



by Jenny Friel

MANDY Kelly is in her hotel room in Cairo, a mega-city of almost 11 million people. Out there, somewhere in this sprawling Egyptian metropolis, are her two small sons, Zayn, who turned six in May, and three-year-old Kareem.

Mandy has absolutely no idea where they are. All she knows is that local police are out searching for her missing estranged husband, to serve him with court documents and execute a custody order for the two boys that was granted last week.

The stress and exhaustion she's suffering are palpable as we talk over the phone. At times she finds it hard to keep her emotions in check, and she apologises profusely for any short outbursts during our long conversation.

Given the circumstances, her overall composure is remarkable.

Mandy has not seen her children since March 11, 2022. Shortly before the family was due to return to their home in Dundalk, Co Louth, after a two-week

'I've met bad people who try to take advantage'

holiday in her husband's home country, he told her that the boys were staying in Egypt with him.

There are things Mandy still can't discuss, for legal reasons, but also because they are too difficult and harrowing for her to recount. Suffice to say, she claims her sons were 'forcibly taken from her care' and she decided to return to Ireland because of 'concerns surrounding my safety'.

Not surprisingly, she arrived home in 'a state'.

'My mother had to look after me, I was too scared to stay in the house on my own,' she explains.

'I couldn't eat, I was all over the place, sleeping was out of the question.'

'Although sleep eventually became my saviour, it was the only time I could actually see my boys because I was dreaming about them.'

The 37-year-old has had zero contact with her children since she last saw them, not even one phone call. Neither has she seen any photographs of them.

For the last 29 months, she has lived in a 'bubble' of going to work to keep up the mortgage repayments on her home, and spending every other waking moment she has fighting to get her sons returned to her.

'That's all I've done, it's been my entire life,' she says. 'I'm also involved in various groups that are passionate about working with parents in this situation. But

This would destroy anybody but all I care about is getting my sons back

Mandy Kelly has had zero contact with her two young sons for 29 months after her husband kept them in Egypt. She has spent €60,000 fighting for custody and last week finally won a court order. But she still has no idea where they are

I've met bad people along the way too, who try to take financial advantage of parents in this horrifically vulnerable situation — they promise you the world but there's nothing behind it.

'It's been very difficult to find the small circle of people that I've surrounded myself with.'

That circle now includes professional mediator Miceal O'Hurley of Munster Mediation.

'He's been working with me since June 2023,' she explains. 'I did some research on him and then got in contact with him, I've found him to be very trustworthy, and a strong advocate for fighting for people in this situation.'

O'Hurley, she says, has been instrumental in her dealings with the Egyptian authorities.

'For an Irish mother, trying to

navigate systems here would be almost impossible,' she says.

It's been a particular tricky situation for Mandy.

Egypt is not signed up to the 1980 Hague Convention, which tries to protect children from international parental abduction, using diplomatic pressure to help get minors returned.

She has already exhausted every avenue available to her here in Ireland, including getting a High Court order in December 2022 that legally required her husband to return their children to her. But none of it has worked so far.

Last month she flew back to Egypt to talk to the authorities there about being awarded full custody of her children. It was granted, and a couple of weeks later she was given an execution

order. All of this petitioning has come at a massive cost — she estimates about €60,000 so far.

'Thankfully my GoFundMe page has helped, I've also borrowed from family and friends,' she says. 'Thank God I still have my home. I will get my debts sorted out at some stage, but this is what happens to women, they are financially exhausted and they have to give up.'

It is just over ten years since Mandy first met Ramy Gamal Maamoun Mohamed on a night out in Dubai, where she was working as a teacher. The Egyptian banker was 'very charming', and the pair struck up a relationship.

They visited each other's home countries, meeting their respective families and in July 2017 they were married. It was agreed they

would settle in Ireland and raise a family here.

They first rented in Dublin and their son Zayn was born in May 2018. Working as an education administrator, Mandy was able to save up and buy a home in Dundalk. Her husband was working in customer service.

Although their marriage was coming under some strain, with Mandy feeling isolated and pressured to keep them financially afloat, their second son Kareem was born in November 2020.

When it was suggested that the family go to Egypt to visit her mother-in-law, Mandy thought it was a good idea. The boys had never met their grandmother and the restrictions on travel were finally lifting after the pandemic.

They flew out of Ireland in late



Long road: Mandy Kelly has spent more than two years trying to get her sons back

February 2022. Mandy had absolutely no reason to suspect anything was wrong; Ramy Gamal had applied for a visa renewal just before they left, and Zayn had been registered at a local primary school where he was due to start the following September.

