yup, that's just Dad being Dad again!'

I checked the speedo and we were doing five miles over the speed limit, just like normal. We passed the '60s housing estates with boarded-up windows and all the other ruined places on the outskirts Dad had taken us to teach us his philosophy of life. We sailed right past, accelerating obliviously into Dad's Abduction Plan A. He was later forced to use Plan B, Plan C and even Plan G, but we had no idea such things even existed at that particular junction or juncture, or whatever.

Confiscate The Phones Of Your Abductees Through Some Simple Ruse

Taking the phones from your abductees is essential, as one simple text message can be enough to scupper your entire plan. Teenagers and tweenagers very rarely part from their phones for more than a few minutes so you will need well-planned strategies to nab those telecommunication devices.

Ben asked Dad where the fabulous vaventure was going to be, and I reminded Dad that we had to be back at Mother's at twelve, due to me meeting up with Shanna, who was my new bestie.

You see, I'd fallen out with Beth, Stace, Lana, Scoobs and Eva, on account of them private group-chatting without me because they thought I'm weird cos of my asthma and ADHD, or some shit. So I was supposed to go to the mall with Shanna for the sale

in Blitz. But that was just an alibi, cos really we wanted to spy on Jason in Vodafone – he'd recently dumped me, telling me he was gay, but he still gave me the major moists.

These were my plans for that day.

I waited for the right moment to sneak out my phone, half listening as the radio said that someone who was head of something had become suddenly ill. My phone screen had a 7% power warning.

'Damn it, Dad, you total doofus!' I shouted. 'You promised you'd charge it for me last night!'

'Sorry, Hale-Bopp. But hey, who needs a phone when you can speak to real humanoids, huh? Try it sometime.' Dad called me Hale-Bopp sometimes after some goofy comet that comes round every seventy years. Kind of ironic, given that we only saw him one night a week.

Anyway, so Dad had actually drained our phone batteries deliberately in the night, then topped them up by one or two per cent to hide his subterfuge.

I mumbled that he was as bad as Mother and rummaged in the glove box for his charger. Weirdly enough, there was a brand new pack of my asthma inhalers in there, but I gave zero fucks and thought only about getting back online. 'Where's your cable for the cigarette lighter charger thingy, Dad?' I moaned at him. 'It's not here! Why can't you have a proper phone charging socket like every other human being!'

He put his hand out. 'Give it to me.'

I refused.

'OK, if you hand it over, I promise I'll charge it for you,' he said. 'Why don't we see how long you can live without it, anyway? See it as a character-building exercise, Haley. I'll bet you can't go half an hour without it. Prove me wrong.'

So, I handed my phoney over with a sigh. 'You'll really charge it?'

'Sure, when we get to our destination,' he added, with a grin, and he switched off my phone and set it on the dash, where I couldn't reach it.

‘Heinous,’ I muttered, ‘abhorrent, grievous, monstrous!’

Dad accelerated and ignored my moaning for a whole five minutes, so I said: ‘Er, are we just going to drive around for miles and miles and then turn round and go back to Mother’s? Because, sorry, that’s not much of a vaventure. Plus, we should be watching the time because I seriously have to be back at twelve to meet Shanna.’

I thought I’d better text Mother, just to warn her that things had gone awry. I asked Dad for the phone again, but he said, ‘Haley, you’re not calling your mother, it’s way too early, and your phone’s dead anyway. I told you, I’ll charge it when we get there. Trust me for once, would you?’

We passed a petrol station. It was empty and I recalled that time, during the last pandemic, when Dad had seen ten cars in a line waiting for gas and he’d said, ‘You see that, in three hours’ time they’ll be paying a hundred for a gallon. They’ll be queuing for miles. When that ring road gets blocked it’ll turn into a stranglehold – no one’ll get in or out. The biggest nose-to-tail in history, the last one.’

Of course he was wrong, and things like this were why Mother called Dad ‘paranoid obsessive.’ There was something else about a personality disorder, but he’d done a shit ton of therapy and had convinced Mother he was now more-or-less fine.

After the petrol station we’d officially ‘left the county.’ But I still didn’t suspect anything was up – Dad, with his many vaventures over the years, had trained us to not be alarmed when he deviated from the map.

He’d also managed to keep it secret that he’d been preparing for this day for the last five years since the last pandemic. His motto, we later found out, was: ‘It’s better to be one year too early than one day too late.’ Or maybe it was ‘hour.’ In the years when we hardly saw Dad at all, he had been a very busy chap indeed, and all that money he’d not given Mother in child support payments... well, it had gone to something much bigger.

Have A Fake Narrative Prepared For Your Abductees To Buy More Time

Vague promises of rewards buy time, and give greedy teenagers and kids motivation while also creating disorientation.

We passed the sign that said *NORTH* and Dad accelerated way past legal speed and I decided it was game over. ‘Very amusing, Dad, but actually, I’m getting too old for this. To be perfectly honest I’d rather you just took us back to Mother. Like, now, OK, thank you very much, *danke, merci beaucoup*.’

