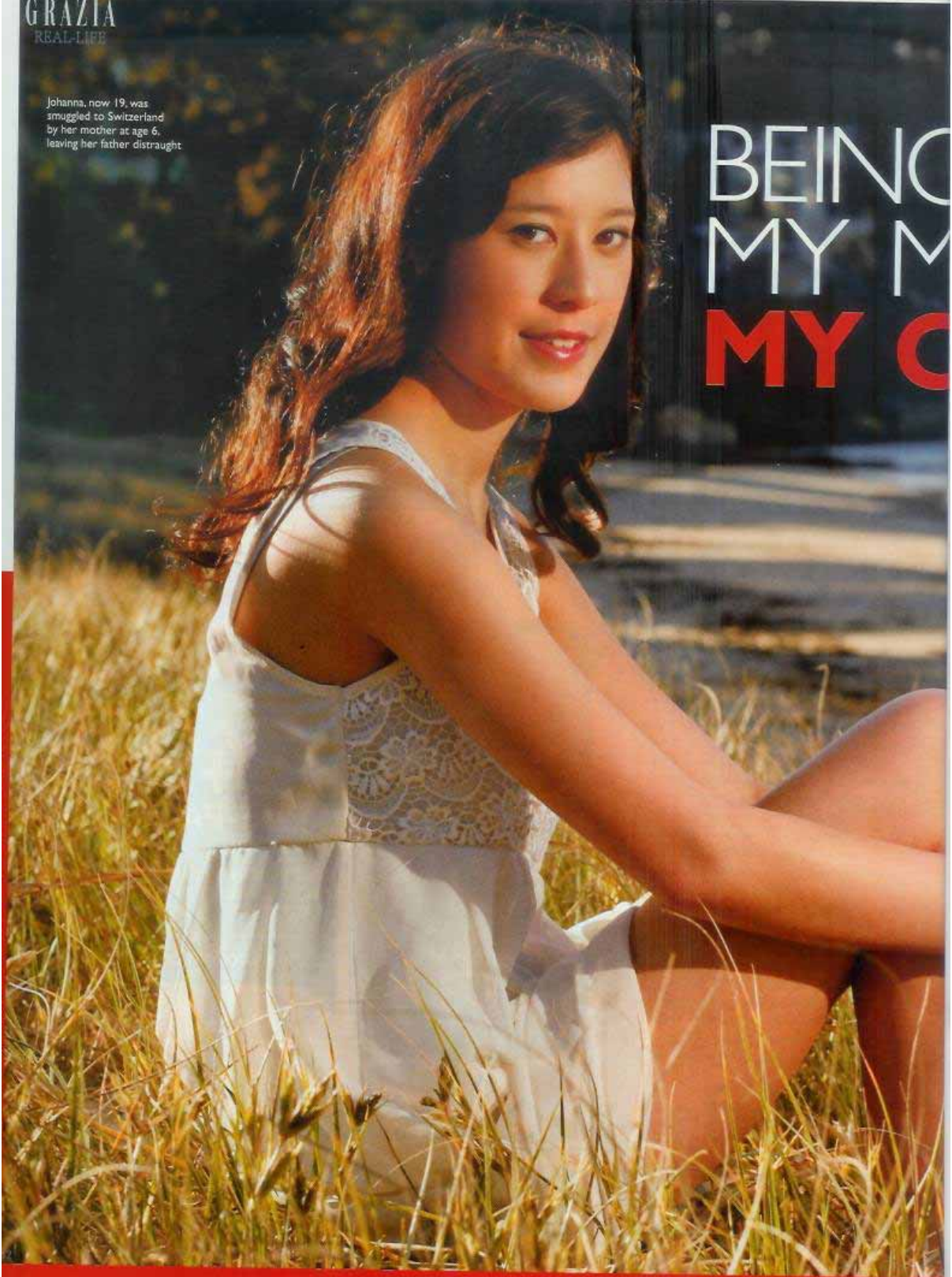


GRAZIA
REAL-LIFE

Johanna, now 19, was
smuggled to Switzerland
by her mother at age 6,
leaving her father distraught

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ABDUCTED BY MUM DESTROYED CHILDHOOD

As one father's reunion with his child hits the news, Johanna Fisher shares her devastating story

DRIVING in my car the other day, I felt a shiver run down my spine when I heard a news bulletin on the radio about Sydney father Ken Thompson's reunion with his 6-year-old son in Holland.

Listening to how Andrew was taken by his mother Melinda Stratton three years ago, I was struck by how similar the story was to my own.

Twelve years may have passed since I was abducted by my mum and taken to Switzerland, but I'm still coming to terms with it.

My parents divorced when I was 2 years old and I was caught in the middle. I lived with my mother Shirley full-time and saw my father Brian on weekends, but as far back as I can remember she would drill in to me what a horrible person my father was. She'd tell me he didn't care about me and made serious abuse allegations against him, which weren't even true.

I was so young I believed everything she told me – why would I question my own mother? But I also knew I enjoyed spending time with Dad – we'd go on outings or camping together. Away from Mum's influence, I could see he was a nice person.

Somehow I coped with the conflicted situation – but when I was 6, things suddenly escalated. Mum said we were moving to Switzerland.

Looking back, I think she had been planning to abduct me and flee overseas for years before she actually did it.

Mum promised me I'd have all these presents and get to go to a great new school, so I didn't question it and instead got excited about living on the other side of the world. She told me that I wasn't allowed to tell Dad

because we were better off without him – and if he knew, he'd kill us.

It was such a massive secret to entrust in a child, but by this point I was so brainwashed by her lies about my father, I just did what she said.

