

the cradle will fall

The Tragedy of Peggy Ann Barsness

by aimee lee ball



*The Shocking
Story of a
Young Mother
Who Left Her
Baby to Die*

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One cold January morning in suburban Minneapolis, 22-year-old Peggy Ann Barsness bundled up her infant daughter, Kirsten, for a regular "well-baby" checkup at a local clinic specializing in family medicine. The same doctor who had delivered Kirsten exactly six months earlier pronounced her healthy and growing right on schedule, and a medical assistant gave her a DPT shot, for immunization against diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus. Around 1 P.M. that day, Barsness returned home, fed the baby, rocked her to sleep for an afternoon nap, placed her in a crib with a yellow blanket and several teddy bears, and then drove to the airport, where she purchased a one-way ticket to San Francisco, not to return for a week, leaving her daughter alone, unattended, to die.

Tales of such gravity and depravity shape the editorial pages of newspapers across the country, but the typical scenario involves poverty, drugs, broken homes or teenage pregnancy. The case of Peggy Ann Barsness, in contrast, is a middle-American nightmare, played out within a family that seems, on the surface, thoroughly "white bread"—a Grant Wood painting come to life. Her parents have been married for 26 years. Her father is an accountant. She went to John F. Kennedy High School and grew up on a pretty cul-de-sac in a beige and brown ranch house with flowering shrubs and a basketball hoop over the garage door.

What's wrong with this picture? It's a David Lynch movie, that's what. With pentimento effect, the patina of Midwestern civility and stability gives way to a portrait of a willful and intractable teenager whose rebellious behavior first confused and then alienated her parents. Gradually, the picture emerges of a young woman who had little motivation or intention in life, who came to define herself by success with men—and who finally became desperate to be with one particular man, regardless of the cost or consequences. Step back, and the larger view shows a time and place where single pregnant women may be encouraged to keep their babies rather than choose abortion or adoption, even though they do not have the financial or emotional resources to rear a child.

And a baby girl named Kirsten will never see her first birthday.

The suburbs of Minneapolis all seem to have euphonious, optimistic-sounding names—Golden Valley, Eden Prairie, Roseville—and it was in a 'burb called Bloomington that Barsness grew up, the middle child between two brothers. She was an outgoing and athletic little girl who ate everything put in front of her and romped with her family at a lake near their home—"a normal child, like the rest of them," according to her father. But by the time she finished grade school, Barsness had developed the body of the young woman she is today—5 feet 2, about 100 pounds—and she began to retreat. She spent an entire summer hiding out in the basement, then ran away from home and was placed in a group

facility for truant teens. She required a special reading program called Title One, dropped out of school in the tenth grade, got pregnant and miscarried at 16. She signed up for an equivalency diploma program called Project Reentry but didn't keep up with classes; she went for vocational training at the Hubert H. Humphrey Job Corps Center but could find only minimum-wage jobs, working the counter at a fast-food restaurant and the second shift at a dry cleaner.

In December 1987, Barsness's pelvis was fractured in an automobile accident. While recuperating at her parents' home, she became reacquainted with a young man who used to sing with her older brother in a local group—a Navy jet-engine mechanic named Timothy Brewer, home on leave from the U.S.S. *Enterprise*, stationed in northern California. Brewer and Barsness promised to correspond once he returned to the base, but Brewer got no answers to his letters until the end of February. "You probably won't want anything to do with me," Barsness finally wrote, according to the court record, confessing that she was five months pregnant by another man, who was moving to St. Louis, Missouri. "I probably won't keep the baby," she wrote. "I want to have a baby with someone who loves me, and I would like to be married."



Unexpectedly, Brewer was not put off by this news. He wrote back that same night, and the two began a courtship by mail: He confessed his unhappiness and boredom at sea; she poured out her fear and confusion about the pregnancy. "I can't keep the baby," she wrote in May. "I am just not ready to have a baby. There's too much I want to do. . . . I really don't think I could give the baby everything it will need." In June, Brewer called Barsness while on a drunken shore leave in Hong Kong, proposing marriage and promising he'd take on the responsibilities of being a father.

