


 Sunrise: 5:40am
 Sunset: 9:03pm

Humidity: 57%

 Light Breeze
 9 km/h NE

25 °C




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Kidnapped: Gabriola grandparents fight Japan

By Bruce Mason, Gabriola Sounder

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The sun was shining brightly in a cloudless, blue sky and whitecaps enlivened the already spectacular view from the heirloom dining table of Marilyn and Ian Wood.

But something very important was missing from the otherwise perfect scene, something fundamental and profoundly important. The absence was haunting, tragic and unjust by almost any standard.

"We have lost all contact with two of our grand-children," reported the couple, well-known and active in the community. When asked for their reaction when they realized they may never see 11 year old Takara and eight year-old Manami again, they said they were "devastated and heart-broken," and you could cut through their pain, anger, frustration and loss with a knife, or briefly consider using it to strike out against the perpetrators of an almost unspeakable and uncivilized tragedy.

Their son Murray, a schoolteacher in Richmond, had been granted sole custody of the children in Canadian courts and was raising them with a new partner when his ex-wife Ayako wanted to take them to Japan on the pretense of visiting their dying grandfather in November, 2004.

Somewhat suspicious, but never even dreaming of a conspiracy, Wood had always recognized the importance of maintaining a connection to their Japanese family and heritage. Besides, there were court orders precisely dictating the departure and arrival dates.

He agreed and kissed them goodbye at Vancouver International, unaware that he and his parents would soon be embarking on a nightmarish legal battle with Japan.

The evidence of abduction quickly mounted. His ex-wife's child maintenance cheques had been cancelled, 18 boxes of household goods, including the children's toys and clothing had been shipped to Japan and her apartment had been abandoned with three month's rent owing.

Panic set in when there was no forwarding address at the post office, her bank, or creditors. A flight attendant at Air Canada, Ayako called in sick and then severed all communication with her employer.

The granting of sole custody of Murray, nine months earlier that year, is meaningless in Japan, where officials are under no obligation to consider the wishes of their Canadian counterparts. A member of the wealthy Group of Seven countries, Japan alone has not signed the 1980 Hague Convention on Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction.

The convention, ratified by 75 other countries, clearly and unequivocally specifies that any child removed by one parent without the permission, the other must be returned, and that custody issues be resolved in the original country.



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Murray - who has filed unsuccessfully in Japanese courts for his children's return - was among parents at a recent forum in Tokyo, urging Japan to sign the treaty that protects children from international custody battles. During that time he was denied any access to his children, whatsoever.

"We have sent hundreds of postcards to them with news, but have had no response," say Marilyn and Ian, "and our other grandchildren miss them terribly, especially during their frequent visits to Gabriola on holidays.

"One of our grand-daughters produced a power point presentation on how much she misses them," said Marilyn. "It is very sad to watch, especially when you think of tea ceremonies and other evidence of civilization in Japan.

"But this is horrible and it is difficult not to reach the conclusion that we are victims of racism," she added with great difficulty.

Ian is a former school principal, currently involved with classroom practicums of Malaspina education students. Marilyn taught figure skating for years in Richmond.

Their property was formerly owned by his uncle, a long-time family destination, with a cottage that Marilyn and Ian have lovingly made into a comfortable house, like the dining room table where we are seated, a place for loved ones to gather, evolving over time with family as its focal point.

Ian produced a December 21st issue of the Asian Pacific Post, an award-winning independent newspaper. A most unseasonable front-page headline reads: "BC Dad Fights Japan to get his kids back." "Kidnapped," is emblazoned over the children's photographs, with news underneath: "Japan refuses RCMP arrest warrant and Vancouver court orders, saying they are not obligated to listen to Canada."

The couple is standing beside their son in his overwhelming fight against international injustice. They praise the work of Canada's federal government, our ambassador to Japan and Embassy staff.

There is some good news. Earlier this month the Canadian government made an official request to Japan that their former daughter-in-law be returned to this country to face child abduction charges. Other than murder charges, this is a first, a big step. But hope, by now, is faint.

Marilyn and Ian are active in the International Rights of Children Society which seeks to protect children from the abuse of international parental abduction.

On an island with a large population of grand-parents, they are asking Gabriolans to help. See "Stop International Child Abduction,"

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