

My First Baby, Leonie Molly Pickett

by Jill Pickett

The anticipatory excitement was almost overwhelming as I stood amidst the bustling crowd of people waiting to meet family and friends at the international arrivals at San Francisco International Airport. I eagerly studied every person who came through those double doors, as they opened at regular intervals to let a few people through. I was huge! Nine months pregnant, with such a short body that my baby pushed my abdomen out so far that I could not fit behind the steering wheel of our old VW hatchback. Our first baby was due in ten days, and my dear friend Mary was coming from England to help.

Joy filled me as I finally saw Mary, blond and slim, waving to me as she came through the doors. We hugged excitedly. After Warren hugged her, he relieved her of her two cases, which were enveloped with vividly colored strips of tape. Those bags could never be taken for anyone else's bags. It was July 1977, and I had only lived in the United States since November. I knew very few people, had no family around, apart from Warren, and I spent most of my time in our apartment. I was ready to have a friend with me.

We loaded Mary with her suitcases into the car and were soon back at our one bedroom apartment off Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley. After a late lunch I was doing the dishes in the little galley kitchen. Suddenly I felt water soaking my clothes, running down from my body onto the kitchen floor. Warren called Kaiser



Jill and Warren with their first baby, Leonie Molly Pickett, born July 23, 1977.

Medical Center in Oakland and was instructed that we should come right away. Their rules insisted that a baby be born within twenty-four hours of water breaking, to reduce the risk of infection. We invited Mary to use our bed while we drove to the hospital. I hated leaving her so soon, but I knew she was exhausted after her long journey. She would see us with our new baby the next day.

After being admitted and checked for progress, I settled into bed and started working on my birth announcements. I carefully addressed envelopes, using my calligraphy pen. This helped me to stay calm, so I was disappointed when the nurse told me I had to put everything away. I had other work to do. Then monitors and straps held me down and I was confined.

My confinement under Kaiser's rules contrasted greatly with my daughter's birthing center experi-

ence twenty-seven years later when she splashed around in a pool of water during labor.

When my body had made no progress by seven p.m. I was given a shot of Pitocin that quickly and sharply induced labor. I appreciated the weeks of Lamaze classes we had attended, as Warren stood by my head and coached me through the painful contractions. I finally yelled that I needed pain medication, but it was too late. Our daughter, Leonie, was born just after midnight. It was an emotional experience seeing her pink, wet little body. I was unprepared when she was taken, too quickly, to the nursery so that I could get some rest. Warren went home for a few hours, to make sure Mary was okay, and to get a few hours sleep on our couch.

I was wide-awake, stimulated from the birth. Why had they taken my baby? Where was she? It was a ritual

that I did not remember agreeing to, and I needed her with me. I had to find her right away. I carefully got out of bed to walk to the nursery, aware of my changed body and thin gown. A nurse checked my wristband, and identified my baby among many in the nursery. I watched, thrilled to find her. I felt a tug in my womb as I heard her cry. It was a cute little mew; she was mine, and I was her mother. I wheeled her back to my room, cuddled her and settled her down. She never went back to the nursery.

How could I have known what a loving, natural father Warren would be? He was got into bed with us early next morning. He held Leonie lovingly, changed her first diaper. I gazed at the two of them, watching him let her fingers close around his as he took in her little face and body. He counted her fingers and toes. Later, he cut her fingernails so she would not scratch herself. He brought Mary in the next morning; since Leonie and I were both doing so well we were released after thirty-six hours.

I felt overwhelmed by the twenty-four hour responsibility. I was glad to have Mary with me. She had no children, but spent a great deal of time with nephews and nieces. She was calm, practical and a wonderful to support to me, which helped build my confidence Warren seemed more confident than me; he was the seventh of eleven children and had much experience with younger siblings.



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I was most afraid of nursing. Warren sat on one side and Mary on the other, as I tried to nurse. I felt panic when I could not get Leonie's little mouth to latch on to my breast engorged with milk. Leonie cried but nothing seemed to come naturally to either of us. I called La Leche League for help, thinking someone would visit from the organization. No. They just gave some advice. I struggled on, and finally Leonie and I learned what to do.

She still seemed to cry a lot, so we went back to Kaiser for more advice.

Mary said, "Babies do cry, you know." I guess that was comforting, normalizing! She helped me bathe, dress and change Leonie, and we talked about our changing lives. She had just got married in England, but left her new husband for a month out of commitment to me because she knew I needed her company.

After a week Mary helped put together the combination bassinet and stroller we had bought and we went out into the Berkeley streets for the first time since Leonie was born. As cars drove by, I felt guilty about her poor lungs getting dirty air for the first time. Mary and I went shopping to find something I could wear that was not maternity clothes. We went out for a drink together to relax and celebrate!

During the second week after Leonie was born, Warren's mother, Mildred and one of his brothers, Clark, came to visit. They stayed in a nearby hotel. I



Jill, having a glass of wine with her friend from England, Mary Naylor. They were teachers together in Cambridge. Mary took credit for Jill and Warren meeting.

appreciated my mother-in-law coming from Kansas. She rarely traveled. She had raised eleven children, had over twenty grandchildren, yet she came to Berkeley to see us. I had only met her that Christmas, but already loved her. She was gentle, non-judgmental, and had welcomed me warmly into the family.

I missed Mary when she left at the end of a month. I slowly adjusted to being a new mother in a strange land.

Mary visited at some point after each of my two boys was born also. That experience with my first baby was the most valuable to me. She has remained a close friend throughout the years. ♦



Jill Pickett grew up near Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk in England and immigrated to the United States in 1976 where she became a counseling psychologist and school counselor. She has three children and three grandchildren.

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