Because he was concerned she might try to take me out of the country, Dad had actually placed a child alert with the Federal Police.

But Mum was prepared for this.

When we were stopped by an officer at the airport, she produced forged passports for us and fake travel documents that said my dad had given permission for me to travel abroad. We were allowed to leave.

I was so upset that I didn't get to say goodbye...I couldn't quite grasp that I was never going to see him again.

When we got to Switzerland, I quickly realised Mum had been lying about the fabulous new life we were going to have. Instead of the large Sydney home I'd grown up in, I was forced to sleep on the couch of a housing commission studio apartment in the town of Fribourg with my mum and her new boyfriend.

It was such an awful place. I'd have temper tantrums because I was stuck inside all day – Mum told me we had to hide. I wasn't able to go to school.

She began calling me Genevieve and insisted I call her Felicity, and she constantly reminded me not to tell anyone about my dad. Unknown to me, he had contacted the Australian police back home and was on a frantic search to try and find me.

But for six months I was stuck in that horrible apartment – with only occasional outings to go shopping or to the nearby city of Bern.

I'd picked up a bit of French but I couldn't even speak to children my own age and I had no friends. I felt incredibly isolated and confused.

I can still vividly remember the night we were found.

We were in bed when I was woken by the sound of people talking to the neighbours about us. Mum said, "That's it then, we've been found", and I remember asking her if I should go and hide under the bed.

It was all so bewildering at the police station, because I didn't understand what was happening, and clung to Mum before she was taken away in tears for questioning.

I was reunited with my dad that night at the station. I remember giving him a hug because I was so relieved to see him after so many months, and if I was going to be ▶

At first overjoyed when her dad traced her to Switzerland, Johanna later suffered trust issues due to her mum's aggressive bad-mouthing of him





PARENTAL ABDUCTIONS IN AUSTRALIA

- The Attorney-General's Department says each year an estimated 95 children are taken overseas without permission.
- Mothers are responsible for 70 per cent of international parental child abductions. The most common reason for fleeing is to leave an abusive relationship.
- Parents are able to apply for a child alert with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade if they believe an attempt may be made to take their child overseas. The alert warns the department if applications are made for a passport or travel documents, however it doesn't stop a person from travelling if they already have a current Australian passport.

A Description of Myself
 Hi! My name is Johanna. I have dark brown eyes, brown hair and my hair is 17 centimetres long. I have 7 goldfish at home, and I live with my Dad. My parents are divorced. My Mum lives in the U.S.A. I was born on the 28th July 1991 in the Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney, Australia. I absolutely H.A.T.E. Barbie. I think she shows off. I like Pok'emon. I have been to three schools. When I was 7, my Mum took me with her to Switzerland. I lived in Fribourg. I'm not sure why she did it. I skipped kindergarten. I am good at Spelling and Reading and I'm pretty good at Maths. My hobby is collecting Hybrid pens.

Johanna with her father today (far left); their reunion made big news in Australia (below); back at school she expressed her feelings about the abduction (left)

taken away from one parent, I was glad I could see him again. But instead of going home with him, I was placed in a transit home for three months while my parents went to court over my custody arrangement.

Living with other children of parents involved in disputes just added to my trauma. I was forced to share a room with a 13-year-old boy who sexually assaulted me, and it wasn't until I was older that I understood what had happened.

I'd see both parents each day but while Dad was overjoyed just to spend time with me, Mum spent her visits trying to manipulate me into siding with her.

When my father was granted sole custody, I had to be pulled away from Mum in tears because I thought I was never going to see her again.

Back in Australia it was a struggle to reconnect with my father because of what she had told me.

I was so confused to be back living with him and we had a lot of fights because I'd been taught to hate him.

But Dad was intent on ensuring I had stability, and within weeks I was back at my old primary school.

For three months I didn't even hear from my mum until she called out of the blue from the US, where she'd moved to. I didn't know what had happened to her and I'd been worried she was in prison.

Every time she called she reinforced to me that Dad was a horrible person.

It wasn't until I was a teenager that I realised what she was doing and told her to stop bad-mouthing him, but it still took years for me to trust him.

I've seen her a handful of times since Switzerland, but each time it

has been very strained. I still can't believe what I've already been through and I'm only 19. I really wish I'd had a normal upbringing... I get jealous when I see normal families.

It's also meant I've tried to form attachments to my friends' parents because I've missed having a mum. It takes me a long time to open up to people and form relationships because I have issues with trust.

To this day I still don't know why Mum and I fled to Switzerland. I saw her a few months ago and she got quite aggressive when I asked her why she did it. She continued to try and reason that she had to take me away from my father.

As far as I know, she's never regretted what she did and still won't admit she did anything wrong. She refuses to give me an apology even though her actions destroyed my childhood.

I've had counselling since I was 13. I've suffered from depression and feelings of guilt because I thought it was my fault we had to flee Australia.

No child should ever be forcibly taken away from their parents. I had this stable life and I was comfortable, and she totally upended it.

I can only hope that when Ken Thompson and his son return to Australia, Andrew can come to terms with it and have a good upbringing.

The hardest thing to deal with is continuing to have a positive relationship with the parent who took you. I still have a lot of resentment towards my mum, and even though my relationship with my father is much better now, it's still difficult for us to discuss what happened. We've never really spoken about what it was like for him during those six months when he didn't know where I was.

But Dad has always been so supportive of me and I know now that he is the one who looks out for me, not my mother.

I currently live with my dad and am at university studying business and law. I have so many goals in my life that I want to achieve.

I just want to be happy and balanced. I don't want my abduction to define the rest of my life. ■

TELL US YOUR STORY Email crazialetters@acmagazines.com.au