He raised an eyebrow and squinted into the rear-view mirror, checking out Ben, who was dozing in the back, cute sibling-style, his little spherical face smooshed against the glass. I say Ben is my *little* brother – he’d just turned six a month before this began – but he weighs about the same as a nine-year-old on account of his eating disorder. Mother blamed Ben’s egregious eating on the divorce and Dad blamed it on Mother’s ‘unsustainable consumerist lifestyle’. Classic divorce shit.

Anyway, as we headed into the deeply sheep-filled countryside, I asked the question that had started growing on me over the last few miles.

‘Dad,’ I said, ‘you wouldn’t happen to be, you know, abducting us, would ya?’ I said it as a kind of joke so as not to offend him. ‘Just checking, cos if you are, I might have to make a few calls.’

He laughed. But not like an evil cackle. More like he’d been elsewhere and just tuned back in. He checked out the snoozing Benster again, and with lowered voice he said, ‘Haley, can you keep a secret?’

And I thought, oh crap, he really is abducting us, for real!

But this was him cueing up his fake narrative. Note: an effective fake narrative should contain an element of truth in it, so as to not be out-of-the-blue.

‘What if I told you,’ he said, ‘that I just made a lot of money, Haley?’

This was pretty improbable. Dad never had any cash and I knew

that he'd recently stopped paying his child support payments, and Mother was officially 'concerned', alluding to his 'mental health issues' and his 'need to just buckle down and get a proper job'.

'Well, how much money we talking?' I asked, thinking it's most likely a measly hundred or something.

Then he says, 'Well, I finally sold an invention.'

And I'm like, 'What? You mean like your bike-powered TV?' Poor old doofus Dad had actually made one such object, though he told us not to tell Mother.

He shook his head. 'Guess again, Hale Storm!'

So, then I'm staring at the random cows speeding by and saying, 'What? The wind-up hairdryer?' and he's laughing but quietly so as not to wake Ben and he says, 'Nope, this one actually works,' and so, I said, 'OK, just frickin tell me!' and he says, 'Nope, guess again,' so I say, 'The water-powered fan?'

'Nope.'

And I'm getting giggly because it's like a kiddie's guessing game. 'OK! The metal glove thingy with the screwdriver fingers? The newspaper sandals? The solar-powered fridge?'

'Nope, nope, nope.'

Now when I say Dad 'invented' these freaky things, I mean they were mostly just held together with duct tape and not likely to become an all-in-one solution to the problems of modern living anytime soon. And I stared at the road thinking of his vast sad legacy of failure, and he's doing a steady seventy and the car is rattling and there's a few cars all heading in the opposite direction but no one else going north.

And this gave me the melancholies, thinking of what a forever hopeful fool my dad truly was and how maybe Mother was right about him being a loser-ish dead-beat. Such insights can make a girl feel a bit lonely in life.

So, I just said, 'OK, Dad, I give up, you win!'

After a short silence his voice went serious and he said, 'OK, we're going north to visit the folk who bought my new invention.'

That's my surprise. They live a hundred miles away and I'm going to do some final adjustments and, all being well, they're going to pay me today.'

For real? I thought.

But then he said, 'Then I'll pay your mum all the child support I owe her plus some extra. Then who knows, maybe she'll let me see more of you.'

That kind of killed me. Because Dad'll never get it that he could give her the nine months of over-dues plus a million bucks but Mother would always find a way to limit our exposure to him. So I said, 'Sure, Dad, that'd be cool. I mean, to see more of you.'

But then curiosity got the better of me, because I'm shallow and materialistic, like Mother says, and so I asked, 'So, how much are these simple country-folk paying you for your va-va-vention, anyhow?'

'Well, this one is worth twenty grand,' he said, 'and there's ten more friends of theirs interested in buying the same thing. So that's...'

At this point I musurviast have choked because I'd done the mental math and I coughed out, 'A quarter of a million! For real?'

Make a Fake Promise of Expensive Consumer Goods as a Reward

There is an egregious trick that psychologists call 'leading with the carrot'. It is all about animals but it works very well on teenagers too.

All I could think was, Dad could be rich, Dad could be rich! And this was dumfounding and legit hopeful. Then he was on about how he could put a little cash my way, and me being pathetically addicted to my phone (as he says everyone in my generation is), he said he could even buy me a new one.

And me, being pre-wired for the merest possibility of such an offer from either competing parent, spat out, 'Awesome, Dad. Could you buy me a Samsung G80 X Phone Extra-Lite with two

terabytes and three times optical zoom and four gigs of RAM?’

Dad laughed and shook his head as he took a turn-off onto a smaller road.

So I said, ‘Pretty please,’ doing the cutesies, ‘please, please, Dad, cos if I had an X-Phone I could send you proper long vids, and have decent video streaming for our wonderful chats and I could buy that app so Mother could track my phone and then she’d stop getting on my case about where I am all the frickin time, and I could even take the subway or the bus over to yours and have a bit more freedom and not have to beg her for Ubers home to which she always says no, anyway. Please, the X-Phone’s on special offer and it only costs three hundred and fifty and I don’t just want one because my friends have one, and it’s the newest and coolest and if I have it I promise I’ll spend less time on Snapchat.’

And he was still laughing and shaking his head. Then he put his hand out and said, ‘Deal.’ And we shook.

‘You’ll get me an X-Phone G80? For real?’

