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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Mum, come save me

Samantha Raw battled for two years to win back her two sons after they were snatched by their father. Then came a secret message from one of the boys

John-Paul Flintoff

Published: 26 December 2010



Samantha Raw, whose sons Austin and Dylan were taken by their father (Tony Buckingham)

her two sons, who had been abducted by their French father. She'd done everything she could to get the French authorities to return the boys to her, but without success. Had something awful happened?

Raw packed her daughter off to friends and went to see Kevin and his wife Paula, who lived near her home in north Norfolk.

Two weeks ago, Samantha Raw was eating dinner with her daughter Camille when her phone rang. It was her friend Kevin. "We think you should come and see something," he said.

Her heart sank. Whatever it was, it had to be about

They told Raw that her younger boy, Austin, 13, had made contact with their son, Joey, and another old schoolfriend, Reece, using Facebook. She should see what he'd been saying.

Raw sat down at the computer in their living room to read the Facebook dialogue. She was thrilled by what she found.

Austin told his friends he was planning to escape from his father's house, and needed his mother to come to France and collect him on Saturday night. By the time she read this, it was already late on Thursday. To be sure that the Facebook messages really were from Austin, Joey and Reece asked him to confirm the name and colour of Joey's dog (Marley, black and white) and the football team Reece's dad supports (Leeds, as Austin spelt it).

Reece had another question: "Where is ur dad?"

"Next to me," Austin typed. "He sosn't undurstand english. Dosn't. What did my mum say? Can she comme and fechme?"

"Were trying."

Austin urged them not to let her tell anybody else, fearing his father might hit him if he found out about his plan. And then he paid tribute to the mother he'd spoken to only once in two years — but whom he'd glimpsed on a French television documentary about their case just days earlier.

"She is incredeball becos she didn't fegett what I sead before my dad captures me — i sead that she musn't laeve me in france," he wrote.

Raw hardly needed any encouragement to rescue her son. But Austin's words gave her strength as she prepared for what would be the most nerve-racking 48 hours of her life.

Raw, 38, grew up in Norfolk but moved to western France with her parents as a teenager and stayed to work as an English teacher.

At a school in La Roche-sur-Yon she met an art teacher, Thierry Girardeau. Looking back now, she can't remember what she saw in this man who has since caused her so much heartache, but they married in 1996 and had two sons before separating when Dylan was aged three and Austin 10 months.

Not long afterwards she became involved with another man, Christian Traineau, and had a daughter, Camille, by him. That relationship didn't work out either, and in 2001 — having first secured permission from the French courts — Raw returned to Britain with her children to be near family and friends.

There are elements to her story that cannot be reported, by order of the courts, which is why it may not seem to add up in places. What can be told is that the two fathers became allies and began a battle against Raw in the French media and in court. In 2006, on the same day, they started separate but related proceedings for custody of all three children.

She continued to let the boys see their father in the holidays, believing that contact was important. In the summer of 2008, Girardeau failed to return them to her on time. He had done this before, and Raw went to court to be sure he didn't do it again. However, when he took the boys once more in late December — ostensibly to spend the new year with them — he decided to keep them in France. Dylan was 13 and Austin 11.

The first Raw knew about this was on January 3, 2009, the date they were due back. "I phoned his mobile several times, and the landline, and got no answer," she recalls.

She was later told that Girardeau had taken the boys to the French police and that they had made statements about her. It appeared that the police had not been told the two boys had dual nationality or that their mother had the consent of French courts to bring them up in England.

According to Raw, the female gendarme who spoke to the boys ended the conversation with the startling assertion that their mother did not know how to love them.

Raw rang the police in La Roche-sur-Yon and said that her sons were missing. She was told to call back the next day. When she did, a female gendarme told her: "Your children are safe with their father. They are French and belong in France."

The town, in the heart of the Vendée, has a strong sense of nationalism. Built by Napoleon in 1804, the centre is dominated by an equestrian statue of the emperor, and tourists are urged to walk the "circuit Napoléon".

