



TRUE STORY

'Nuke Mom' Marisa Sketo Kirsh on Her Vindication

She accused her husband of child abuse, fled South Carolina for South Africa, got caught in an alleged nuke smuggling ring, and lived to tell the story. Meet Marisa Sketo Kirsh.

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That she would land in South Africa and be even briefly charged with exporting nuclear weapon components to Pakistan was not something Marisa Sketo Kirsh could have imagined when she took off with her 4-year-old son from rural South Carolina nearly two decades ago.

Then again, she was not thinking at all of where she might end up when she vanished with little Zackary in 1996 in defiance of a court order that gave her ex-

husband joint custody. She says she was only thinking of getting the boy away from the father she says was abusing him.

“What had to be done had to be done,” Marisa, now 52, declares from her home in Cape Town. “I need to protect my son.”

Her ex-husband, Kevin Kirsh, denies ever abusing their son and says that Marisa was simply in a rage because she had not received a satisfactory monetary settlement in their divorce.

A former detective with the York County Sheriff’s office who investigated the case says that the abuse was never proven.

“The child would never confirm anything was going on and there was no medical evidence of anything,” the detective says.

But the detective is not ready to rule out completely the possibility that there had indeed been abuse. The detective described the case as an unresolved and perhaps irresolvable instance of “he said, she said.”

“This went on for ever and ever,” the detective says, “I don’t know who was right and who was wrong. I never did know. I can truthfully say I just didn’t know.”

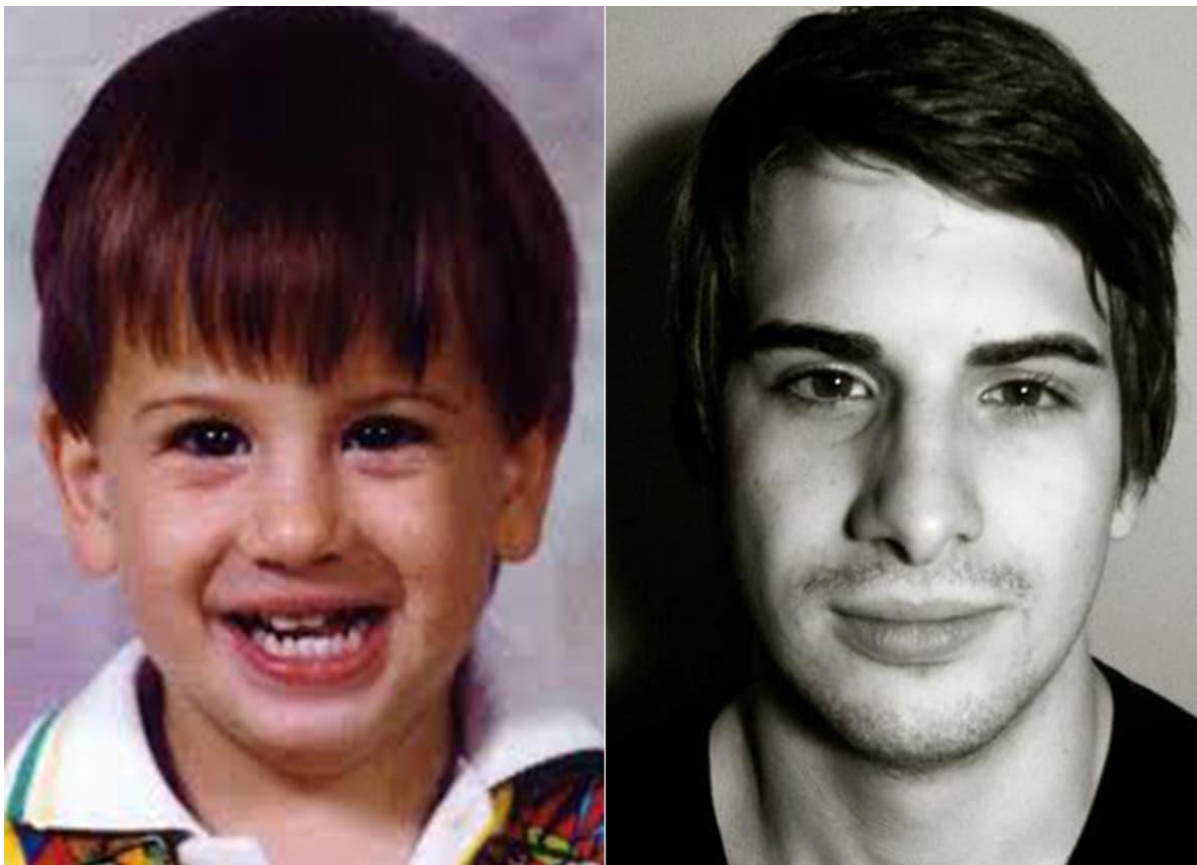
The detective notes that Kirsh has a significant criminal record involving narcotics, at one point serving six years in state prison. But Kevin is also the son of Herbert Kirsh, former mayor of the town of Clover as well as the longest serving member of the South Carolina House of Representatives, serving 32 years until he was voted out of office in 2010.