He nodded and said, ‘You drive a hard bargain, Hale-Bopp.’

Dad didn’t actually have to buy me it, because just the threat of him saying he was going to would trigger the competitive ‘buy first’ reflex in Mother. It’s not like money can buy you love, but in the absence of love, new technology is a pretty good substitute. Actually, it would be a good time right now to ponder how most of the horrific things that were about to happen to Ben and me and Mother might never have been triggered if I hadn’t betrayed her for the illusory promise of a new smartphone.

Then Dad said, ‘But let’s just get to our destination first and make sure this invention of mine actually works before getting our hopes up too high. OK?’

‘Deal, Dad!’

And then, for some reason, staring out at the romantic clouds and hills, I said something corny like, ‘Really proud of you.’ And he took my hand and squeezed it and then I got some emotions because of his strong, wrinkly, old-man hand on mine and he said,

'Proud of you too, Haley boo.' Which is so corny, but fuck you, he's my dad and I was legit lumping it in the throat.

We chewed up the country miles, and by his stroke of evil genius my deceptive dad then had me actually enjoying the trip, looking forward to arriving at this wherever hillbilly place. I even said to him that it would be cool if we were a bit late for Mother, and I thought, that'll teach her for restricting ban my phone usage last month after the me-sending-a-pic-of-my-boobs-to-Jason-to-test-if-he-was-really-gay incident. And to be honest, Dad never stood up to Mother, so him defying her schedules for once meant he had some guts. And maybe he'd even end up in a custody battle and renegotiate better terms and that would mean he really cared.

It didn't cross my mind for a second that every single thing Dad had said that morning might be lies, and that the new phone he was promising me would not even operate in the future world he believed would soon be upon us. Because, the way he saw it, within three or four weeks smartphones would lie scattered in the streets beside tear gas canisters, spent plastic bullets, credit cards, oxygen masks and dead bodies. But he didn't tell me that. Not until we'd put another two hours, a wall and some razor wire between us and Mother.

Make Your Kids Question the Safety of The Home They Want To Return To

Just in case Dad's abduction Plan A didn't work, he had back-up plans from Plan B all the way up to Plan G. Dad had actually considered these options for Ben and me:

1. Drug your abductees so they are asleep for the duration of the abduction.
2. Tie them up. Don't forget to gag them so the screams and pleas won't disturb you when you are driving.
3. Threaten your abductees into compliance with a gun or other lethal weapon that can be used at close range i.e.

within a speeding vehicle.

4. Any combination of 1, 2 & 3. Plus Strategy X.

Dad drove us on through ever more rugged, windy roads. We'd been in the car for more than two hours and boredom was killing Ben and me. Dad once said the problem with young people was they mistakenly thought that boredom was a thing other people gave them. Like a virus.

We sped through picture-perfect landscape moments that would have got hundreds of likes. We saw a hovering hawk and like a million sheep. Ben seemed to be incanting a Buddhist-type mantra: 'Will we get there soon?' 'Can we go back to Mum's?' 'What time is it?' 'Are we there?'

Dad turned to me. 'Sorry, kids. Not much longer now.'

Then it was single-track roads, off-the-map roads, and going fast like he knew these tracks super well, which was weird because we were two hundred miles from home. I started doing that very-Mother-thing of compiling lists of complaints against him.

Dad's 4x4 hit a pothole and I bashed my nose against the window – and this was his fault.

Ben was snoring in the back because this is what obese kids with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder do, apparently – and this was Dad's fault.

The vehicle was super cold and the heating didn't work – Dad's fault.

It also stank of cooking fat and now so did we – Dad's fault.

He was driving dangerously fast down a dirt track and if we crashed – Dad's fault.

At first there were cottages and farms, then only the abandoned ones from millions of years ago. The mountains loomed dark and heavy over us. I've never trusted mountains – they're like screen-savers that actually kill people. And this was Dad's fault, too.

We were going to be so late for Mother, and I was about to raise this again when Dad suddenly said, 'It's good that your mum gets

some personal time, too.'

And I was like, 'Woah, random! What in the actual hell do you mean?'

'Well, maybe your mum needs a bit of grown-up time once in a while. I'm glad she's moving on.'

Now this was really freaky. Because moving on could only mean, like, shagging some other adult, and the absolute thought of micro-managing middle-managerial Mother actually even looking at another male, let alone the horrific vision of her with make-up on, and like flirting, like out in a pub, like on an actual date, or even touching another man, let alone bouncing about on his love pole... Anyway, my bile rose and I said, 'What do you frickin mean, Dad? Call a spade a spade, spill the beans, are you saying Mother is like' – and I leaned in and whispered in case Ben woke up – 'do you mean she's, like, dating?'

'Oh,' he said, 'didn't you know? Oh, sorry.'

Oh my actual God. 'What?!' I shouted. 'You're saying Mother is bonking, like, a man? Not that I'm saying she's bisexual, but... for God sake, Dad!'

'Well,' he said, reminding me not to wake Ben, 'I don't know if it's someone specific, or if she's seeing...' Then he paused. 'What did you think she was doing all these Saturday nights when you stay at mine? Come on, Haley, you're an adult now.'

