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That Place Called Home

Sister Mary Ann LoGuidice
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“They’re all going to be okay, aren’t they?” Amanda asked. “They’re going to find their family? Make it home?” “Yeah, they’ll make it,” Barbara said. She turned and hugged Amanda. “They’re going to make it home.”

Barbara, the central figure of this book, reassures her friend Amanda as they watch the Disney film Homeward Bound: The Incredible Journey. The movie’s plot shows how three displaced family pets track their way home to a family who has moved across country. A short time later eight-year-old Barbara succumbs to AIDS. Barbara and her friend Amanda, both born infected with HIV, each find their way “home” through their own “incredible journey.”

From the moment the story begins of Barbara and her adoptive mother, Sisters of Mercy nun Mary Ann LoGuidice, the reader knows the journey will be of the emotional sort.

The unlikely odyssey of a Catholic nun who adopts a terminally ill orphan, developed out of a year’s worth of interviews conducted by Paul Grondahl, a newspaper reporter for the Albany Times Union in New York. Parts of this story were published as an eight part serial narrative in that paper beginning in May 1998.

Sister Mary Ann struggles with opposition from her peers on her desire to be a mother, with her obligations to the church and with her duties as new parent. She shares many of the woes of single parenthood: scrambling for childcare, trips for fast food because she’s too tired to cook and the search for positive male role models. (In this case, a priest and a brother-in-law step in.) Because she’s a nun, however, she hangs back when the other mothers chat while waiting to pick up their children after school. She is unique and alone.

Barbara, who enters Sister Mary Ann’s world as a cherub faced three-year-old, shows her wit and maturity as she struggles to comprehend her fate. Despite her ill health she makes friends, charms the other sisters into being “all her grandmothers” and surprises doctors with her stoic response to countless tests and medications. The authors warmly recount the intense but short-lived events surrounding this singular child and her unusual extended family.

Readers gain insight not only into the details of how HIV and AIDS destroy the lives and families of innocent children but also into the complex faith journey experienced by all the players involved in Barbara’s upbringing.

Says the bishop at Barbara’s funeral: “Barbara is truly a fantastic love story…A triumph of the human spirit and the conquest of goodness over the forces on ignorance, fear, sickness, suffering, and even death.”
MARY SPIRO (May / June 2000)

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