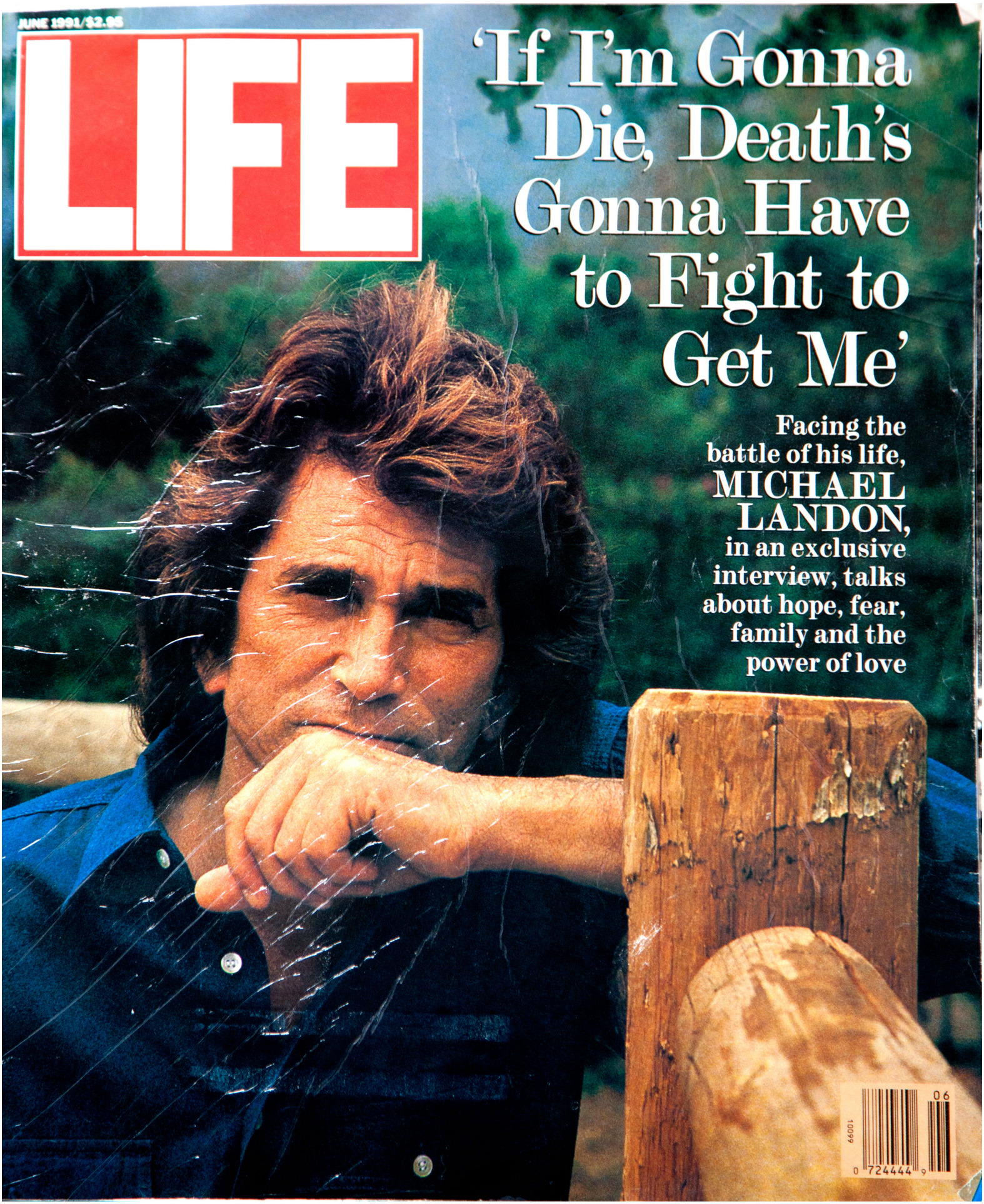

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When a Child Is Taken

The American Family
Part Three

He was four. He called her Mommo. He liked butterfly kisses and building castles. And then one day he was gone, abducted by her ex-husband. For seven years Kara lived with the fear that she might never see her son again—and that even if she did, he would not love her anymore

A photographic essay by Eugene Richards

Text by George Howe Colt

Life_page1and2.jpg

There were times I could almost feel him needing me'