A local court decided the boys should live with their father for a trial period of six months. "I just couldn't believe this was happening," says Raw.

"You don't expect an EU country to behave like this. No one had attempted to verify what the father told them. They did not contact local Norfolk police to investigate Thierry's claims about our children in my care, which would be normal procedure. The two children were trapped."

She told eight-year-old Camille that they could enjoy some "extended mother and daughter time" because the boys were going to spend a bit longer with their father. "But after a while she started to miss her brothers and asked when they were coming home. I said, 'Mummy is going to try to get them back'."

The High Court in London made an order requiring that the boys be returned to Raw at once. Raw took this order to the local police in La Roche-sur-Yon but they refused to help.

She secured the same ruling from the highest court in France under the Hague convention on international child abduction. But still the local authorities refused to intervene. Raw visited Poitiers, the regional capital, to lobby the prosecutor-general in person. She told him that abduction was a form of child abuse and that he was complicit. He would do nothing but wished her "good luck".

The fathers of her children, by now close allies, appeared in the French media together and seemed not to fear any interference from the law, even though Austin and his brother were wards of court. In one recent story, headlined "Two fathers fighting a single battle", they gloated that Girardeau was bringing up the boys as an "outlaw" father.

After several trips to France failed to secure the boys' return, Raw stopped telling Camille where she was going. The girl had lost her brothers to France and had started to worry that Raw, too, might one day simply fail to return.

At school, Camille wrote a poem about Austin full of affectionate and teasing recollections. However, the last lines suggested that she had stopped believing she would ever see him again.

"So glad I had my brother," she wrote, tellingly using the past tense. Raw put the poem up in the hall, opposite framed portrait photos of all three children.

The hardest time for Camille was Christmas. In the past she and her brothers had taken turns to open their presents together, but on Christmas Day 2009 she opened her presents on her own, and that was not such fun, she said.

Raw's efforts to get her sons back were costing a fortune, and Girardeau had stopped paying maintenance. She borrowed from friends and family and spent to the limit on her credit card in the

hope that one day she might recover some costs. She began working in a care home.

Although she did not realise it at the time, her breakthrough came when she agreed to take part in a documentary for French television about “parental alienation syndrome” — in which one parent turns the children against the other. Girardeau also took part, and was filmed at home with the boys.

The programme was broadcast early this month. Raw watched alone, while Girardeau sat the boys down to watch with him. An expert had assured him, on camera, that he had nothing to fear because the boys’ “hard disks have been wiped”. In other words, they retained no affection for their mother.

But Austin’s hard disk had not been wiped. He saw for himself on television how his father finished his sentences and spoke on his behalf. Girardeau claimed that the boys were allowed to talk to their mother whenever they liked, and that they “knew where the computer was”; but in fact Austin had only once been allowed to talk to his mother in nearly two years — and then only in French, while Girardeau listened in.

His father’s words on television gave Austin the confidence to ask for access to the computer. He set up a Facebook account, and within two days of the broadcast he had contacted Reece and Joey in Norfolk and told them that he planned to escape.

The 13-year-old had triggered an extraordinary sequence of events involving lawyers, a High Court judge, and a six-hour flight by car from France to Belgium.



Samantha Raw's two sons Dylan and Austin before they were snatched (Chris Bouchier)

After reading the Facebook dialogue, Raw asked Joey’s parents to call the police. She wanted officials to have a record of what was being planned. But she urged the police not to inform their French

counterparts. Next day she saw her lawyers in London.

They believed that Raw needed to take her story to the British media, as the children’s fathers had done in France. On Friday, December 10, they asked the High Court to lift the usual blackout on family cases. After due deliberation, that is what the judge, Mrs Justice Parker, did.

Raw’s barrister, Teertha Gupta, told the judge that Raw believed her children had been manipulated

by the father. He had done so to such an extent that, on one occasion, the mother alleged, she had been physically attacked by the eldest son.

The barrister said that the father had publicised the case extensively in France and alleged that the boys had been mistreated by Raw — which had never been proved and was dismissed as categorically untrue and without foundation.

