

## **Taking Somebody's Baby** by Becca Martinson

Except for the fact that it was Friday the thirteenth, a lot of things went right the day the baby was born.

I'd expected to get beeped in the middle of the night, but there it was, a little after 10:00 a.m., when I was startled to attention. I called the number on the beeper and learned that Virginia, the baby's birth mother, was already at the hospital. It was time for me to get to Iowa. My second child was about to be born!

Since I had no way of knowing exactly when the baby would come, travel arrangements had had to wait — not the best circumstances to arrange for cheap fares and convenient connections. But there was an angel watching over us that day: the airline waived its requirement for 24-hour notice and gave older my daughter and me their cheapest fare. They also found room on a flight that left within a couple of hours — the only space available on any flight that day. I managed to get hotel and car reservations in Iowa, even though the whole town had been booked months in advance for a convention. We missed two busses while trying to get to the airport, but still made our connection when the bus station manager drove us to another stop. We barely made it to the airport in time to get on the flight, but we did make it. I was a basket case, but we were on our way.

While on a layover in Denver, we had just enough time to call the hospital in Iowa. Virginia's mother answered the phone and told us we had a beautiful little girl. My daughter, the four-year-old tomboy, got on the phone to say that she was going to call it a boy anyway. I took a breath. It was a girl and we'd see her that night. It was 11:15 p.m. when we finally got to the hospital, but Virginia had made arrangements for us to visit after-hours. We walked in, and there she was, barely six pounds, but very healthy. She was one of the prettiest babies I've ever seen, with no newborn wrinkles or pointiness and a head full of shiny, dark hair. She looked like one of the 4-week-old babies Hollywood always substitutes to play a newborn. Virginia was tired (and so were we), so we stayed just long enough for our first kisses and hugs.

It was well after 2:00 a.m. by the time we bought some food, got checked into our hotel, and went to bed. My daughter fell asleep immediately, but I'm not sure if I slept much at all... maybe a few hours. When the alarm went off at 8:30 a.m., I jumped out of bed, ready to meet the day, and once again to see my new daughter.

Our road to Iowa had started several months earlier when I was first told that Virginia had selected my daughter and me to be the family for the child she was expecting. When my older daughter was born, I'd had a mere ten days to wait after learning of her impending arrival. It was a whirlwind. This was different. I had three months to wait and ponder, and to get to know Virginia.

There was another difference as well. This time I knew a lot more about adoption, about the processes, about the emotions and the losses. Most importantly, I'd become friends with a number of birth mothers, even having one stay with me throughout her adoption process. I knew a lot more about the preciousness of a child and the pain of separation.

I wrote or talked to Virginia on a weekly basis and got to know about her feelings. As time wore on and the delivery drew near, my excitement was tempered by the realization that I was going to be taking somebody's baby. It was her choice, a good decision probably, but even though I was the solution to her problem, I'd still be taking her baby.

With most of the birth mothers I've met, I've been able to imagine how something in their lives could change — the arrival of somebody, some money, some extra something — that would enable them to parent their child. With Virginia, I didn't sense that. She had so many obstacles in her life, so much work to do, it was almost impossible to imagine how she'd ever be able to take care of a baby. I realize now that she wasn't able to imagine herself caring for this child either. But I also knew that she loved the baby and that this adoption was going to be very difficult for her.

The day after the birth, my daughter and I arrived at the hospital to spend more time with the baby, and with Virginia. I held the baby, whom I'd decided to call Maggie, and helped my daughter hold her while we waited for her to open her eyes. It was an awkward time with Virginia. She was somewhat distant, but it was only the second time we'd met face to face, and we had a long way to go before our relationship would feel comfortable. Within about half an hour, Kathleen, the social worker, arrived. She was a warm, friendly woman, who'd bonded easily with Virginia. After about fifteen minutes of small talk, Virginia started to cry and I felt it would be best if my daughter and I stepped out for awhile. We went up and down in the elevator about a hundred times and called Timbuktu on the pay phone until Kathleen finally came looking

for us. What she had to say was something I had hoped I'd never have to hear: Virginia wanted to parent this baby. We went back into Virginia's room and endured a few more minutes of small talk until Kathleen steered the conversation back to where it needed to go. Virginia repeated her assertion that she wanted to take care of her daughter. She knew she didn't have anything for the baby, didn't have anyplace to go, but she'd figure it all out. Whatever it took, wherever she had to go, whoever she had to talk to, she'd find a way to make it work. I could see it in her body language. She was that baby's mother.