The block, a brown wooden rectangle the size of a baby's first shoe, lay in the bottom of Kara's bag, among the keys and the cigarettes and the lipsticks. It had been there ever since her four-year-old son was taken from her by his father one rainy December morning seven years ago. For seven years she had carried this block with her wherever she went, not knowing whether the boy who had built castles with it was thin or chubby, happy or sad, alive or dead. Now, with the bag on her lap, 29-year-old Kara Hernandez sat in a strange white station wagon parked across the street from an apartment complex in a city 1,800 miles from her home. She was waiting for her son to walk out the door. She was waiting to take him back. So many times she had pictured how the reunion would be—the disbelief, the exultation, the never letting go—but now her mind cramped with doubts. Would she recognize Jimi? Would he recognize her? What if her ex-husband was there? What if he made their son choose between them? She felt certain Jimi would want to come with her. But what if he didn't?

When I lost Jimi, it was as if someone had ripped my heart right out of me," says Kara. Jimi had been the only part of her life she had ever really cared for and taken care of. Kara grew up fiercely independent and achingly lonely, the child of a broken marriage with little childhood of her own. By the time she was 17, she had a drug habit, an abusive marriage and a baby who became the only reason to wake up in the morning. A year later she summoned the courage to divorce Kevin Brogdon. *I'm going to get you for this,* she remembers him shouting. *I'm going to hurt you like you hurt me.*

The couple was given shared custody of Jimi. Kara knew that she was far from an ideal parent, but she always tried to look out for her son. Although most of the money she earned as a stripper went to amphetamines, she made sure that Jimi was clothed and fed, that his eyes were tested and that he wore his glasses, that he got to the doctor for his shots. As her own life continued to unravel, Jimi came to represent a life as unblemished as his skin on the cheek she loved to stroke. She loved the way he'd pat her gently on the back as they hugged, the way they'd brush eyelashes and announce, "That's the way the butterflies kiss." She and Jimi used to sing "Pink Houses," a song by John Cougar Mellencamp that seemed to capture Kara's yearnings for a new start, and she would promise Jimi that someday they would have a house of their own, where the two of them would live happily ever after.

One rainy Saturday, six hours after Kara's mother-in-law was supposed to return Jimi from a Christmas shopping expedition at a Memphis mall, Kara's mother got a call from Kevin. He hadn't written or telephoned his son in more than a year, hadn't sent child support or fetched him for his six months' custody. "I've got Jimi in Texas," he told her. "And if your daughter ever decides to clean up her act, she can have her son back."

Kevin maintained that he feared for his child's well-being because of Kara's drug use. Kara, however, believed that vengeance, not compassion, had driven her ex-husband, that

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY EUGENE RICHARDS, JANINE ALTONGY

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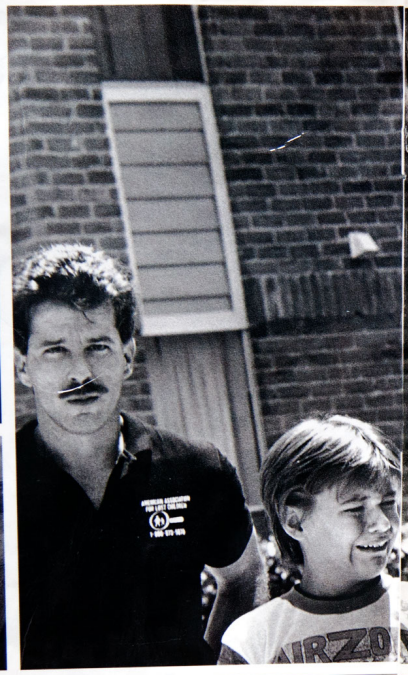
When Jimi was free, Kara took him to a photographer's studio for a formal portait. After Jimi was abducted, it was one of the few reminders Kara kept of heson, as she turned increasingly to drugs and alcohol to blot her pain.Eventually Kara got clean, remarried and took a job as a forklift operator at Gerber Products in Modesto, Calif. (op). And each December Kara would look at the calendar and think, "One more yea without my son."

She felt certain that Jimi would want to come with her. But what if he didn't?



For several days Mark Miller *(far left, top)*, director of the American Association for Lost Children, kept up surveillance of the apartment complex where Kara's ex-husband lived. When Kara got her first look at the building, she was filled with hope and apprehension *(bottom)*. On the morning of the "recovery" *(near left)*, Miller, at center, and his assistant Mike Kramer, at left, approached Jimi and a family friend, at right. "There's someone here who has been looking for you for a long time," Miller said, "someone who loves you very much."

he and their son had disappeared without a trace and that he was never going to return Jimi. Although Kara applied to all the so-called proper authorities, she found that laws governing family matters are as amorphous as the situations they purport to judge. The police said they couldn't get involved because it was a domestic matter; the juvenile courts said that the case was beyond their geographical jurisdiction; the lawyer said that Kara's only option was to get her ex-husband to appear in court on a custody hearing. Kara filed the necessary papers, but Kevin never showed up. She was awarded sole custody of a child she could not find.

