Prime-Time Lives

She says he kidnapped their daughters, he says he had to save them

September 1, 1998 By Peter Kurth

As my deadline approached this month, I found myself contemplating themes of resurrection in ways I hadn't expected. "Lazarus" has been my alter ego for nearly two years, ever since my health rebounded on protease inhibitors and I found myself contemplating a future that until then didn't exist. Facing AIDS,
I never expected to reach my 45th birthday last July, just as I never expected my family's past—in fact, the most sorrowful episode in our lives—to rise up in a welter of national publicity and demand that we account for ourselves.

You may have heard about this story on television or run across it in People or Newsweek. Simply told, it's the story of two little girls who were kidnapped from their mother in Massachusetts 19 years ago by their father and raised by him under false identities, having been told that their mother was dead. When the truth came out after two decades, when the father was finally tracked down in Florida and arrested and charged with kidnapping, the now-grown girls stood staunchly by him, calling him "the best mother, father and friend" that anyone could have and declaring that if it had to happen all over again, they would want it to happen the same way. Their father, Stephen Fagan, was recently indicted for the kidnapping. Their mother, Barbara Kurth, is my sister.

And in the last few months, I've heard her described by Fagan's attorneys as "an alcoholic," "an unfit mother," "a liar" and "an art thief." We managed a laugh over that last one. Fagan has no defense against the kidnapping charges except to assert that my sister was a monster. We all remember what it was like when Barbara came home to Vermont in 1980, several months after her girls were taken. We remember the look in her eyes and the sound of her voice. She describes the person she was at the time as "some pathetic woman," battling a host of personal problems and a vicious ex-husband who, plainly, would stop at nothing to get what he wanted.

"I remember sitting in the dark by myself for days and days and days," Barbara told reporters recently. "I was in despair. I had been only a mother for the years that I had them with me, and suddenly I was not that anymore, and I had absolutely no idea what to do, what I should be, what I was or anything." She contemplated suicide, but rejected it: "I had to either completely drop out of sight and be nothing but this person who couldn't function, or I had to live." Within a year of the kidnapping, she was back in school, and by 1987 had earned a PhD in cell biology. She is Dr. Barbara Kurth now, remarried and serving on the faculty of the University of Virginia. She has no

other children.

Looking through the stack of press clippings I've collected, staring at my sister's face amid garish headlines and tabloid dreck, I'm filled with an admiration so strong I can barely express it. I have another reason for writing about Barbara here, and that's to give her thanks. It was Barbara who rescued me, I believe, at a time when my own life looked bleaker than anything I'd ever imagined, after I'd been hospitalized with AIDS-related pneumonia, when I was sick, jobless and spiraling downward in a savage depression that had everyone in my family on the edge of their seats. They all helped, but it was Barbara whose words got through.

"If you decide it isn't worth it," she said, "if you decide it's too much, no one on earth will understand why better than I do. But promise me something: If you do decide to jump out a window, call me first."

I never needed to make that call. The promise was enough. I know that she saved my life.

Is this a story of love triumphing over adversity? I'd say it is, though my sister is not so sentimental. When asked about her own resurrection from grief-stricken mother to biology professor, she replies: "I don't think I've been transformed. I think I've just become myself. It took a lot of work."

When we look at each other now, we both see resurrected selves, and we can only hope that Barbara's daughters, somewhere deep down, have some memory of what they have missed, and what they might gain, by knowing her.

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