“Of course you know that political thing put pressure on the sheriff that we had to do something,” the detective says.

The detective signed a fugitive warrant for Marisa despite some reluctance.

“When your sheriff tells you you got to do a warrant, that’s what you do,” the detective says.

The detective was not entirely without sympathy for the subject of Arrest Warrant 337415 of 1998.



“If it had been my child and something was going on whether it could be proven or not, I probably would have done the same thing,” the detective says. “I would have run with my child.”

The detective understands what that entails.

“To leave everything...” the detective says.

The subsequent federal complaint charged that Marisa “did unlawfully abduct and carry away Zackary Lamar Kirsh by moving, though unknown means, from

Clover, South Carolina...to parts unknown.” The complaint adds that Marisa sold her car to “an individual identified as Billy Ray Yager” in Atlanta, Georgia.

“Yager is generally known by the law enforcement community to provide assistance to battered and abused women and facilitate them in establishing new identities,” the complaint adds.

The complaint almost certainly means to refer to Billie Faye Yager, the now retired head of the Children’s Underground, which has indeed assisted hundreds of “runaway moms” and their children. That includes another South Carolina woman, Dorothy Lee Barnett, who was arrested last month in Australia for the parental abduction of her daughter back in 1994. Yager has alleged that her own daughter was sexually abused by her first husband. She was charged but acquitted in 1992 of pressuring a runaway mom’s kids to say they were abused.

Marisa will not discuss exactly who assisted her or where she went in the first year and a half prior to her arrival in South Africa. She will say that prior to then her only travels outside America’s southern states had been a brief trip to the Virgin Islands and another to Las Vegas. She will also say that she would have been happy to have spent the rest of her life in the South, where she had enjoyed a storybook childhood.

“Bare feet and firecrackers and cousins and walking down dirt roads to a corner store to get a Coke or Pepsi,” she rhapsodizes.

She now had to give it all up.

“Everything,” she says, echoing the detective. “I had horses, I had dogs. I had family. A brother with terminal cancer.”

And life on the run proved to be considerably more harrowing than she anticipated.

“I had no idea what it was like to be on the run,” she says, “I was destroyed. The first 18 months, those were extremely scary and difficult times.”

She goes on, “You have to be distant from everybody. You have to make up stories. You can’t trust. You can’t relax. If someone you don’t know is at the door, you freak out. Even when the phone rings...”

She adds, “Most of the mothers who run, 98 percent of them, are caught or they give themselves up. It is a horrifically difficult life. Nobody would go through it without having a reason to go through absolute hell.”

Her reason was Zackary and she had to be careful to conceal her fear and anxiety from him.

“Everything was fine for Zack,” she says.

He could make her feel at times almost as if all really was well.

“It was also some of the best times for me and Zack,” she says. “It was me and him.”

They might have been all but broke, but they had enough to make an adventure out of going to the grocery store.

“We could go shopping, pick out food, and he would drive the buggy and we would buy one of his favorite things for a snack,” she says. “It was something to fill our day.”

She would watch motorists drive past and she would marvel that they took for it granted.

“I thought, ‘If they would only know how much having an old car would mean to me,’” she recalls.

But after sundown, she would enjoy what felt like a greater luxury.

“We had our night walks,” she says.

She could never completely escape a particular fear.

“I was keenly aware if I made a mistake he would pay with any chance for Zack to have a normal life,” she says.

In 1998, she arrived in South Africa. She was still so unworldly she did not appreciate the risk she was taking when she opened a bank account in her real name and applied for a credit card. A knock came at the door and this time her dread became real in the persons of two government officials.

“Oh my gosh, you have no idea, it was terrifying,” she says. “They said to come down to Home Affairs.”

Kevin would later say that he had had hired a private detective who had no success and that he himself located her via the Internet, finding a company she had founded. But she says the company did not exist until 2002. She figures that private detectives he hired tracked her down via bank records and alerted the authorities.

The South African government’s Department of Home Affairs informed her that she would be given three days notice after a formal order came through for her to be returned to America. The legal system in South Africa required her to get an advocate as well as an attorney, and she was able to secure pro bono help in both regards.

“There have just been so many angels along with way,” she says.

Officials in South Carolina would later say that the South African authorities declined to go along with an extradition. U.S. officials indicated otherwise when they filed court papers to withdraw the federal criminal complaint.

“State authorities have advised the Federal Bureau of Investigation that they do not intend upon extraditing the defendant for their state charge,” the papers state. “Thus, the interests of justice would best be served by a dismissal.”

The father, Kevin, would later suggest that he got little help from local officials in South Carolina, in part because his father was a prominent Democrat in a county that had gone Republican. (This happens to be the same congressional district that the Kevin Spacey character represents in the TV show *House of Cards*.)

“They just thought I was a big time dope dealer and my dad was a big time Democrat,” he says. “They got no use for me or my dad even though he’s more Republican than the Republicans are.”

He notes, “All they had to do was call down there and stick her ass on a plane. I don’t know what’s so hard about that... Nah, they weren’t going to do anything to help me. They’re not going to do nothing. I even offered to pay them to fly her back here.”