After returning home in March 2022 without her children and in a highly distressed state, Mandy reported the matter to the gardai. Since then, she's met with Tánaiste Micheál Martin, Justice Minister Helen McEntee, the children's ombudsman and a plethora of other TDs and politicians, to beg them all for help.

In these unsettled times, she's

anxious that people don't blame any difference in culture or religion for what's happened to her family.

'I know from working in the Middle East for very many years that this is totally against the Islamic faith,' she says. 'What he has done is appalling, devout Muslims are appalled at what he has

done. I am so grateful that an Egyptian Islamic cleric reached out his hand immediately to help me and my two boys because he was so horrified at what had happened.'

She adds: 'My love for the Middle East hasn't been tarnished by what has happened, I loved my time there. I had nothing but amazing experiences with people I dealt with in that region.'

Miceal O'Hurley also points out how the Egyptian legal system, since becoming engaged, has moved quickly on Mandy's situation.

'One of the sad things about Ms Kelly's case is how some members of the public blame her for marry-

'Devout Muslims are appalled at what he's done'

ing outside of her faith and nationality,' he tells the Irish Daily Mail.

'With some 23 per cent of Irish residents being born outside of the State and with a growing asylum seeker population and international protection cohort, we will sadly see more of these cases. As a society we need to be accepting of diversity and more culturally aware of other people. For instance, I continually see on social media feeds that Ms Kelly would not get justice under a legal system informed by Sharia law.'

'To the contrary, Sharia law promotes the care and custody of

small children to be with their mothers and seeks to have both parents play a role in their children's lives.

'We shouldn't reject outright that foreign jurisdictions are capable of devising a justice system every bit as sophisticated as ours. That Ms Kelly obtained custody in Egypt, and the courts treated her with respect and kindness and expedited the matter is proof positive of this.'

O'Hurley says work done in the last few weeks by the Minister for Foreign Affairs Micheál Martin, his department and the Irish Embassy in Cairo has been 'pivotal' in securing the custody order. However, he also believes the Irish Government needs to re-examine the protocols and supports in place to deal with child abductions. He says the Hague Convention, drawn up in 1980, is out of date.

'The scale of the problem requires a new approach that actually discourages child-taking in the first instance,' he says. 'And produces the return of the children in the second instance.'

Other countries, he says, have set up funds to help parents whose children have been taken. The legal and document costs, the travelling abroad and accommodation costs are often 'too onerous for most parents to absorb'.

'Without resources to assist parents, the kidnapping parent almost always prevails because they incur almost no cost in maintaining the child in their country of origin,' he explains.

'While the Irish parents lose jobs, re-mortgage houses, take out credit union loans and have to beg through online fundraising platforms in the hopes of simply contesting the kidnapping.'

Mandy, who works in educa-

A mother's love: Mandy with Zayn and Kareem, who were only three and two when their father took them

tional training, says her employers have been a tremendous support during this entire ordeal.

'When I went back to work my colleagues and boss were incredible,' she explains. 'They gave me projects to work on that I was really interested in, it helped keep me occupied.'

She's also been allowed to build up annual leave, which she is currently using to spend time in Egypt while the police search for her estranged husband.

'I did it thinking that this was going to happen,' she says.

'I can't be thankful enough to them, the company has been so supportive.'

These last few weeks in Egypt have been busy for her.

'I was in the Irish Embassy today meeting with officials there,' she explains. 'Earlier this week I was liaising with lawyers, there's a big push happening for him to hand over the boys, I've felt a good hand of support from the authorities here.'

There is still, however, a lot of time for her to think about being reunited with her boys — and where in this vast city they might be.

'I worry,' she admits. 'I just want them to be OK when they see me, just not to be scared. Zayn turned six in May; I know he'll probably

'Zayn will have a memory of me but Kareem will have none'

have some sort of memory of me. But Kareem, he'll have none.

'Please god time will help heal us, and they might not know tomorrow, or next year, but when they're adults they'll know everything I've done for them.'

The last couple of years have altered her, she says.

'My facial features have actually changed, but then this would destroy anybody,' she explains. 'Nothing else matters to me, all I care about is having my kids with me.'

As she waits in Cairo for news about her sons, family and friends are staying in daily contact.

'There's an awful lot of good folk out there,' she says. 'A whole community of people are supporting me. My mother is keeping busy by doing up the house for the boys, so it's ready for them.'

'This week she's been painting the outdoor space, so there's plenty of room for them to play.'

'It's been so tough on her, she badly misses them and she's incredibly concerned about me, that I'm mentally and physically able to cope. I just can't wait to get home, close the door behind us and spend time with my children to make sure the healing process begins.'

'Some time in the future I will continue to support parents in similar situations in any way that I can. There have to be more structures within Government departments to help people like us.'

'It's too hard, what you have to do to get help.'