'I just puked in my actual mouth,' I said, because I had. A bit.

'But keep it hush from your brother,' he said. 'Anyway, I'm glad for her, don't you think it's good your mum's having some fun?'

Jesus. Mountains were passing by my furious eye and I was getting flashes of Mother dearest sipping wine and smiling at this man who was stroking her thigh, and I was saying, Jesus, Jesus. And maybe I even said, 'What, in your actual bed?' This meaning the very large marital bed which Mother never got rid of after the divorce. And maybe I was secretly holding onto the childish fantasy that Mother and Dad's grand pash would one day be re-kindled. But the thought of some male stranger in this bed she used

to share with Dad – when she wouldn't even let Dad get past the front door – and maybe this male stranger was even naked and totally tumescent and he's gazing at a picture of me and Ben in the bedroom and saying, 'Your kids look so cute,' as Mother prepares his pink love pole. And I literally mouth-barfed cos this was not just a betrayal of Dad, but a violation of me and Ben and our safe space and everything.

Of course, this was a very clever part of Dad's PLAN A, and the evidence is in his book under 'Delay and Disorientation Strategies.'

There was no boyfriend, no date. It was most likely Mother had actually spent all night before updating her yearly planner and her calorie counter app for Ben's diet, and trawling the net for ever newer gluten-free solutions to the problems of midlife loneliness.

But I was livid and caught up in his lie and so I said to Dad, 'Well, fuck Mother then. Like, not literally, but fuck it, I don't want to go back home today!'

And with that, Dad bought another hundred miles and my total commitment to getting as far away from my traitorous principal caregiver as possible.

But like I say, what was actually happening back home, I found out later, was Mother was panicking as the time for our drop-off came and went. She sent me and Ben dozens of messages, and after calling us and Dad and getting no reply ten times, she was frantic and heading off to a fake destination that Dad had sent her to.

You see, evil clever Dad, under PLAN A section five, had actually sent Mother a cunningly timed auto-send text message that said something like, *Sorry, traffic bad, running late. Meet you at Nando's in the shopping mall at 1:00 p.m.*

And Mother was flipping because Dad was never ever allowed to lay down the schedule. And she was actually getting in her car, right then, two hundred miles away, and on her phone, most likely to Tami, her best-bitchin-bud, and telling her, 'How dare he change my schedules like this?' and asking, 'Has Debra received

any messages from Haley this morning?’ Or other such freaked-out questions to the rest of the midlife, single-mum, friend-group, panic-phone-call circuit.

But, like I say, I was oblivious and even hating her at this juncture. I gazed out at the trees speeding past and back at Dad as we chewed up the mountainous miles, and I got a lump in my throat as I thought, what a brilliant human he is, how could Mother ever have thrown him out?

And Dad told me another lie then. He said, ‘I sent your mum a message already saying I’d have you back at hers for five p.m. She’s totally OK with it. Chill.’

Then the wheels were skidding and spraying millions of dirt up the side windows and his knuckles were white from gripping the steering wheel. He yelled, ‘Hold on, kids!’ and steered us headlong into an actual river. My head hit the roof and Ben woke up and was laughing. ‘Wow, Dad, total moon landing! Do it again!’ Steam roared from the bonnet as we practically turned into a boat.

‘You fat phoney freak, do you really think this is fun?’ I yelled at Ben. ‘Do you have any remote idea what’s actually going on in the world?’ I recoiled, as water sprayed up on either side of us, fearing we might actually drown.

Ben sniffed and said, ‘Dad, Haley called me fat.’

‘Apologise to your brother!’

I mumbled an apology, actually feeling pretty out of line because Ben has, according to my online diagnosis, bulimia nervosa, but without the vomiting.

My head bashed the ceiling as the 4x4 hit the other side of the river.

‘Ow, that hurt!’

‘Wooh!’ yelled Ben. ‘Do it again, Dad. Again!’

The radio was mere fuzz as we headed deeper into the mountains, literally driving through a field and fifty sheep scattering before us in bird-like patterns. And I probably deserved the headache I was getting. Then some radio news report crackled, saying

‘...demanding an explanation, while government officials claim this is fake news deliberately created to upset the markets.’ And some boring politician was saying something about scaremongering and bio warfare and not to panic, this is all under control, like this is going to be nothing. Dad just turned it off. His eyes were miles away and a smile grew on his lips, so I asked, ‘You OK, Pops?’

And his silence became ominous, interrupted only by machine-gunfire from Ben’s vexatious computer game.

‘Dad, why are you grinning like that?’

‘We were right.’ He beamed.

‘We’ – who the hell was ‘we’?

Trick Your Abductees Into Completing The Final Steps Of Their Own Abduction

Rather than using force to get your abductees over the threshold into captivity, it is best to trick them into entering of their own accord.

The SUV stopped with a jolt in the middle of this marshland. Before us was a high fence of shiny metal, like the ones for keeping deer out or in, but the curly spiky wires round its top made it look military. Dad got out with a big bunch of keys, leaving the motor running. The fence ran as far as I could see before vanishing into a mist of landscape nothingness. For a second I might have thought, wait, why does my dad have a set of keys to a top-secret military-looking enclosure?

