

He Gives and Takes Away

I knew why the white van was coming down my street. This had happened before. It had only been three years since Family Services came to our home and took our first daughter from us.

No one plans on fighting infertility. Three years into our marriage my wife and I decided to start a family. We did not sit down and discuss what we would do if we were unable to get pregnant. I am sure our conversation was not unlike many other similar conversations being held throughout America. There were hugs and kisses and the anticipation of an addition to the family.

Three years later we were a very frustrated couple. We had exhausted every avenue and drew the line at In Vitro Fertilization. Due to our religious views we did not like the prospect of discarding fertilized eggs. As a result we chose foster parenting with the goal of adoption. My wife left her job, we sold our house, and moved into a smaller place that we could afford on my income. We spent the next year in Foster Parenting and Adoption classes.

In January of 1998 we received our first long term placement. Latecia was with us for nine months but the court had decided to return her to her mother. Many on her services team did not agree with this decision, but we carried out our duty to the bitter end. This was a horrible experience. Loading a child that we truly loved into the back seat of a car, and then watching her ride down the street was gut wrenching. Especially when nobody felt it was a good plan. I held to my faith during the next few months expecting every phone call to result Latecia being returned to us. As time passed I realized this was not going to happen. This experience left its mark on my faith.

Our experience with Jessica was supposed to be completely different. After Latecia left our home we made it clear to Family Services that we would only accept children where adoption was the only goal. Jessica was only three days old when Family Services asked us to take her. They explained her situation to us, and we were told that adoption was the agreed upon goal. After only a few months everything changed. During one particular meeting Jessica's team told us that reunification with her birth father was now the intended outcome. Jessica's caseworker, Sonny, was in tears. I was in tears. My wife was in tears. We feared the worst.

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The next eighteen months were hell. Visits with both birth parents increased. Jessica's birth father was holding it together. He had a steady job, a place of his own and had been sober for the last several months. Most of the team remained apprehensive and were pushing my wife and me to petition the court for termination of the father's rights, leaving us to adopt. We petitioned but were denied, and the visits with the father were instantly increased from once a week, supervised, to Monday through Friday and only home with us on the weekends.

This was pure torture. We spent Monday mornings waiting for Sonny's car to pull in. It was a small compact foreign vehicle. The back seat was barely large enough for the car seat. I was obsessed with how well the seat was installed and would always do it myself. I would press my knee deep into the seat forcing it as tight against the soft fabric as possible. By god I was going to have control of something around here! A team of wild horses could not pull that thing an inch from the cloth! Several times Sonny would comment that she had to leave the car seat in

place all week because she could not move it. I did not care. My girl was going to be safe if it killed me or the car seat or Sonny.

Once I got Jessica into her car seat she would go catatonic with her eyes gazing off into the distance. It was eerie to watch; like witnessing the administration of intravenous medications to a patient about to be taken into surgery. Her eyes would gloss over and it was almost impossible to get her to make eye contact. She did not kick or cry and was completely silent. It felt abusive; it was abusive.

The clocks in the house seemed to stop every week. You have heard the phrase, "A watched pot never boils?" Well, a watched clock never hits five pm on Friday either. We would pace the dining room floor waiting for the sound of the caseworker's car pulling in. It was relatively new, so it did not make enough noise to hear it from very far away. Julie and I learned how to pace quietly, almost completely silent. Our sock covered feet made a slight whisper noise as we moved around the house, racing to the front door every time we heard a car go by, and the anxiety level peaked then bottomed out with each swing of the wooden front door. Jessica would enter the house exhausted, and we were left to wonder what had happened all week. She was only two years old, and this schedule was taking its toll on her. God only knows what happened all week long. Jessica was too young to tell us anything.

I still wonder what God was thinking of me during all of this. I felt like Job from the Bible must have felt when Satan trashed his life. I did not do anything wrong, and God was slapping me around. I did not even bother to pray. Why should I? It did not help last time. This time would not be any different, or so I kept telling myself. I wasn't praying; I was wishing. I was wishing this birth father would mess up. I wanted him to screw up, and I wanted to be there to watch him crash. I wanted all of this to stop. It did not stop; instead, it got worse.