Raw's solicitor, Anne-Marie Hutchinson, told the press afterwards: "This is one of the most upsetting cases I have had to deal with. This blameless mother has the orders of the highest court in France and the High Court in England in her favour, but she is powerless in the face of the father's wilful breaching of the law and his cynical manipulation of the children."

What was not revealed publicly was Austin's audacious plan to escape that weekend. Raw told her lawyers about it and they informed the judge — but that part of the story had to remain secret.

It was mid-afternoon on Friday when Raw left the High Court with her father Mike and Wendy Gould, a close friend from her school days. They had no luggage, because Raw had not wanted anybody at court to ask where they were going afterwards. They set off empty-handed by train to Dover, where they stayed overnight.

By phone to Kevin and Paula in Norfolk, then through their son Joey's Facebook page, Raw got a message to Austin: she would be coming for him at 1am on Sunday.

What was it like trying to sleep that night in Dover? "With a thing like this you don't sleep," she says.

The next morning Raw, her father and Gould crossed the Channel, took a train to Lille and then another to Nantes, about 40 miles from La Roche-sur-Yon.

Raw withdrew lots of cash so they would not have to use credit cards in France. "If Austin went missing, there would be a search, and quite rightly. If they found us, I might be arrested and Austin might be returned to his father while things were cleared up." When they hired a car in Nantes, it was not under her name.

They continued to communicate with Austin by Facebook via Norfolk. While Raw drove, Gould sat in the passenger seat making phone calls to Paula. Always nagging at the back of Raw's mind was the fear that the person on Facebook was not her son but her ex-husband playing a cruel trick.

On reaching La Roche-sur-Yon, they sat in a hotel car park practising opening and closing the hire-car doors silently. At one point a police car approached. "We thought, 'Oh, no, do they know who we are?'" But it swept past, into the night.

Raw put on her father's black woolly hat, "because I've got blonde hair that could be seen from miles away". It was cold. "We were dying for the loo, but there was nowhere to go." Having no alternative, they made use of nearby bushes.

Friends and family phoned, wondering how they were getting on. "We didn't dare to tell anyone where we were — not anyone — because information can travel fast."

As 1am approached, Raw drove gradually closer to the house. Then Gould received a phone call: Austin was saying on Facebook that his father had not yet gone to bed. Could they come for him half an hour later?

The tension was unbearable. When the time came, they approached the house as quietly as possible. Raw's father held one of the car's back doors open as they moved so that Austin would be able to get in without making any noise.

The house stood in a quiet area, surrounded by other homes. With the headlights off, the street was terribly dark. There was no moon that night, and no streetlights nearby.

Inside, the downstairs lights were on. “My first thought was, ‘Oh shit, has he been caught?’” says Raw. But suddenly a window opened. From the television documentary she knew that this was Austin’s window. A silhouette appeared. But it looked like Austin’s father — the same size, and the same movement. “We all thought it was his dad,” she remembers.

The figure waved at them. “We thought it was Thierry narking us, saying he had found out.”

In despair, Raw drove away. But two minutes later there was a frantic telephone call from Paula in Norfolk. “She said, ‘Austin’s on Facebook. He says he saw you and you drove off!’”

He also said his dad had been in bed for only 10 minutes. Raw asked if he could wait till 3am, just to be safe. He said no, he was going outside right away.

Panicking, Raw could not find her way back to the house. “I tried to turn round,” she recalls with a pained face, “but there was a flyover and a road I didn’t recognise.”

She drove around, lost, for what seemed like an hour but may only have been 10 minutes. “I just kept thinking, Austin is outside, Austin is outside! And he’d logged off Facebook, so we didn’t know what was happening.”

Eventually she found the right way and as the car went round the final bend they saw a figure standing outside the house with two bags. “When he saw the car lights, he jumped behind a wall.” It was a heart-rending display of vulnerability, she says, from a sensible, courageous boy.