Brewer returned to Minnesota for the baby's birth on July 23—he'd signed up for recruiting duty to qualify for extended leave. Barsness didn't want him in the delivery room because she'd gone through Lamaze training with a friend as coach, but Brewer passed out cigars, suggested the name Kirsten and drove the new mother and child home from the hospital. "I thought it was the greatest thing that ever happened to me," he said. "I figured that five years down the road, I'd adopt her." Shortly before he returned to California in August, he bought Barsness an engagement ring, and they planned to marry that Christmas. Brewer wrote to Barsness almost every day he was at sea, sometimes addressing her as Peggy Ann Brewer. "I thought it would be kind of neat to play the charade," he said. "We weren't married, but we wanted to be, so we were playing like we were."

Barsness moved into her own apartment in September 1988. It was a pleasant two-story town house that was rent subsidized under Minnesota's generous family-aid program, and her parents agreed to pay the first two months rent of \$238 so she could buy some furnishings. Some of Barsness's letters from this time on her own revealed a growing maturity and stability. "I am getting a lot of pleasure from people back home," Barsness wrote. "I listen to what they have to say. I don't always agree, but some of it makes sense."

But she also wrote rambling letters of isolation, insecurity and anxiety: "I want my own place but I don't want (continued)

to be alone. I really wish you could be here. . . . Mr. Brewer, I love you a lot, and I can't stand not being able to show you how much. . . . My, or should I say our, daughter doesn't stop crying. She's spoiled. I have to go pick her up before she dies. . . ."

In October 1988, the U.S.S. *Enterprise* was in port for refitting and repainting. Barsness left Kirsten with her parents and went to visit Brewer in San Francisco for the long Columbus Day weekend. She suggested eloping to Reno, but he wanted to wait until his tour of duty was over—"I thought I'd be able to provide better for Peggy and Kirsten," he