For months Kara simply lay in bed and wept, so despondent that her roommate removed the pills and knives from their apartment. For the next two years Kara didn't seem to care whether she lived or died; she drove recklessly, got involved with a series of men who beat her, and her drug habit grew to include morphine and heroin. No matter how she punished herself, Kara felt she deserved it. She had lost her child. For a while, she even gave up looking for him. Eventually, she stopped talking about her son—it just hurt too much—and the fact of his existence was as hidden as the block at the bottom of her bag.

Two years after Jimi disappeared, Kara entered a treatment program for drug and alcohol abusers and got clean. "I did it for Jimi," she says. "And I did it for myself." She took her first steady job as a sales clerk at K mart. She met a man with whom she felt she could build a future, married him and became stepmother to a boy two years older than Jimi. Yet she knew that her family would never be complete until she found her son.

But clues were few. Kara scoured the newspapers for ads placed by child-finding agencies. One group wanted $600 just to put his name in its files, another wanted $3,000 to run a check on her ex-husband's social security number, a third said it couldn't do anything because the case was too old. The least expensive private investigator wanted $2,500 up front, far more than Kara could manage. It seemed that there was little she could afford to do. But at least once a week she called directory assistance in Houston, where Kevin had last been seen, asking whether they had a listing for him, for his brother or even for her son—*Jim Brogdon? Jimmy? James? J?* They never did. Eventually, some of her friends suggested it was time to let go, and even Kara wondered whether it would be less painful just to pretend that Jimi was dead. But her new husband, who had won a tough custody battle for his own son, wouldn't let her. "You do have a son," he told her. "He's alive, and you will find him."

One night Kara's sister happened to see a TV show about a group in Houston that found missing children. Kara called the American Association for Lost Children, whose director, a 32-year-old born-again Christian named Mark Miller, told Kara that his was the only agency that actively searched for missing children. There was no fee, he told her, but clients were asked to volunteer at car washes and bake sales to help fund the organization. Over the next few months Miller kept Kara informed of his progress as he followed a paper trail of utility bills, license plate numbers and forwarding addresses. And then, one evening last June, Kara got a call from Miller. "Are you sitting down?" he asked. Kara imme-

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Jimi, my baby . . . you're my baby. . . . Jimi, I'm your mama, remember me?'

diately assumed that something awful had happened. She sat down. "Well," said Miller, "I saw your son today."

On a hot, sticky Fourth of July weekend, Kara flew to Houston for what Miller called the "recovery." As they drove around town, the air balmy with smoke from backyard barbecues, the aroma of happy families, it was eerie for Kara to realize that she was in the same city as her son. The recovery was scheduled to take place on Sunday morning, but it kept getting postponed. Copies of the divorce papers had to be certified, Miller needed to talk to an attorney to clarify Kara's legal right to take back her son. Kara grew increasingly anxious. She had quit smoking four months earlier, but in Houston, she was back up to a pack a day. She called her husband each day in California, her mood oscillating between hope and despair. She spent nights on a foldout couch in the four-room bungalow that doubles as AALC offices and Miller's home, but she couldn't sleep. She sat up late, praying, biting her nails, staring at the photograph of her and Jimi, imagining what it would be like to be reunited. Always, just as she and Jimi were about to hug, Kevin would appear. "You don't want to go with her," he'd shout. "She's a bad mother."

Finally, learning that Jimi and his father would leave on a vacation the following day, Miller decided the time had come. On Tuesday morning, while Kevin was at work, Miller and Kara drove to the apartment complex and waited for Jimi to emerge.

All weekend, Kara had assumed that every boy with blond hair was her son, but as soon as she saw the tanned, handsome child in white shorts and T-shirt walk across the porch, she knew it was Jimi. "My God," she thought, "he's got my dad's nose." She watched Miller walk up and say something to her son, who started crying. Kara jumped out of the car. "Jimi!" Her son turned and looked at her in confusion, then turned back to Miller, who said softly, "That's your mom." And then Jimi ran into Kara's open arms. "They told me you didn't want me anymore," he murmured through his tears. "I knew that wasn't true." As she hugged her son for the first time in almost seven years, Kara felt his hand, tentatively, instinctively, begin to pat her on the back.