Dad opened the big-locked gate and I was staring at him through the muddy windscreen, in a kind of daze with a big ‘what-the-fuck?’ forming.

This was the moment when Dad played his absolute masterstroke.

You see, another secret that Dad asked me not to reveal to my principal caregiver, aka Mother, was the super-covert driving lessons he’d been giving me since I was ten, usually in the back roads

of some industrial estate.

So Dad came back to the car, smiled and said, 'Jump in the hot seat and bring her through, Hales.' And all my questions suddenly became a big yeah-yeah-yeah and I jumped straight into mirror-signal-manoevre mode as I shunted my aforementioned scrawny ass over and literally got into the driver's seat.

There came a sound like a small nuclear explosion from Ben's accursed computer game and he said, 'Bum! Why am I always dead?' I revved up the engine and yelled, 'Hurry up, Dad, get back in, so I can put my foot down!' Dad jumped in and shouted, 'She's all yours, I souped her up last week. Slow now on the clutch, and wait for the bite.'

We lurched forward and the first thing we passed, as I took her through the huge gates, looked like a burned-out-car from some Middle East war, but I gave zero fucks. Alarm bells be-damned. Nope, I was giving it, first into second, don't over-rev, listen to the engine and hear what it wants.

So yeah, the dirt track and potholes had me plenty occupied, and so I didn't notice a stack of morbidly abandoned refrigerators sitting in ditches, oddly different from the usual junk lazy farmers have strewn around their property.

Nope, I was only thinking, rev it up, hold her steady, then up into third.

I didn't even see the sewage pipes sticking out of stony holes that could only imply some kind of bunker beneath. Or the big, burned hole in the marshland that could only have been the blast crater from a DIY explosive device.

Nope, I was doing forty, and the dirt track was long and the SUV shuddered and felt good and Dad was winking at me. 'That's my girl!'

And here's the irony: I remember thinking, wow, it feels really frickin great to BE IN CONTROL! Which kills me, given that I was riding me and my bro, at speed, into our own prison.

To be honest, I should have clicked what was going on a whole

day and a half before, cos when we'd first got to Dad's flat, he made us wash our hands with bleach and soap and then gargle and he scrubbed the soles of our shoes with bleach too cos, he said, a cat had pissed outside his door or something. Plus, he did sort of quiz Ben and me about whether any of our school pals had been abroad recently and he got Ben and me to spit in a jar, one each - but this hadn't set off any alarm bells. Nope. I didn't think 'is Dad testing for us some kind of contamination?' cos it just seemed like Dad's usual eccentric paranoia.

And so, blissfully-unaware-me drove past abandoned rubbish sacks, with crows picking at the innards, and past vertical poles carrying a single swooping electrical cable that I didn't realise was our only connection to the outside world. We passed five old TVs lying in the mud, their screens smashed with little holes and then there was a row of three target-practice soldiers, with their heads and hearts punctured so many times they could only have been shot by automatic weapons. But I saw none of these things that I would, very soon, come to know and loathe as the only markers in the one-kilometre square of my imprisonment. Hell no, little old me was oblivious and elated, as I accelerated down the dirt track, kicking up movie-style dust behind us with Ben yelling, 'Weeeehoooo!' and Dad grinning over at me. Like one of those classic Facebook family montage moments that gets auto-set to music by the app, even when you didn't ask it to.

How to Trap Kids in a Safe House

Keep Up The Pretence Of Civility As Your Abductees Acclimatise

The use of façades is very important. Conceal what is really inside with a calculated exterior. N.B. this works for buildings and humans.

It looked like an ancient, abandoned farmhouse surrounded by an old ivy-covered stone wall. It was grey-black, mildewed and decayed-looking against the grey sky, all desolate and *Wuthering Heights*-like. Weird, in other words.

Dad must have sensed my disappointment, as he told me, 'Just wait,' and he jumped out the passenger door. As if on cue, the ancient iron entrance-to-the-farm gate creaked open and, even weirder, there was this woman with long red hair grinning at us, holding this big plastic bucket. Now, I'm the last person to want to reduce a woman to her physical attributes, but let's call her homely, big-boned, perhaps hefty, food-loving or huge-knocked. And hippie-ish too, with that kind of red-cheeked, no make-uped, muddy-handed, nature-loving, probably-smelly energy that always freaks me out. Weirder still was this major déjà-vu feeling – like I totally knew Dad was about to say, 'Hey, kids, this is Meg,' as I steered inside and Dad locked the huge black iron gate behind us.

The farmhouse had a bit of the roof caved in and some broken windows, like it had been utterly deserted for fifty years. I was pretty disappointed that this was our surprise vaventure actually, plus it had started pissing with rain.

I slowed down, just right, put the handbrake on, and I saw Dad go over to this Meg person and I couldn't hear them properly through the windscreen but she asked him something weird

like ‘all clear?’ and he nodded. Then out of the blue she hugged him and handed him her bucket and she ran over and was literally yanking my door open. She had this big, over-eager smile, like in a horror film where the baddie grins and says, ‘We’ve been expecting you.’ And her totally bra-less boobs were bouncing under her outstretched arms and she said, ‘Here they are at last! The little rascals! Hi Ben, Hi Haley.’ And she’s wearing this weird mixture of, like, a tie-dye ’80s T-shirt and camouflage pants along with this weird apron with bunnies on it. She had the kind of gnarly hair vegans call ‘self-washing’.