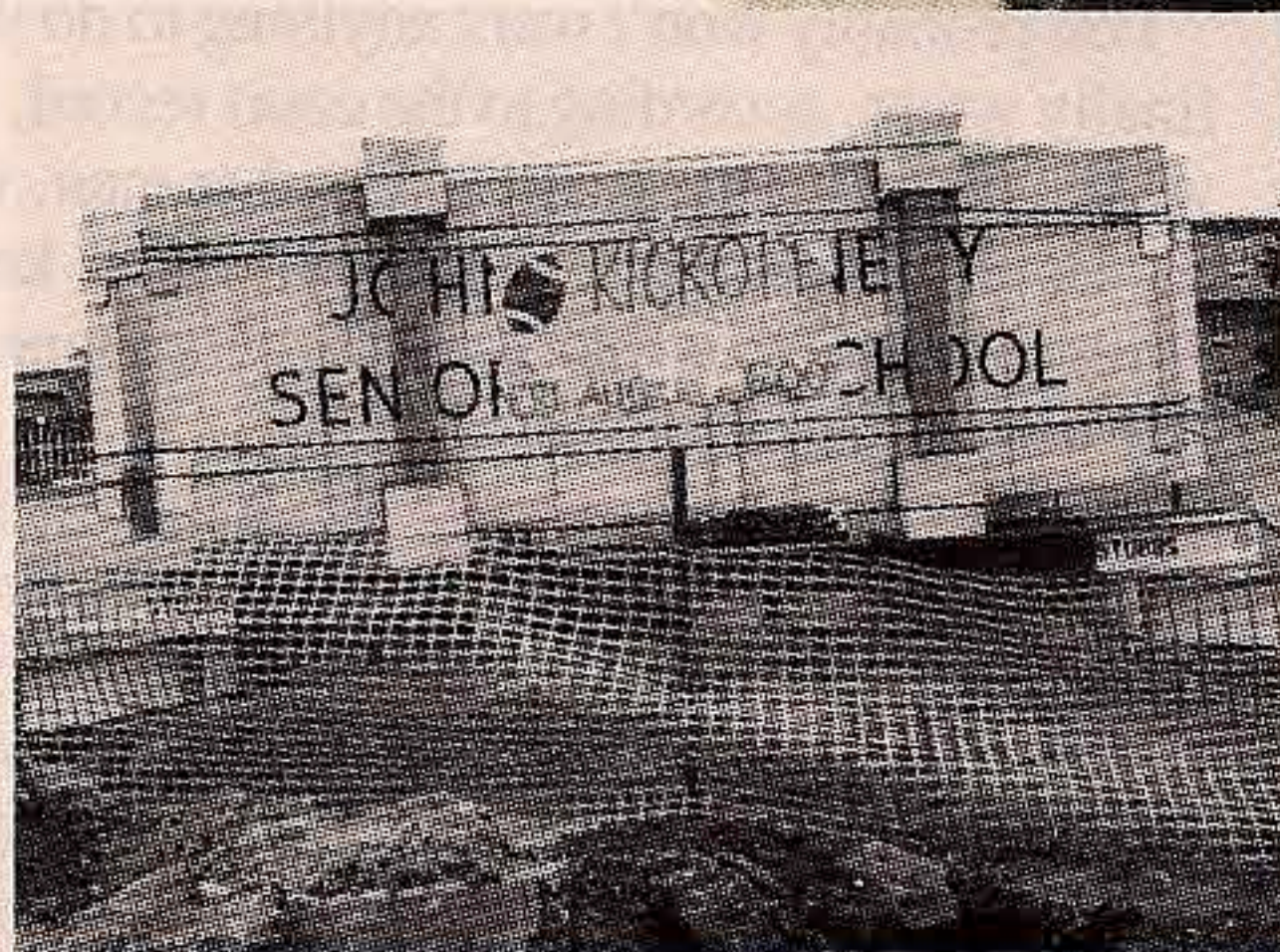
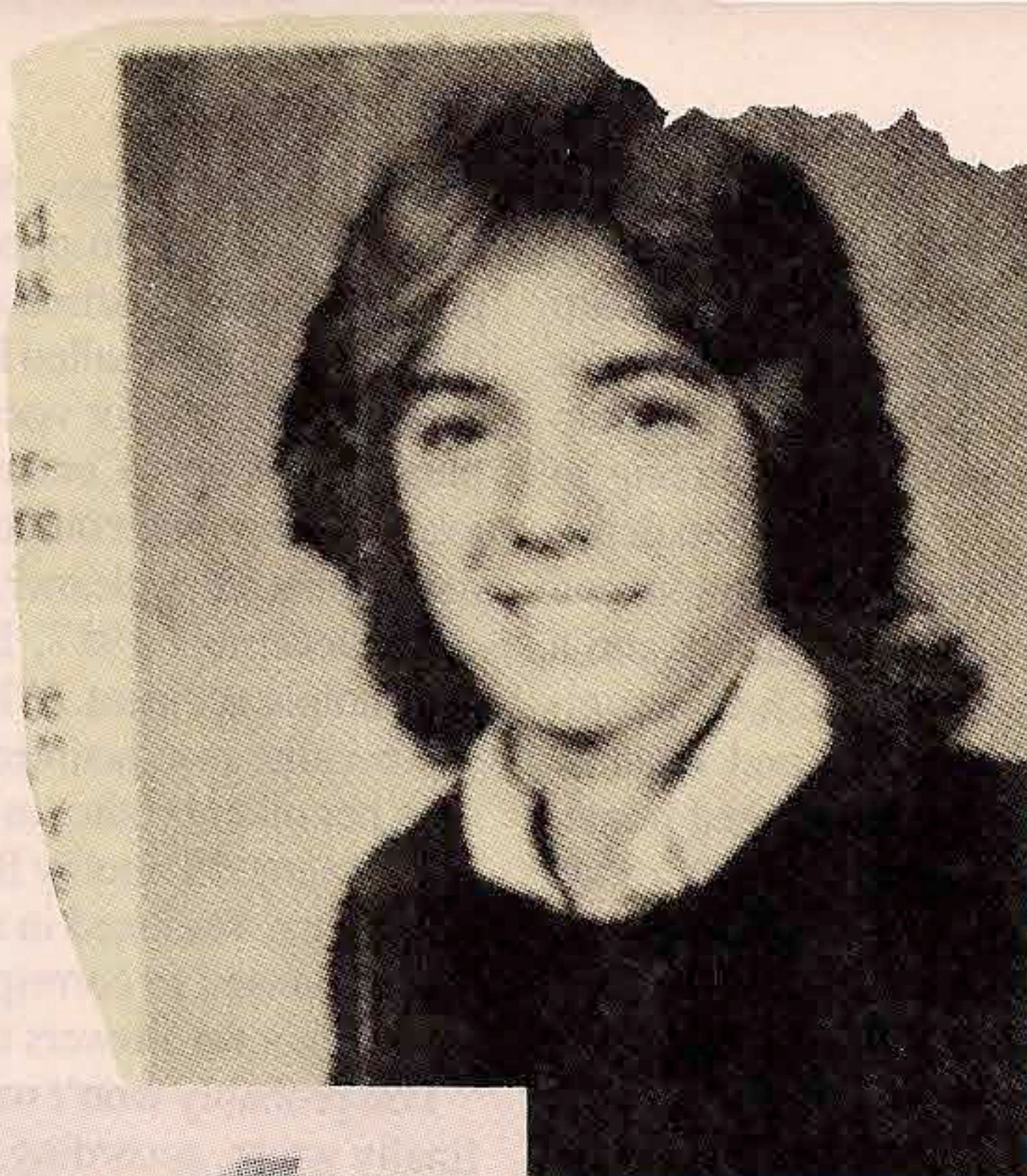
said. Barsness was miserable when she returned home. "All I do is think about being there with you," she wrote Brewer.