She apologized to me and asked if I was going to be all right. I assured her that I would be and said I knew she hadn't made her decisions maliciously. Then there was nothing more to say. I gave her a hug and wished her well, and we left.

I wasn't aware that I felt anything at that moment. But a few blocks from the hospital I came within a whisper of a car accident as I absent-mindedly ran a red light.

The rest of the day is a hazy blur of naps and restaurants. The social worker had suggested that we stay in Iowa for a few days, as she felt Virginia might change her mind. But sometime that afternoon it hit me — I had seen absolutely no ambivalence in Virginia. She wasn't going to change her mind. It was over. I returned to California as soon as possible, 2 days later and \$1,000 in travel expenses poorer.

The mourning began.

Luckily, I'd talked to my daughter about the process, about how Virginia would have to look at the baby after it was born and make a very difficult decision. My daughter was with us, in the hospital room, as Virginia formed her decision. Thank God I'd given her the basis for the answers she needed to hear. She now seems to be doing a good job of working through her feelings. She asks a little more often about when our baby will come, and she seems to be needing a bit more attention than usual, but overall, I think she's processing her loss fairly well.

It's been more difficult for me. I came home to a world where everybody and everything was expecting a baby. It wasn't until my daughter went back to preschool that I was able to begin processing my feelings. First up, there were dozens of people to tell. Over and over, every friend, everybody I work with, every neighbor, every dentist, doctor, hairdresser I'd had casual conversation with for the last three months.... "The adoption fell through, but we're looking forward to the next one." An explanation designed to keep all but the closest friends from becoming too inquisitive, to give them the impression it wasn't a big deal.

But it was. It was a really big deal. I don't have any idea how to characterize it. There's so much worse I can imagine. The baby hadn't died. She hadn't spend months in my home before Virginia changed her mind. She hadn't grown in my belly, only to be raised by someone else. It's not as though I had a chance to bond with that particular baby. In a lot of ways, all I have to mourn is the loss of a possibility, and I know another possibility will come along some day. I think about the anguish birth parents must go through as they relinquish their child to an adoptive family, and feel as though I don't deserve to hurt this much.

With loss comes growth, and I know that I now have much greater understanding of loss, something that may help me identify with the loss my adopted children will likely feel some day about their birth families.

The social worker in Iowa wrote recently to update me about the baby — to help give me closure. Virginia named her daughter Sarah and seems to be doing a good job of parenting. She has moved into subsidized housing, is taking advantage of all of the social programs available to her, and has reconciled with her mother, who's now supportive of Virginia's decision to keep the baby. Hearing about her progress has been both painful and comforting.

My feelings toward Virginia are a mishmash of contradictions. I'm incredibly angry at her but I also completely support her right to make the decision she made. I still care about her and the baby, but at the moment, I don't ever want to talk to her again. She took so much from me — my time, my money, my caring, missed opportunities for other babies. A part of me really wants her to know what this experience has cost me, but I also recognize that it's not fair to unload on her when she's struggling through the challenges of being a new mother. She has earned my anger, but I can't give it to her because she's really done nothing wrong.

I've been stunned at how painful this loss has been for me — and how lonely. Most people, even close friends, seem afraid to talk to me about it, not quite knowing what to say, not quite understanding how I feel. Some have said once whatever they had to say, and then don't choose to return to the subject. Others seem to assume that it was not a big deal, that it's over with. In all fairness, I probably haven't done a very good job of letting people know what I need (if only I knew!).

It's been hard for me to put my finger on exactly what it is I'm grieving over. I'm not sure I'll ever comprehend it completely, but a few days ago I was overcome with sadness and came to understand at least a part of it.

When I held the baby that first day and felt her warmth, I looked in her eyes and realized I didn't know who she was. That morning, as I had throughout the pregnancy, I had looked forward to getting to know her. Not just any baby — that baby. What I wanted — what I now yearn for — was to have had her lie on my chest, to hear her breathing, to smell her sweet baby hair and to feel the softness of her skin, to know her cries and her feelings, to watch her learn to trust me. But I never got the chance. I never got to know the little girl who was almost my daughter.

I miss her so much.  
Okay. Maybe I have the right to grieve.

*Becca Martinson is an adoptive mother and the former editor of Pact Press.*