He adds that there was another way he could have handled it.

“I could have paid somebody to go down there and just kill her,” he says. “I didn’t do that. If I knew all this was going to happen, I would have done it.”

The case Kirsh vs. Kirsh reached the South African high court, and Marisa was allowed to remain in the country, eventually receiving citizenship. But there was still the South Carolina warrant. And the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children continued to list Zackary Lamar Kirsch as case number 820776. The missing poster had a photo of the mother as well as the boy.

In the meantime, Marisa went to work for a technology company in Cape Town. Her co-workers included a former Israeli soldier named Asher Karni. She had difficulties with the management and set off to start her own company. Karni did the same, and they shared offices. She says that his English needed polishing and she sometimes helped out answering the phone and writing e-mails.

In 2003, Karni endeavored to import 200 gizmos known as spark gaps from an American supplier and ship them to a man in Pakistan who is said to have links to both that country's military and Islamic militants. These over-sized, super powered, high-tech spark plugs deliver an intense electric pulse that is precise down to the microsecond. Doctors sometimes employ them to pulverize kidney stones. They are also used to detonate nuclear devices.

Marisa insists she had no idea of this other use until after Karni flew off with his wife and teenaged daughter for a Colorado ski vacation on New Year's Day of 2004. A tipster back in Cape Town had alerted American authorities to the spark gap plot, and when Karni landed in Denver he was arrested for conspiring to smuggle nuclear weapon components.

"He told us he was innocent," Marisa recalls. "We believed it."

Marisa says that she learned he had pleaded guilty only when she read it in the newspapers. She immediately moved her company from their shared office.

"We were great friends," she recalls. "That's why I just absolutely blew me away."

In 2008, Marisa got another knock at the door and this time she opened to see the police. She would later speculate that Karni—whom she came to call "the guy who was doing the nuclear things" and who had been sentenced to three years in prison—sought revenge for her having cut her ties with him by now trying to involve her in the case. She was questioned and taken to magistrates court on charges that she "intentionally and unlawfully imported and

exported...components of nuclear devices,” in particular 66 spark gaps. She was described in news accounts as standing tearful, her lips trembling.

“It’s scary,” she recalls.

She was released on her own recognizance, but scary it remained for a year, until she was informed that authorities had decided to drop the charges.

“They came to the house again and said, ‘We’re really sorry,’” she recalls. “It’s a feeling of relief, but also why didn’t you investigate me before you started all this? One day you’re terrified and another it’s, ‘Oops, I’m sorry.’”

The “he said, she said,” continued between Marisa and Kevin. He says that he spoke to Zackary on his 18th birthday. Marisa insists that he did not. She also continues to insist that Kevin abused their son and says she has consulted with numerous health professionals who have interviewed Zackary and confirmed her claim. Kevin continues to insist he is innocent. He says he has boxes of records of his own stacked six feet high in his garage regarding her and the allegations.

“Every one of them unfounded,” he says.

He reports that he keeps Zackary’s baby picture hanging on his wall.

“I would love to speak to my son,” he says. “It’s tough.”

Anybody who genuinely cares for Zackary can only take heart that he has fared remarkably well. He attended the American International School of Cape Town and reports, “I loved it and made some great friends there.”

He concludes on reflection, “I had pretty normal schooling, considering my interesting life. I had a pretty decent childhood I think.”

He has proven to be a computer whiz, earning the nickname “Ninja Coder.”

“Since I was 12 or 13, that’s been my passion,” he says, adding that he started writing code in the eighth grade. “I pretty much know that’s the way I should go. It’s a very fun field. It’s great for problem solving, especially in the code world.”

He is now 21 and working as a programmer. He is said to have a very nice girlfriend and many good buddies. He is of good cheer, respectful, and well respected.

The missing poster of Zackary at age three was still up on the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children’s website late last month, when an FBI agent visited him at his office. The agent checked Zackary’s identification and informed him that after 17 years he was about to be removed from the list of missing children.

On Tuesday, the missing poster was removed from the NCMEC website, but not before Zackary had made some screen shots.

“Just as a memory,” he says. “That’s quite a story to talk about.”

He is still glad the poster had come down.

“It’s nice to have it kind of resolved after so long,” he allows.

He says of his mother, “It took a strong character to up and leave like that.”

“But I guess you gotta do what you gotta do,” he adds.

The solicitor for York and Union Counties in South Carolina, Kevin Brackett, reports that the warrant for Marisa’s arrest is still in effect.

“It’s a small world after all,” he says of this case that extends from South Carolina to South Africa.

Marisa continues to live in Cape Town, with no apparent risk of extradition, but she finds that even a rare mom on the run who does not get caught can end up facing empty nest syndrome.

Her improbable journey concluded with a question.

“Who do I protect now?” she asked herself.

She has answered it by starting a rescue animal shelter for the townships surrounding Cape Town. She offers a final she said.

“Even if nobody believes why I did what I did and thinks I was just some vengeful woman, I know the truth.”

Source: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/nuke-mom-marisa-sketo-kirsh-on-her-vindication>