Barsness seemed to vacillate between calm and despair about taking care of Kirsten. "I think I'll be okay," one of her letters said. "I really think we can give [her] everything she could ever dream of and the most love possible. Sometimes I just need to be reminded that I am doing okay as a mom." A few days later, her letter took a more ominous tone: "Peggy is not ready to be a mom. Peggy wants to be there and anywhere with you and only you. I want to be myself again. I want to work. I want a family when I am ready. I want a life with you first. We haven't even had that yet, and now we have to share it with Kirsten. . . . I love her terrible, but I can't right now."

Barsness had virtually no contact with Brewer for the entire month of November. According to the court record, her phone was disconnected after she ran up a bill of nearly \$2,000, and he stopped writing. "I needed some time to get my thoughts together," he said. "I was scared to get married, and she was putting pressure on me." When he returned to Minneapolis for Christmas leave, he told Barsness he was preparing for a long world cruise, and it didn't make sense to get married when he wasn't going to be there. Barsness said, "I can wait."

The next month, Barsness went to visit Brewer over the Martin Luther King holiday, using a substantial settlement from her automobile accident to finance the trip and pay a friend to care for Kirsten. Much of the weekend was spent dancing and drinking—12, 18, 24 beers every day. "It was great to have her out there," Brewer said, "until we had a fight Sunday night in the Taco Bell parking lot. She didn't want to leave, and I told her she had to. It was a battle—she hit me a couple of times, and she wanted me to hit her, but I wouldn't." They reconciled at the airport. "She was sorry, I was sorry, we hugged and kissed, and I watched her get on the plane."

On Sunday, January 22, while her family was watching the



Left: Peggy Ann Barsness attended John F. Kennedy High School in Bloomington, Minnesota; above: a 1983 photograph; opposite: the two-story, two-bedroom town house in Burnsville, where Barsness lived with her baby daughter

Super Bowl, Barsness called Brewer, saying she had "messed up" and claiming she had lost custody of Kirsten to her parents. Brewer said to let him know if there was anything he could do. "I felt we were starting to drift apart," he said. "I told her someday we'd probably get married, but there wasn't any definite plan."

When Brewer reported to work shortly before seven the next morning, he was given the surprising message to pick up Barsness at the San Francisco airport that afternoon. Barsness got off the plane crying and mumbling that she had to get away. Over the next week, they established a daily routine: After work, Brewer would stop at a package store for a six-pack, then have more beer at a bar called Wally's Corner, or beer with a bottle of whiskey snuck in for shots at a sailors' hangout known as the Grub Pub, then dancing and, for a change of pace, more beer at a club called Johnny B. Goode. They slept in a room at the Sixpence Inn, chosen

because it was cheap, and then at the Easy Eight Motel, because it was cheaper. Barsness paid for everything until she ran out of money and borrowed \$100 from a sailor known as the Bank of Hank because he always had cash.

