

K · A · Y · L · A

I feel her absence

Her picture was everywhere. On bus shelters and T-shirts and the front page and the bulletin board in my kitchen. Little Kayla with the shiny brown hair and the angel eyes. Three year old Kayla Klaudusz who went missing from the courtyard of her apartment building and isn't coming back. If I have allowed myself to think of other missing children as somehow 'mythical,' other parents' pain as somehow unrelated to me, this time I found it impossible to do so. I pass Kayla's building, less than a ten minute walk from my home, several times a week. When I was three years old I lived not half a block from where a family now grieves the loss of a little girl and a tiny baby sister wonders where her 'La' has gone. Although I never knew Kayla I feel her presence acutely. I miss her.

I joined the search for Kayla the day after she went missing, within hours of reading about her disappearance. By then no one believed that she was simply 'lost,' but in those first desperate days I'm sure there were others like me, others who hoped against all reason, all logic, that we would find her in time. As we searched the back lanes, the garages, the river banks and yes, the garbage dumpsters, a vision of Kayla often appeared before my eyes. At night, unable to sleep, I imagined her lying somewhere hurt and frightened and alone. But alive. I hoped a woman would find her — a woman who would rock her gently, stroke her hair, whisper to her that she would soon be home with her mommy and daddy.

Once, struggling through the tall, dense brush of High Park with a hundred others, I found myself beside Kayla's father, Steve. As we worked side by side in silence, sweat dripping down our faces, our long poles poking and prodding the thick undergrowth, I wondered how I would feel if we were searching not for *his* child, but for *mine*.

But it was Kayla's mother, Keri, who made me really understand. On her 24th birthday, she said that the only present she wanted was to have her daughter returned safely. "It's all I want and all I will ever want," the papers quoted her as saying. The simplicity of that statement rang so painfully true for me that I felt I'd been hit in the stomach with a sledge hammer. It

was of course exactly how I would feel, how anyone would feel, in her situation. But it was more than that. It was her choice of words. "It's all I want and all I will ever want." In that one sentence I heard my own speech pattern, my own voice, and perhaps for the first time I knew with absolute visceral certainty, that what we often say but seldom really believe was true: it *could* have been my child.

That's when the tears, which had not come before, began. Tears for Kayla and for Allison Parrot and Nicole Morin and Christine Jessop and Michael Dunahee and Andrea Atkinson and all the other children who have been stolen by those who cannot love them, by these who do not deserve them. It's a very long list and sometimes I'm afraid that these tears, once begun, may never stop.

And in a sense the tears are for my daughter. My precious little girl who cannot do and cannot be all that she is capable of. And perhaps the tears are for me too. For the mother I *want* to be and the mother I'm *forced* to be and the great sad gulf that lies between the two. The world is not a kind and gentle place for children, and more often than not, I, who love my child more than life itself, am the one to say no to her dreams, her would-be adventures.

I have never seen a four year old who was not beautiful and mine is no exception. I have a picture of her taken recently on a beach in Toronto, long legs stretched out in front of her, serious little face fixed in concentration. She's trying to decide whether to risk one more shovelful on an already precarious castle. Like most of my photographs the background is simple and uncluttered. Just sand and water. My daughter's image fills most of the frame. It's a rather beautiful picture of a beautiful child and this beautiful picture of this beautiful child frightened me. Not later, when I saw it, but then, when I took it.

I sat on a blanket a few yards away, peering through the viewfinder off and on, mostly on, for perhaps ten minutes, waiting for the right moment. My daughter has long since grown used to this, to looking up and seeing a camera instead of her mother's face. It's an arrangement we're both comfortable with. She ignores me. But on that particular day something felt wrong. Something I couldn't quite explain. A slight tension in the back of the neck, a pressure just below the solar plexus. Every time I put the camera down for a

few minutes this discomfort, this vague uneasiness, went away. Then suddenly I knew why.

Without the camera my field of vision extended in all directions for some distance around my daughter but *with* the camera I could only see a few feet on either side of her. That was enough to make me uncomfortable. The visual safety zone, the invisible net I throw around her to protect her from the dangers of the world, could too easily be penetrated. Had someone approached her, scooped her up and run away with her, I was afraid I might not see them until it was too late. Too late to save her. Too late to ever get her back.

Even at the time this seemed absurd. How bizarre I thought, that a watchful, attentive mother should worry about her child being abducted from a busy, public beach on a Sunday afternoon.

Two weeks later it happened. In another part of Toronto, on a beach much like the one my daughter and I frequent, a two year old boy was picked up and carried off while his mother, no doubt also watchful and attentive, looked on in horror from a few yards away. Though she fought to regain control of her screaming, terrified son, his abductor managed to carry him some distance before being apprehended by police. The child was returned, physically unharmed, to his mother, but had his abductor been armed or had he managed to get the child into a waiting car, the drama might have had a very different, and very tragic ending. The boy may in time forget the incident (there are those who would argue otherwise and I'm inclined to agree with them), but his mother will most certainly never forget. For the rest of her life it will affect her relationship with her son.