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Court day was upon us. We were warned it would turn out this way. They told us what the commissioner was going to do. Family Court was informal compared to what we saw on television or at the movies. There was no audience being entertained. There were just caseworkers and family members; there were lawyers and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). There were the foster parents; my wife and I. The acoustics in the small court room amazed me. I could hear every nervous twitch. Even the shuffle of paper would draw my attention. The high back chairs used held up over the years. I could tell they were made of leather, yet the smell of leather was not in the air. I could not smell anything; my senses were so focused on the Commissioner that I did not notice anything other than his every movement and sound. Taste and smell did not exist in this room; they served no purpose. The Commissioner looked over the documents handed to him by his clerk. He shook his head, for even he knew this was the wrong decision, but he was helpless to do anything other than what he was required to do; what everyone already knew he would do; what everyone knew he must do. You could see the turmoil in the his eyes. He was almost delaying the decision; dreading the consequences he feared would result from the decision he was required to make. He settled back into his chair as if to say: "Listen up; I am about to speak". My heart was racing. My ears, which were previously ringing from the deafening silence were focused on his every word. His decision was quick and simple; Jessica was to be sent home with her birth father. Even now I struggle to remember what he said. It did not matter then and it does not matter now. He said to send her home with her dad, and send her home with dad is what we did.

We got to the house knowing that Jessica's case worker was only minutes behind us. We gathered a few of her items, and we waited for Sonny's arrival. Like so many times before Sonny pulled into our driveway. I opened the back of her car and found Jessica's car seat poorly installed. I unhooked the seat; repositioned it and placed my knee into its center. I pushed my full weight on the seat, and reattached it correctly. I strapped Jessica into place; fighting back the tears so I didn't scare her. Julie and I both told her goodbye, and Sonny slowly pulled out of our driveway and drove down the street, and disappeared around the corner.

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Julie and I had spent the previous day at Wal-Mart. A regular practice with foster kids is when they are moved; many parents put all their stuff in black plastic trash bags for transport. I cannot think of anything more horrific and demeaning than to have all of my belongings thrown into a container that looks like it should be tossed into a clothing donation bin or put at the end of the drive on Monday morning. Julie and I had decided we were not going to take part in this practice. We purchased several nice plastic containers for Jessica's belongings. We carefully packed everything she owned into three or four containers. We kept a couple of keepsakes for ourselves. Our oldest daughter Lydia shared her thoughts with us; she was still unable to pronounce Jessica's name.

"Kika isn't going to stay away; she is coming back."

"No honey," I replied, "she isn't coming back this time."

"Yes, she is," Lydia argued.

I kept trying to explain to her that this was not the case, but she refused to believe anything else. I shrugged my shoulders. It did not matter what Lydia thought anyway. She is only three; what does she know? Sonny showed up again, but this time in a white van she had rented. We had so much stuff that it wasn't going to fit into her car. Sonny and I loaded all the plastic containers into the van and she left.

My wife was nine months pregnant when Jessica left. The pregnancy was overshadowed by court dates and week long, unsupervised visits. If there was ever proof that anxiety has nothing to do with infertility, Julie and I were a case study. We had managed to get pregnant during the most stressful time of our lives. Obviously, everyone and their uncle were incorrect when they told us we just needed to relax in order to get pregnant.

It had been three weeks since Jessica left. Sonny and Jessica's guardian were on their way over to talk with us about Jessica. She had only been gone a month. "Why did they want to talk with us?" I asked myself. I fought back the optimism trying to creep into my head. "I'm not going to get hurt again!" My faith continued to falter. Sonny and the guardian showed up together; they sat down in our living room and explained what was going on. Family Services had to remove Jessica from her father's house. Just one week after he was awarded custody! They waited to tell us because they wanted to make sure she would not be returned to him again. This was the final straw for dad. It was a foregone conclusion that Jessica would be returning to us permanently.

I was ecstatic! After my previous experience I had convinced myself that we would never see Jessica again. Thank God I was wrong! The guardian and Sonny set up a date the following week to return Jessica to us. We had settled on September sixth. So here we were; Julie was nine months pregnant and due in three weeks. We were so filled with excitement that Julie went into

labor early the next week. Sonny gave us a call to make sure we were ready for Jessica's return, and I answered from our hospital room.

“Oh you guys!” she said “What terrible timing! Do you want to wait a few days?”

“No!” we yelled into my cell phone in unison.

“We’ll be just fine.” I reminded her. “I want my girl back.”

Julie gave birth to our third daughter Elaina that night, and the next evening I was at our home to meet Sonny and Jessica. Jessica came in the door; she was exhausted. I took her back to her room, and Lydia greeted her in a very casual way. Jessica was back just as Lydia predicted. I put Jessica in her bed and she went to sleep, and she slept for the next sixteen hours waking up half way through the following day.

It has been said that God can do his best work when our faith intersects with His faithfulness. God's faithfulness is not completely revealed in this quote. During a time when my faith was at its lowest God's faithfulness was at its highest. His grace and love is not based entirely on my faith in Him, but rather it is based on His character; something that isn't swayed by events and circumstances. God's grace is not dependent on what I do or believe but on who He is.

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