When Barsness called home on Sunday, January 29, her father promised to charge her \$415 return ticket on his Visa card. But instead of leaving that night, Barsness stood in the middle of the road crying and said, "Kirsten is dead. If I go home, I'll go to jail." Brewer was outraged. "There are two things I hate: liars and cheaters," he said. He drove her to the airport and didn't wait for her plane to take off.

On Monday, January 30, Barsness arrived in Minneapolis at about 6:30 A.M., without enough money to retrieve her car from the airport parking lot. At 7:30 she took a limousine to her father's office to get some cash, then continued to her own apartment. Her front door was unlocked and, as she later told the police, "There was a really bad smell. I dropped my bag at the door and went upstairs." She then walked to the Holiday Store down the road, called a Yellow Cab, went to her parents' house and told her mother that Kirsten was dead.

Sunday, May 13, 1990, was Mother's Day. Monday, May 14, marked the beginning of testimony in Peggy Ann Barsness's trial for the murder of her daughter. Her plea was not guilty. She was a diminutive figure in the courtroom: caramel-colored hair, white cotton sweater, beige skirt, white anklets and brown kid shoes—a study in bland. To her left sat a prison matron. To her right sat a public defender named Rick Mattox, who placed in front of her a small package of Kleenex and a glass of water poured from a black plastic carafe on the table. Mattox had instructed Barsness not to get tanned and to look straight down during the proceedings. If he had intended to create the impression of a cipher, he succeeded. But what Mattox could not have orchestrated was Barsness's shaking, her hands clasped together so tightly and jerking so violently that her entire upper body

was in perpetual rhythmic convulsion.

The prosecutor began by calling a parade of witnesses: the police lieutenant who had taken Barsness's statement when she reported Kirsten's death, first insisting that she had left the baby with a sitter named Tina; Tina Hilden herself, a young woman with pretty brown hair and pale skin, who said she had watched and waited in vain for Barsness to arrive with Kirsten on the day the baby was abandoned; Mark Rynda, a young man whom Barsness had called from San Francisco, asking if he could check on the front door of her apartment, which she said might have been left open. Rynda was recuperating from surgery and told Barsness he probably wouldn't get there, also declining her offer to stay in the apartment while she was gone.

Barsness's mother testified—about feeling frustrated during the years of Barsness's teenage truancy. "We would have conferences with counselors, but the school didn't really cooperate," she testified. "When she didn't show up, they wouldn't notify us until halfway through the marking period." But Mrs. Barsness couldn't remember what kinds of grades her daughter had received, and when asked about the baby's natural father, she said, "The name slips my mind." She knew her daughter had a drinking problem, yet she asked Barsness to move to her own place two months after Kirsten's birth. "We thought she was better off if she took care of the baby herself," said Mrs. Barsness.

Barsness's father testified in connection with her absences from school. But when asked about his daughter's drinking, Mr. Barsness inhaled deeply and blew wind out of his cheeks as he answered, "I never discussed it with her." And both parents admitted that, in the preceding 16 months, when their daughter was in jail fighting a murder indictment, neither of them had ever met or spoken with her attorney.

I saw a woman sitting in the back of the courtroom every day of the trial—too consistently to be a casual curiosity seeker—so I asked who she was. The woman said that her son had dated Barsness a few years before, and she made a gesture of wiping imaginary sweat off her brow—a grateful acknowledgment that she was, in this case, a near miss to a tragedy. She described a Barsness who seemed a distant cousin to the pathetic figure in court—personable, sexy and spunky, and almost brazenly independent. Often, instead of going home, she slept on their family sofa or in their car.

Barsness's lawyer made a big point of her excellent parenting during Kirsten's short life—how she boiled the baby's milk on the stove top because she distrusted the microwave, how neat and clean she kept her apartment. As explanation for this tragedy, he said that Barsness was like "a little girl in an adult's body," that she had insomnia and drank as her way of self-medication, that she found herself falling apart. "She snapped," he said. "Peggy lost it. Do you think that a normal, healthy Peggy would have wanted this to happen?"