My own relationship with my daughter, and possibly the very core of her personality has been altered by the constant need to protect her from those who would do her harm. It is her nature to be a bit of a loner, a wanderer, stubborn and defiant in the extreme. She's a lot like me. She may not be the easiest child in the world to live with but we love her just the way she is. By now of course she's 'well-trained.' She knows to stay right beside me in the supermarket, doesn't get too far ahead on the street, asks permission to go to another area of the playground, never speaks to strangers. This relentlessly cautionary approach to life goes against her grain as it goes against mine but that's reality now.

Survival tactics are part of parents', and kids', lives.

I'm familiar with the various techniques for street-proofing kids. Be alert not afraid. Good touching *versus* bad touching. Beware of situations not people. I've tried it all. She understands none of it. She wants specifics. Details. Facts. Who exactly will approach her? What will they say? What will they look like? Where will they want to take her? And of course, the toughest question of all — why? She wants answers and she wants them from me.

From the beginning my daughter knew that Kayla was missing and that I was helping to look after her. (I had not yet found the courage to tell her that Kayla's ravaged little body was pulled from the weeds and the filth of Toronto's industrial harbour on August 2nd, 23 days after she disappeared.) Have you looked in the park she asks? Down that street? In the playground? Have you looked everywhere Mommy? Though we have been careful only to say that a little girl in our neighbourhood is missing and that the grown-ups are trying to find her, one day she comes to me and says in a small, quiet voice, "Mommy, maybe somebody *took* Kayla." This time it is not a question. She has thought about it and somehow she realizes that a child is not 'lost' forever. There is nothing I can do except put my arms around her and agree that yes, maybe somebody took Kayla. This shared moment of truth makes us both very sad.

Returning once again from a day long search, tired and dirty and despondent, I dreaded having to face her. Having to tell her that once again the grown-ups, the all-powerful, all-knowing grown-ups, had failed to find Kayla. I knew that she would be disappointed but nothing could have prepared me for her response. With more than a trace of anger in her voice she said, "Maybe you're not looking hard enough." Then she turned and walked away.

At the time I was too stunned to react but since then I've thought a lot about what she said. Maybe she's already losing faith in the grown-ups. Maybe she's right. How hard *am* I really looking? For answers. For solutions. Sometimes I can't wonder how serious I am, how serious most of us really are about building a society in which kids are free from violence.

The violence of war. Abuse. Hunger. A society in which it would be inconceivable for anyone to willfully inflict hideous

and outrageous pain on a three year old child. In which it would be nothing short of a national emergency for a child to be missing. A society in which our kids could be as trusting and as daring as we would wish them to be, as we *need* them to be, if we are not to raise a generation afraid of its own shadow. How hard would we be looking if it were *our* child and not Keri and Steve's?

I've asked myself a hundred times why I felt I *had* to join the search for Kayla. Why it seemed essential to my own stability, my own sanity. Was it simply because she lived in my own neighbourhood, so close to where I lived at her age? Because



I've asked myself a hundred times why I felt I *had* to join the search for Kayla. Why it seemed essential to my own stability, my own sanity.

I have a little girl myself? I don't think so. There's something else.

Since the murder of fourteen young women in Montreal, I often feel that the knowledge of one more act of male violence against a woman or a child will be more than I can bear. That I will disintegrate, sink to a level of cynicism or despair from which I may never return from the burden of knowing that there are those who hate us so. Kayla's disappearance, the awareness of what might happen to her, perhaps already happened to her, threatened to upset an already delicate equilibrium, threatened to be the fatal shovelful of sand atop the already precarious castle.

But to ask why I joined the search for Kayla, is of course, the wrong question. The real questions are much more difficult to answer. Why haven't I joined other searches? Given more time, more money, more thought to protecting and assisting the victims of violence, whoever, and wherever, they may be? Why haven't I cared more? And what about my friends? Where were they when Kayla was missing? And the men who feel that the issue of male violence is not within their realm? Who think that they are not guilty and that being 'not guilty' is the same as being innocent. Perhaps they would like to accompany my daughter and I on our trips to

and from day care to help us fend off the leers, the gestures, the comments, we face daily in our less than middle class neighbourhood. Perhaps they can explain to my daughter what has happened to Kayla. Perhaps they can explain it to me.

If thousands of us had turned up at midnight to look for Kayla when the news of her disappearance was first aired would we have been able to find her in time? We'll never know. But she might have had a chance. Each of us must look within ourselves to ask how we can help, how we can stop the violence, and every time we hear of another victim, another tragedy, we will have to ask ourselves how hard

we're really looking for the answers.

I can't speak for others but for the rest of my life I will have to live with the knowledge that the view from a four year old is that maybe *I'm* not looking hard enough.

The original version of this article was written on August 2nd, 1991 and discussed for the first time with one of the editors of this journal in a telephone conversation from 7:10 pm to 7:30 pm on that day. Throughout the writing of the article, and the subsequent conversation with Eimear O'Neill, there remained at least the faint possibility that Kayla Klaudusz, who had gone missing from her apartment building on July 10th, might be found alive and safe. The following morning we were shocked and saddened to learn from the newspaper headlines that Kayla had been found. While this article was being written two railway workers had discovered her body floating in an isolated section of the Toronto Harbour. Kayla was removed from the water at 7:20 pm.

Lin Gibson is a Toronto/Winnipeg writer who also works in film production. She was the first director of Osborne House, a shelter for women and children set up in Winnipeg in 1975.