Freaky. And there were hugs. Ben always laps that shit up, probably because Mother dearest had to do online classes in expressing intimacy. I stood there dreading contact with this woman’s pendulous possessions and her stained apron, and I guess I must have muttered, ‘Is that blood?’ to her. Which, given that she was supposed to be Dad’s client and was supposed to buy his invention, was kind of rude of me.

‘Oh that – just a bit of jam,’ she said, with gusto. ‘I bet you’re both starving, I made a chocolate sponge cake, special.’

Ben erupted with excessive ‘Yippees!’ and I clocked that full-on calorific Ben-bribery was now occurring. Total strangers offering chocolate cake with a smile was way up there with the Child Catcher from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. And it was strange: how did she know about coercing-Ben-with-foodstuffs and know our names? So, I had to cut things off.

‘Ben can’t eat chocolate anymore because of his condition,’ I said to the Meg woman and to Dad, who was already unloading the car.

You see, Mother had asked me to secretly police Dad to see if he was force-feeding Ben treats behind her back. Her endless refrain was, ‘I don’t think he realises how much damage he’s doing to his son’s liver.’ Seriously, me and the spheroid sibling had this super strict health diet that Mother enforced. Sometimes, I thought she put her bans on random foodstuffs, just so she could blame Dad

for making a mistake. ‘He fed you flour?!’ It was like we were test experiments that Mother sent out into the world to gather incriminating evidence against Dad. Like guinea pig double-agents.

‘Well, your mother’s not here, and chocolate is actually a really good relaxant and anti-oxidant,’ Dad announced, as he set down the big bucket thing that stank majorly of bleach and opened the boot and started unpacking. ‘And she’s not right about everything. Live a little, it might be the last chocolate cake we’ll ever see.’

That was pretty psychotic but not entirely out of his given repertoire.

‘Think about it, kids, the cocoa beans are from Brazil,’ Dad said, as he unloaded four boxes, going off on one of his classic rants. ‘78% of everything we eat comes in on foreign container ships. This nation can’t feed itself. Everyone’s forgotten how. We ship strawberries in from Chile, anchovies from Japan. We waste ten calories of hydrocarbon energy just shipping one calorie of food round the globe! It’s insanity. Every supermarket has only enough food for two days. How many meals are we away from anarchy, kids?’

‘Three!’ Ben yelled. Then added, ‘Can I have some cake now?’

Dad laughed and winked over at the Meg woman, ‘How much would you trade me for a bit of Meg’s cake, Ben? Your Xbox? How about a can of diesel? How about I trade you this world-class four-wheel-drive for a slice of that chocolate cake?’

‘No way!’ Ben laughed. He always made a big show of guffawing at Dad’s jokes even when they weren’t funny. And the Meg woman was laughing too and weirdly touching Ben’s shoulders, like she wanted to pick him up or something.

Dad carried the boxes towards the grubby old farmhouse and he called back, ‘Why don’t we let your sister decide if you can have some cake?’

Oh, great, put it all on me!

Ben was yanking at my hand then, as if to say, please, please, please? I won’t tell Mother, if you don’t.

Then, as if Meg’s boobs were gravitationally coupled with all

small children in the universe, she bent forward to Ben's height and said, 'How would you like to meet the rabbits first?'

And Ben shouted, 'Rabbits! Yay! Rabbits!'

And how did she know that Ben's ADHD means if you get him excited about the next thing he totally forgets what was basically his reason to live like thirty seconds ago? And Meg was giving it, 'Aren't you the clever one!' and literally taking Ben's hand and leading him away. This triggered my sibling-safety instinct, so I said, 'Ben's not supposed to hold hands with strangers, either.'

Then the weirdest alarm bell of all was Meg saying, 'Auntie Meg's not a stranger, is she, son?'

Auntie? Woah, hold it, horsey! So, I flashed detective-style through my mental holiday-snaps, and there had been some grown-ups one time in a forest, back when I was like nine or ten. And if I'd met Meg in the past, did that mean...? I shuddered: seriously, is this woman Dad's mistress? Then a totally vile flash came to me of Dad mounting those mountainous mammories, because every single kid in my generation has been exposed to way too much online porn, but that's a-whole-nother story.

Meg tickled Ben and he let her lead him through the rain and mud towards this ancient doorway with no door, literally hand in hand.

'Why don't you join in for once, Haley?' Dad said. 'Go check out the bunnies with your little brother while I unpack, then we can eat.'

And in his face I saw no sign of deception, because I'm clearly shit at reading faces. I just sort of stared him down. 'Auntie?'

'Figure of speech,' was all he replied. He undid the ropes on the tarp on top of the 4x4 and took down a sort of bit of an engine and a plastic box full of cans from the roof, but all I'm thinking is, shit, maybe Mother and Dad are literally both having GFs and BFs and FBs.

Word of advice: never, ever, ever put the words 'Fuck Buddy' and one of your parents into the same headspace.

‘Can I have my phone now, please?’ I asked, cos when things get distressing, that’s always the best solution.