Well, of course not. But several of her friends mentioned hanging out at a bar called R-Berry's, and I went to check it out. It was a windowless, smoky place, with perhaps a dozen pool tables and a wall of video games. It made me depressed that a young man like Brewer would haul back a brain-muddling quantity of beer here, then get in a car to

drive home on Minnesota's icy winter roads. It made me depressed that a young mother like Barsness would spend her evenings here, seeking some warmth and comfort—not yet grown-up herself, and singularly ill-equipped to manage the growing-up of anyone else.

"You are going to see pictures of Kirsten that will haunt you," Barsness's lawyer told the jury, "but they are not important." He was wrong. It was stunning to see the police videotape of Kirsten's body—eyes open, dressed in pink, looking unreal and doll-like among the stuffed animals in her crib. It was even more numbing to hear from the county coroner (who had also testified at the trial of Joel Steinberg and Hedda Nussbaum) just how Kirsten had died: slowly, from dehydration, losing nearly a quarter of her weight, her skin developing a doughlike texture and her body sinking gradually into coma. At the mention of the baby's suffering, Barsness—up to then impassive—turned toward the wall, covered her mouth with her hand and cried softly until the judge called a brief recess.

It got worse: Over vehement objections from the defense, the prosecution played a cassette that Barsness had recorded for Brewer, reproving him for not staying in touch—a shocking, private and profane monologue, with two-month-old Kirsten crying in the background: "You (continued on page 205)

**''Peggy is not
ready to**

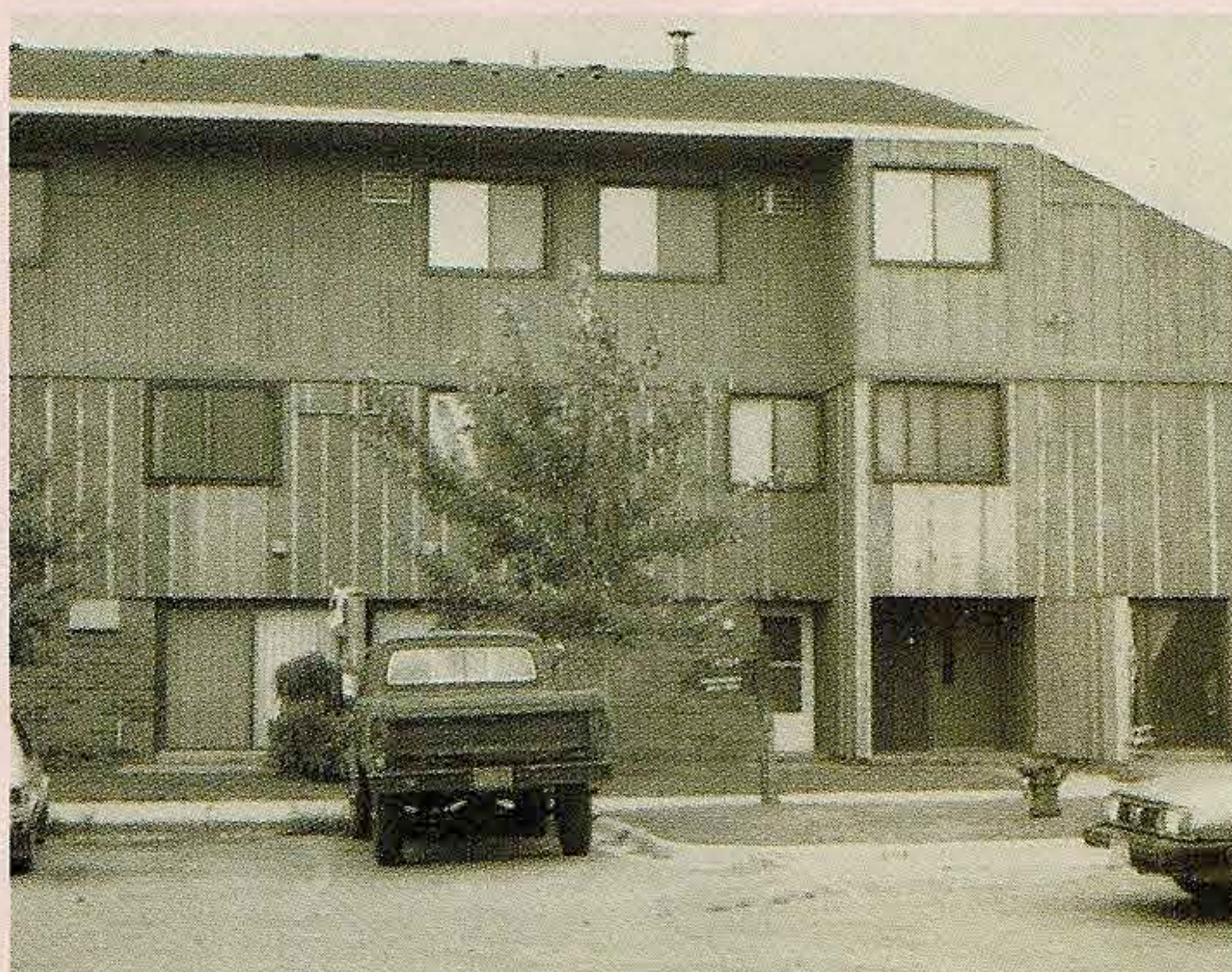
be a mom, ''