Although Jimi had been told that Kara had abandoned him, it seemed as if he had been waiting for Kara all that time. Jimi immediately called her Mom and went with her unquestioningly. Back at Mark's office, over ice cream and chocolate cake (Jimi made sure Kara got the biggest slice), mother and son stayed close to each other, saying little, relearning each other by touch, as if they could make up for seven years' worth of hugs in an hour. And even when Jimi suddenly asked her, *When's my birthday? What year was I born? What time was I born?*, it was not so much to verify her identity but to prove their connectedness. When she answered *(6:15 a.m., October 29, 1979)*, he gave a satisfied smile and said, "O.K." Their talk had the dizzy urgency of young lovers, wanting to know everything at once, and yet tentative and shy. Kara: "You're so handsome." Jimi: "I used to have a

Though it was clear that Jimi didn't recognize the woman with short blond hair *(opposite)*, he knew she was his mom. Jimi wept when he said goodbye to his friends *(top)*, but he went with his mother unquestioningly. Before they got on the plane to California, Jimi announced, "When I grow up, I want to marry someone just like my mom."

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The psychologist said only time will tell how well the new family adapts

spike." Kara: "So did I." Jimi: "Will you help me with my math?" Kara: "Your new brother's real good at it. Right now you'll have to share a bedroom with him." Jimi: "That's O.K." Kara: "Do you mind if I hold on to you some more? It's been a long time." Jimi: "Sure." Although Kara was amazed that everything felt so natural, it wasn't clear that Jimi really remembered her until he turned to her suddenly, shyly, and said, "Would you give me a butterfly kiss?" Kara put her face close to Jimi's and, through tears, gently brushed her eyelashes against his cheek.

Ethologists tell us that animal instinct can be so strong that dogs have found their way home through hundreds of miles of unfamiliar territory. For Kara and Jimi, finding their emotional way back to each other across a gulf of seven years may be no less remarkable. Sometimes, when Jimi climbs onto her lap or calls her Mommo, it feels to Kara as if they had never been apart. "It's like we both kind of regress," she says. But occasionally her son seems a stranger. Two weeks after they returned to his new home in California, Jimi said, "You guys don't know me, you don't know who I really am." And a few days later, over a seemingly trivial matter, Jimi's calm disintegrated into a screaming, bike-throwing fit.

Kara and Jimi don't talk much about the years apart, but there are occasional hints of what might have been lost. A battery of academic tests found that Jimi, at 11, was working at first grade level in several subjects. Diagnosed with dyslexia, he is being tutored three nights a week to bring him up to fifth grade level. And, to make the adjustment smoother, Jimi has met with a psychologist. He still wants to see his father, who has visitation rights, and though Kara has nightmares in which her son is taken from her again, she is careful never to say anything bad about Kevin. "I don't want any more hate in Jimi's life."

Sometimes, as she watches her son ride bikes with his stepbrother or tear down a motor with his stepfather, Kara is struck by how fragile a thing a family is, how easily fractured, and yet how flexible, how strong. How could these four people, the splinters from the explosions of previous families, fit together like the pieces of a puzzle? Even when Kara argues with her new husband over money or mediates a quarrel between her son and stepson, she feels a gust of gratitude that so extraordinary a family could be wrestling with such ordinary problems. Having overcome a bad marriage and a mean drug habit, Kara knew about the triumph of individual spirit, but what she hadn't foreseen was the strength of the family. Recently Kara and her husband bought a three-bedroom house—the first time either of them has owned a home. While putting up curtains in the kitchen, Kara was surprised to hear "Pink Houses" on the radio. "Jimi, here's our song!" she said. "What song?" he asked. Kara explained to her son that they used to sing it together and how she used to tell him that one day they would buy a little pink house and live together happily ever after. Jimi rolled his eyes. "Come on, Mom, don't be so corny." ▭

Kara had worried about the effect getting Jimi back would have on her new family, but thus far, life seems to be going well. Jimi adores his stepfather, Sal, who is teaching him to tear down motors, and Jimi likes to help out his stepbrother, Little Sal, with his paper route. Jimi hopes to return to Houston this summer for a visit with his father. Kara has told her son and her ex-husband that she will never keep them from seeing each other: "I wouldn't wish that kind of pain on anyone."

Next Month:

The Education of a Teenage Parent