They pulled up alongside the bags but couldn’t see him. “Dad opened the door and we all whispered, ‘Austin! Austin, it’s Mum!’”

He emerged and quickly climbed into the car while his grandfather put in the suitcase and rucksack. Austin had packed them some time before his escape and hidden them where nobody could find them.

Raw started to drive. She caught glimpses of her son in the rear-view mirror, but they weren’t enough: she kept asking Gould to confirm he was really there.

Then Austin spoke, in a voice that was strangely deep — it had broken while he had been away — and with a French accent. “Are we going to England now?” he asked.

Only at this point, finally, did Raw believe it was true. “He was in the car! He did it! He thwarted the French authorities!”

As she says this, barely a week after that extraordinary night, she grins broadly and tears fill her eyes.

Austin was tired. He slept for six hours while the others took turns to drive from the far west of France to Paris, then beyond to Belgium. They had to get him a temporary passport from a British embassy, and did not dare to do that in France.



When not at the wheel herself, Raw could not take her eyes off her son. He



Samantha Raw with her father and friend Wendy who helped her fetch her sons (Tony Buckingham)

looked different, his face no longer that of a boy. "I think it was the stress of those two years." (On Facebook, to his friends, he had described his life as a nightmare.) In Belgium, they found a hotel and

for the first time in two years, mother and son chatted freely.

He asked questions about the family, his sister and the new house he had glimpsed in the TV documentary. He had seen goalposts in the garden, he said.

She was happy to answer his questions but didn't ask him any. He's had too many questions from his dad, she says. Anyway, she knows more than he would imagine, thanks to the documentary makers and various court proceedings. She knows what he said about her, apparently under duress, when his father took him to the French police.

"The one thing I don't know is what he was feeling when he was lying down at night in France. I know what I felt like, for 720 nights. I thought my heart was going to melt."

She phoned a friend in Norfolk and asked her to cuddle 10-year-old Camille and tell her that Austin was safe. Then, having secured a temporary passport, the little group headed to the coast to catch a ferry from Ostend.

Joey's father Kevin collected Camille and drove the four-hour trip to Ramsgate so she could be there when the ferry arrived with her brother.

Reunited at last, Camille and Austin threw their arms around each other and hugged for a "very, very long time", Raw says. Everybody who watched was in tears.

Raw is acutely conscious that her older son, Dylan, 15, remains in France. Will Austin's escape make it easier to get Dylan back, or harder? She thinks it should sting the French authorities into action.

"What I'm saying to them is, please don't wait for Dylan to do the same. They should be so embarrassed. What this shows is that they have held Austin for two years against his will."

What is the point of signing up to the Hague convention, she asks, if it is disregarded by other signatories? "We sign these treaties, but if we can't trust them with our children, what can we trust them with?"

She intends to sue a number of public figures and institutions for failing to uphold court orders — not only because of what has happened, but because otherwise she fears Camille might one day be taken, too.

“In the end it took three 13- year-old children to do what the French authorities couldn’t manage. These boys have been amazing. Joey and Reece didn’t tell anybody at school what was going on.”

She wants to give them something special in thanks. “But what could I do that would possibly be worth what they’ve done?”

In the week or so since Austin came home, his face looks healthier and more boyish, Raw says. She still cannot take her eyes off him and resents any intrusion into her time with him — but she says she is delighted that he is slotting back into ordinary life with friends.

“I have been so afraid of losing my children for ever. Last night we were watching a film together, and I just thought, ‘Oh, it’s lovely, it’s Christmas, and I can’t believe we have each other again.’ The children and their friends were sitting by the fire, eating biscuits, and I’m really soaking up these moments. I won’t take them for granted ever again.”

Kidnap's increase

Reunite International, which specialises in cases of international parental child abduction and gave advice to Samantha Raw, says they occur with increasing frequency.

In 2009 it dealt with 396 cases involving 574 children, compared with 251 involving 346 children in 2004. The countries most often involved were Spain, America, Ireland, Poland, Pakistan, India, Nigeria and Egypt.

reunite.org