**Barsness wrote her
boyfriend.**

**''Peggy wants
to be**

with you and

only you''



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did not call me, and it pissed me off. . . . I need to know what's going to happen. I have morals, and I need goals. I'm drinking just as much as you are, and it's not right. I have a daughter. I can't be doing that. I treat her like shit when something's going on with us. We have to go forward with our relationship, or we have to stop it. You can give this ring to some other bitch. . . . I'll switch places with you. You come here and take care of Kirsten. My daughter's screaming bloody murder, and I don't fucking care. [A few moments later, the baby's gurgling can be heard.] . . . Oops, she sneezed for you. Aren't you proud? Your daughter sneezed for you. I hope she is your daughter. I hope you love her. We'll get married. Big, small, nobody there but us, everybody there—I don't care. You just keep your point in your pants. You'd best call me or your ass is grass."

The day after this tape was played in open court, Barsness was not in her usual seat. She was taken to the hospital in a wheelchair—unresponsive, eyes un-

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blinking, unable to eat or walk. Three psychiatrists examined her. One said she'd had an acute anxiety attack and recommended that she be hospitalized for at least ten days. Another said that she was competent to stand trial, although she had gone into a stupor from depression. The third characterized her as "passively suicidal," meaning that she had lost her desire to live, but said she was fit to continue with the trial.

The tape, like the whole tragedy of Peggy Ann Barsness, is almost impossible to explain or absorb. It's tempting to say, "She's crazy," or "It's terrible, but it's unique—a worst-case scenario." But to do that is to ignore the deafness of a community that did not know how to reach a young woman unready for motherhood, a community in which everyone was there at the wrong time and no one was there at the right time. It is to dismiss a family who could deny a daughter's alarming or off-putting behavior, so strong was their need for things to appear okay. It is to let off the hook those people who are always in favor of keeping the unborn baby, acting as if they have some corner on morality. This young woman could have had an abortion. This baby died. Which is more humane?

On June 5, 1990, Peggy Ann Barsness was found guilty of second-degree murder and manslaughter, and was subsequently sentenced to 15 years out of a possible 18 years in prison. Even with her time served and assuming time off for good behavior, she will be in prison at least eight and a half years. The jury did not consider the issue of postpartum depression, which is not a legal defense in Minnesota (although even the judge commented on the need to change archaic nineteenth-century state laws on mental illness), and they seemed to reject the idea that Barsness's actions stemmed from low intelligence and alcoholism, that she wasn't capable of forming the intent to commit a crime. The police asked her why she hadn't purchased a round-trip ticket to California, and she answered, "I never planned on returning."

"In the state of Minnesota," said one of the prosecutors, "we have another name for that: murder."

And a baby girl named Kirsten will never see her first birthday. □

Aimee Lee Ball contributes to many national magazines.