And Dad took it from his pocket and tossed it to me, with a smile. ‘Catch.’

I checked it and it was now totally dead.

Dad said, ‘Calm down, all mod cons here, I’m sure we can find a charger. Why don’t you ask Meg?’

I stared at him, and he said, ‘Or you can have an hour without the net, Haley-Boo, open your eyes to the beauty of nature, stretch your legs.’ And to totally wind me up, he added, ‘Let Auntie Meg show you around.’

A barn. That was what it was called, this thing Meg had taken Ben by the hand into – or that’s what I thought, in my naïveté. I looked round and saw that all the disappointing tumbledown crap on the outside had been a cleverly constructed smokescreen. To my shame, I confess, and it was only then that I began to develop some kind of, what Dad calls, ‘contextual awareness’.

Behind the ruined wall was a high gleaming silver fence of what I would agonizingly learn shortly was razor wire. On the interior wall was a big old satellite dish and three gleaming solar panels and there were two mud-spattered quad bikes. There were three mini-windmills lying on the ground, and the propellers of a huge one were half concealed beneath some camouflage material.

I glimpsed the heel of a dirty army boot vanish round an old wall corner and it gave me the shudders. Who? What? How many others? Random weirdnesses were overwhelming me, so I spat out my big question, ‘Dad what IS this place?’

He clocked that I wasn’t going to let him off without a proper explanation. . He set down his part of an engine - that I would later learn was designed to suck oxygen into an otherwise airtight bunker - and said, ‘Come on, let me show you.’ Then he threw the big bucket of bleachy water all over his car, which was weirder still, and led me onwards.

Do Not Tie Up, Drug Or Lock Up Your Abductees...Yet

If you show your abductees parts of the self-sustaining living environment, they will be less traumatised than if you bundle them without explanation into the bunker, with the threat of lethal force.

Dad led me into what I thought was a barn, but it was really a kind of quad, that contained some kind of futuristic eco-garden packed full of Dad's almost-genius inventions. Ben was running around wowing, and Dad was like, 'Haley, let me show you the hydroponic solar tent.'

I couldn't believe it. Cos Dad had been messing around with bits of this thing for years and there it was, like a plastic greenhouse, with these tubes of pulsing blue light and pipes of moving water with bubbles. Dad grinned and gestured for me to follow him inside and there was classical music playing, probably Baby Mozart or something, and all this lush veg dangling in rows of bags. Like hundreds. And four kinds of lettuce and watercress, and this little pump whirring.

And Dad was like, 'So this is the rainwater transfusion system and the plants hang in water bags, with absolutely no need for soil.'

And my geek-factor kicked in and I was like, 'Because the roots feed directly from the nutrients in the water...'

'Yup, and the water is oxygenated by—'

'—by the solar-powered oxygen pump,' I said triumphantly, and Dad's grinning at me, like we're both part of the same super-geek universal-mind, and maybe he said, 'That's my girl,' and there was a wink of pride.

And I'm seeing this fabulous invention like it's mine too and I'm so proud of Dad for actually, finally, pulling this off. And then he's answering my next question before I even say it, with, 'In summer it captures solar energy into the rechargeable battery rack, so we can grow fruit and veg all year round with our sun lamps.' And sure enough, I'm seeing like half of a tanning booth that Dad must have salvaged and hot-wired with the solar panels. It was awesome in the original sense of 'awe' and 'then some.'

And this totally cancelled out all my questions about what the fuck was actually going on. Then Hippy Meg came in and picked a strawberry/raspberry-looking thing and handed it to me, laughing, 'They're stras-berries!' she said. 'Delicious. Here, love, try one.' And, of course, Ben ran over and snaffled it and everyone was laughing, even though the 'love' thing was super-weird.

Then Dad was pulling back a tarp and saying, 'Haley, Ben, bunny-time!' And there was, no kidding, what looked like a luxury, bunny-super-apartment with a slowly rising bunny escalator, ingeniously made out of some metal bed bases, and a bunny elevator powered by the hamster wheels in the next hutches. Total geek-heaven.

Meg brought a Palomino out of the hutch and taught Ben how to hold it, and the little fluffy thing was so damn cute, and Ben was grinning over at me, like a massive family Facebook moment. But I just had to ask Meg, 'So, like, how long have you known Dad?'

And she said, 'Oh, I don't know, a couple of years.'

So I asked her, 'Did he help you build this place, then?'

Then she kind of looked around and was proud-sounding and she said, 'Help us? He's the one who brought us here.'

Uber freaky. And if Dad had really studied his own Survival Manual, he would've realised that you have to rehearse your survivalist team so they don't go off script. So I said, 'Wait, "us"? Us? Like, how many people is that? What do you mean, he brought you here?'

But then there was a commotion over at the hutches and Meg moved away, totally not answering me. I shot a look at Dad, but he was over with Ben, giving it, 'No, Ben, don't hold it like that! Here, I'll show you.' And the rabbit was struggling in Ben's grip and he nearly dropped it, so grabbed it by the ears. Then Dad shouted in a weird tone. 'Give me it back! They're not cuddly toys, Ben. They're our food.'

