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Front Page Story - Focus Section

SOCIETY

Severed lives

When a parent abducts a child, no one emerges unscathed

BY MATTHEW BRELIS

It is at the far end of the spectrum of failed marriages, a place where love, fear, anger, resentment, and revenge create a toxic cocktail that propels one parent to risk incalculable damage to children by kidnapping them and usurping the role of the other parent.

In a nation where the majority of marriages end in divorce, such cases happen with astonishing frequency. A US Department of Justice study says there are more than 354,000 family abductions annually. In more than 160,000 of them, the department estimates, the parent intended to keep the child indefinitely.

Such was the case of Stephen Fagan, who took his two daughters, ages 5 and 2, on a court-approved weekend visit one fall weekend in 1979. Their mother's only glimpse of them since was on a television screen Tuesday as they attended their father's arraignment in Framingham on

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Matthew Brelis is the Globe's Focus writer.

No one unscathed in a parei

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kidnapping charges.

Fagan defended his actions by saying they were necessary to protect the children. But are there ever circumstances that justify one parent disenfranchising the other, bypassing all social and legal strictures in the process? Authorities in the field are doubtful, saying such abductions create problems of their own.

"If you were absolutely sure that something terrible was happening, I can imagine a parent taking such drastic measures, but it is at an enormous cost to the child," said Carolyn Newberger, a Boston child psychologist.

Clearly, Elizabeth Morgan thought the effort worth it. In 1987, Morgan, a Washington, D.C., physician, spirited her daughter away from her ex-husband, who she contended was sexually abusing their child. Although the father vigorously denied the claim, Morgan spent two years in jail because she refused to divulge the whereabouts of the girl, who was with Morgan's parents overseas.

But authorities say that claims of abuse, or the perception of one parent that the other is doing monstrous things to a child, are often just that: claims and perceptions, not reality.

Richard A. Warshak, a clinical psychologist in Dallas and author of "The Custody Revolution: the Father Factor and the Mother Mystique," says children's safety is often used as a rationalization by controlling parents. "They express concern about drinking or sexual abuse, and the reality is that that masks a desire to take the child and inflict pain. Even when it seems that there are reasons to do it, the devastation is so great it is never a good solution to the problem and ends up creating far more harm than the parent was trying to protect the child from."

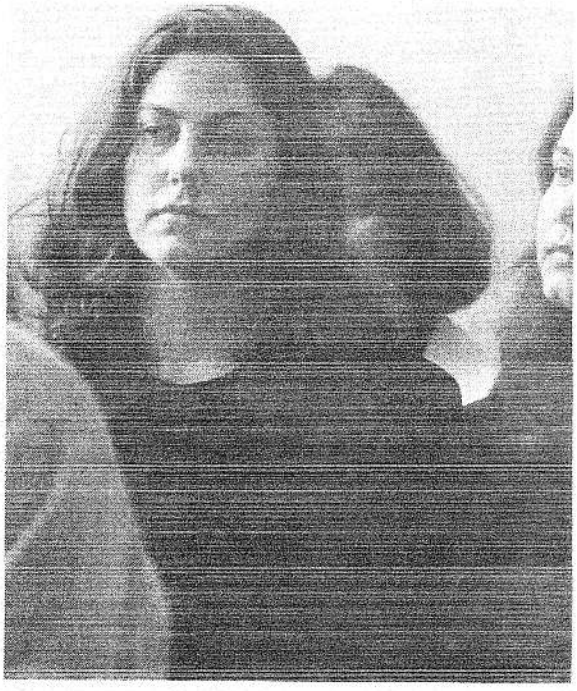
Chris Hatcher spent nine years researching the impact of kidnapping on victims for the Justice Department. He said almost all parental abductions occur because the parents believe the children to be in danger of imminent harm.

"While that does occur in some cases, the allegations vastly exceed the actual number of cases. As a group of people, parents who are left behind have no greater propensity toward child abuse than the general population," Hatcher says.

Fagan and Barbara Kurth were divorced in 1978. When Kurth and Rachael and Wendy Fagan moved from Framingham to North Adams, the "he-said, she-said" vituperativeness that characterizes many divorces and custody battles followed. Kurth, who had won custody, was portrayed then and now by Fagan as a negligent, alcoholic mother whose binges left her passed out while the half-naked girls went to neighbors begging for food. Her lawyers countered then and now that she has always been a loving, devoted mother who suffered from narcolepsy, a condition of frequent and uncontrollable desire for sleep.

Was she a negligent mother? Fagan went to court with his complaints after his daughters and ex-wife moved to North Adams. An official representing the children investigated the charges and was not able to substantiate them. Shortly afterward, Fagan disappeared with the girls.

Pointing to the resources available – from a more enlightened law enforcement community, to a court system that frequently puts the needs of a child ahead of parents, to increased social services – specialists say the risk of lasting damage to a child is too great to resort to abduction.



Lisa, left, and Rachael Martin stood with their stepr trict Court Tuesday as their father, Richard Fagan,

They are not alone. Former abductors and abductees agree with them.

Lee Coburn, a lawyer, acknowledges his children were not being harmed by their mother. He took his 10-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son from their Atlanta home in 1977 out of revenge because his marriage was dissolving and he thought his wife was in love with another man. In a fit of rage, he moved to Hawaii, and changed their last name from Coburn to Landel. They were on their own for 10 years. It was, Coburn says, the biggest mistake of his life.

