

A Daughter's Death, A Father's Pain

Murder by M. Lardner

THE STALKING OF KRISTIN: A Father Investigates the Murder of His Daughter, by George Lardner Jr., Atlantic Monthly Press, 340 pp., \$23.

BY PEG TYRE

THIS IS a journalistic account of an almost unimaginable tragedy. A parent, in this case a prominent newspaper reporter, receives a telephone call informing him that his college-age daughter has been murdered. Her killer is a rejected suitor, someone she knew well enough to fear. Kristin Lardner had had an order of protection against her former boyfriend when he shot her on a street in Boston and then turned the gun on himself.

"The Stalking of Kristin" details George Lardner's passage through grief. He deals with the loss of his child by harnessing his professional curiosity and, using his daughter's death as a jumping-off point, conducting a full-scale investigation into the way our criminal-justice system fails women victimized by former boyfriends and husbands. He delves into the chaotic life of his daughter's killer, Michael Cartier, who had a history of bizarre behavior, drug and alcohol abuse and a burgeoning criminal record. He explores the bungling probation system and the featherweight counseling programs in which men who beat women often end up. In perhaps the sharpest portrait in the book, we are privy to the

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Photo by Edmund Lardner

Kristin Lardner in 1991

escalating violence between Cartier and his former girlfriend, Rose Ryan, and her struggle to get help from the police when Cartier stalked and assaulted her. With great bitterness, the author learns that according to the letter of the law, Cartier's long criminal history should have guaranteed him a jail cell, not the freedom he needed to terrorize and eventually gun down Kristin. But, as Lardner concludes, the porous set of laws which governs domestic violence often seem to protect the batterer rather than his victim.

In November, 1993, six months after Kristin's murder, the story was published at newspaper length in *The Washington Post*, where the author has worked for more than 30 years. It subsequently won a Pulitzer Prize.

"The Stalking of Kristin," above all, is a monumental act of love. And Lardner's pain is etched in every hard-won detail he turns up. The depth of his feelings aren't masked by the cool

reportorial writing. Underneath his easy, newspaperly style, a brokenhearted parent is keening. But more problematically, the book is also intended as an impassioned statement on behalf of victims' rights, and there were times when I wished the story could have been told by someone other than the victim's father.

Lardner doggedly interviews his daughter's friends, former boyfriends and teachers, but what he records are the broad if heartfelt recollections kindly served up to a grieving father — not the gleaming and revealing details so prized by an objective storyteller. From her friends and teachers, Lardner learns that Kristin was artistic, that she loved animals and that, as a high school student, she hung with an off-beat crowd but didn't do drugs. Going through the room she shared with other students, Lardner finds that she painted a self-portrait of herself covered with bruises after being beaten by the man who later took her life.

That harrowing artifact — and the self-awareness and self-defeat of a woman who could artistically catalog her own injuries — seems as fulsome a metaphor as any author could wish. But Lardner seems unable to delve into the complexities of an intelligent, gifted young woman who loved a violent man and then trusted an uncaring justice system to protect her from him. The portrait of Kristin Lardner that emerges sometimes seems superficial and curiously unformed. But who can criticize a father for recounting his warmest, if not most revealing, memories of his dead daughter? Ironically, the flaw in Lardner's book may be that he loved Kristin too much. ■