Ben stared at Dad in horror then wailed, 'Euwww!' and ran back out the doorway.

Evidence was mounting and it looked to me like Meg was too poor to pay Dad twenty grand for his invention. In fact, this place was so packed full of Dad's inventions that only he could have been living here – like, maybe since he even got divorced.

Just as I was about to interrogate Dad, a lion-sounding engine roared.

‘That’s my boy, Danny,’ Meg yelled at me over the racket. ‘He’s been dying to meet you!’

I turned and there in the doorway was this guy on a quad bike. He had the body of a grown man but must have only been fifteen or sixteen. He didn’t smile or blink or even speak and I was sort of trapped in his gaze, like a human on safari being sized up by a wild animal. He turned the engine off and I could hear barking, like from a huge guard dog locked up somewhere. Then this man-boy Danny-person turned away and I was released from his eyes. I shuddered. Did I mention he was bare-chested? ‘Ripped’ is even the word, probably from just lifting hay bails or some crap, and he looked a bit like that famous dead actor guy. He had mud on his face and chest, and something darker, like maybe grease from an engine or worse. He was precisely the kind of redneck that a girl like myself considers Neanderthal.

But Ben was jumping up and down beside the quad bike, practically wetting his little blimp bod with excitement and yelling, ‘Can I have a go? Can I have a go?’ And I couldn’t believe it, but Dad shouted over, ‘OK, let Ben climb on for a spin, Danny, but slowly!’

And me shouting at Dad then, ‘Are you nuts, Dad? Ben can’t go on that thing! Mother’ll be absolutely furious and whip your ass!’

And Dad just smiled.

Use Delay Tactics To Coerce Without Confrontation

I later discovered that Dad had actually planned to play his fake story out for days, with delay tactics and small deceptions. His next delay tactic was a classic: feigned engine failure. He had his head inside the 4x4 engine and was going at it with a ratchet.

I said, 'I get it, Dad, this is some revenge thing with Mother – you're testing her and that's OK. She's been sort of bugging me, too. It's even kind of cool that you've stood up to her for once, even if this is a bit over-the-top. But just so you know, we really have to be back in time for school tomorrow, so I really have to call Mother now...'

He was actually listening.

'...because Mother'll be getting distressed,' I said. 'You know what she's like... my God, she's probably got helicopters out looking for us already!'

'I'm sorry, Haley,' he replied, pulling out some wires. 'I'd take you back if I could, but when we hit that bump in the river, I must have damaged the converter. It's going to take a few hours to fix.'

'A few hours!' I yelled.

'Maybe more.' And he yanked another part of the engine out and laid it in the mud.

I had so many questions buzzing round my head but they were drowned out by the redneck's quad bike and Ben's yells of 'Whey-heh' and 'Wooo!' I was absolutely furious, knowing the chances of Dad getting the engine put back together again and driving us back to the city were getting dimmer.

Cunning, the way that Dad made it seem like 'an unfortunate accident.'

'OK, Haley,' he said to me finally, wiping his oily hands. And maybe he'd even practised his lines with Meg and Danny. 'I messed up. Meg's called a friend in the local village and he can get us a converter, but it won't be till tomorrow morning.'

I was shouting then at Dad, for turning me into the kind of uncool emotional teenager that shouts at their Dad.

'I'll email your mum now and explain,' he lied. 'I'm sure she'll understand.'

'Yeah,' I yelled, 'she'll understand alright, she'll understand how totally fucked up you are and she'll make sure you never get to see us again!'

And there was that secret smile of Dad's again.

It was only later that I clicked. It would be Mother who'd be the one who'd never see us again, as long as she lived, because that was exactly Dad's plan.

Use Sentimental Strategies To Win Over Your Abductees

Objects from your past, music, tunes or books, an old expression or an image can all make your abductees 'feel at home'.

So, it was official, we were going nowhere, and staying 'the night'. When I say going nowhere, Ben was still spinning around on Neanderthal Danny's quad bike, and Dad had led me inside the hobby farm house to 'freshen up and have a rest'.

When I get with the spiralling questions, I get this hot flushing feeling, and usually just go round in circles saying 'I'm so confused, I'm just so confused,' and 'I'm hot, why am I so hot? I'm so hot, I can't breathe,' until either Mother or Dad sits me down and gives me my asthma inhaler and a glass of water.

So that's what Dad did, taking me up the rickety, smelly, woody stairs, into this room that Dad said was 'you and your brother's room'. But my inhaler wasn't stopping the freak-out, because inside 'our room' were two military-looking bunk-beds and those kind of huge local maps you see in war-rooms instead of wallpaper. There was a bare light bulb hanging, like an actual prison.

'Just breathe slowly, Haley,' Dad was saying, his hand on my back.

And I'm staring at Baloo as I suck my inhaler.

Baloo was the bear from my early childhood. My first love. My divorce dolly. I'd cried into Baloo, I'd chewed off one of his eyes, and I'd punched, burned and buried him when Mother and Dad had been fighting downstairs.

And there he was, Baloo the guilty secrets bear, restored to full sight with a new eye and his stuffing re-done and sitting on this weird camp bed. And I still couldn't get my breath, and I was asking Dad what the hell Baloo was doing there, because Mother,