"It is totally destructive and a violation of everyone's rights – the children's and the parent left behind.

"I acted out of anger and revenge, and I think most people do," says Coburn, who is writing a book on parental abduction. "I don't buy the 'for the safety of the children' argument. If we are to live in a just society, we must work within the system. Otherwise it is anarchy."

Within four years, Coburn, by then living in Seattle, realized the mistake he had made but was paralyzed by fear of jail, and of civil suits for pain and suffering he caused his ex-wife. He shared his fears with his children.

"It has been 20 years since I took them, and 10 years since they reunited with their mother, and we are still dealing with it," Coburn said.

The erasure of the other parent can be gradual, with the abducting parent telling the children that they are going on a vacation, and the vacation just gets longer. Some abducting parents tell children that the parents left behind hated the children or did not want them.

Or the erasure can be swift. It was in the Fagan case, where he told the girls that their mother was dead. In similar cases, some abducting parents have

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AP PHOTO

other Harriet Golding Martin in Framingham Dis-as arraigned on charges of kidnapping them.

even purchased tombstones to show a child where Mom or Dad is buried. The Fagan case is unusual because the charade continued unabated for nearly two decades.

It is rare that one parent carries out an abduction and then develops a new identity without the help of friends or relatives. The circumstances in the Fagan case indicate he had help from his parents. Investigators have said he transferred ownership of his Framingham house them before disappearing. They sold it and moved to Florida, 10 miles from where Fagan and their granddaughters were living as the Martin family.

"The 5-year-old girl got a very odd view of death – that everything changes: my house, my friends, my relatives," says Warshak, the Dallas psychologist.

Specialists say it is not uncommon for abducted children to have a sense that something is amiss. Why was there no funeral? How come we never see any of Mom's relatives? Perhaps Rachael and Lisa Martin, as they are now known, were told not to apply to colleges in Massachusetts.

But if Rachael and Lisa are to feel a sense of betrayal, it will likely come later. Their father has been a heroic figure for them, the grieving widower, raising two children single-handedly. He has been their anchor. It is not surprising, specialists say, that the young women have not rushed to meet their mother.

"What we found was, first, there is a fundamental belief that everything you counted on, and depended on, is not really true," says Hatcher. "And what do you do when you are confronted with something like that? You deny it."

If and when a reunion does come, Kurth should not be surprised if her daughters present her with an unusual request. "The recovering parent often expects a tearful reunion, and the first thing that the child or children will say is, 'We have to help Daddy.'" Hatcher says. "The mother is not expecting that, and obviously is not always motivated to do that."

Rebecca Hegar, who coauthored the book "When Parents Kidnap" with Geoffrey L. Greif, has found some cases, though, when the psychological and emotional effects are minor.

"We had one case where the father took a single daughter when she was 6 and hid her from the searching mother until she was in college. He felt he was the parent to offer her the most emotionally, and he did a conscientuous job. She went to an Ivy League college. And by the normal gross measures of success in life, she was doing well in education and socially. She was a poised, together young woman. That is not to say she did not have tremendously mixed feelings about her father." And by virtually all accounts, Rachael and Lisa Martin are smart, athletic, talented young women.

Coburn's daughter, now a psychologist and mother of two, said that nothing, not even sexual abuse, justifies one parent stealing a child from the other. "Most parental abductors feel what they are doing is in the best interest of the children," Lori Coburn said. "But look at the psychological scars that are created for the rest of their lives."

After reconnecting with her mother, Lori Coburn dropped out of college and moved to Georgia in an effort to get to know her mother and play out a part of her youth she never had. "I would come home and cry, and she would hold me. I was grieving the loss of her not being there for my first prom dress, my first bra, and helping me through my first period. Then, there came an acceptance that no matter what we said or did, we couldn't get back those 10 years.

"I spent a year living with her. We cried and cried and cried, and we shopped and shopped and shopped."

She still cannot let her children sleep at night with their windows open. And her father says, "My son still is not free of it and is still angry at me for what I deprived him of."

In addition, abducted children often feel some resentment that the parent left behind did not search harder. Barbara Kurth's fortitude in trying to find her children has been questioned. After all, how hard could they have been to find when their paternal grandparents moved from Massachusetts to Florida?

"She could have looked really hard and not had good advice, or the right resources," Hegar says. And there are more resources today in trying to find someone – including state and federal laws against parental kidnapping – that have law enforcement more actively involved. The devastation for the parent who has lost the children includes grief and guilt. The left-behind parent "has to adapt to a whole series of terrible choices in her life," says Greif, associate dean of the School of Social Work at the University of Maryland, and coauthor of "When Parents Kidnap."

"If you had children and they were abducted, you would spend every minute of every day trying to find them. But as the minutes stretch into months, at what point do you try to reestablish a life? If your child is gone for a year, can you go out to the movies? Can you have any fun?"

A question Greif poses to parents who are left behind is, "What construction do you need to make on how your child is doing that will allow you to live your life to the fullest and still be true to the search?"

In about 25 percent of parental kidnappings, there is no resolution.

"This is a long, complex process, and it is rarely ever 'happily ever after,'" says Ernie Allen, the president of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. "Do we really want to deny children all access to the other parent for life? Even if the abduction was righteous, he had to lie about the children's mother."