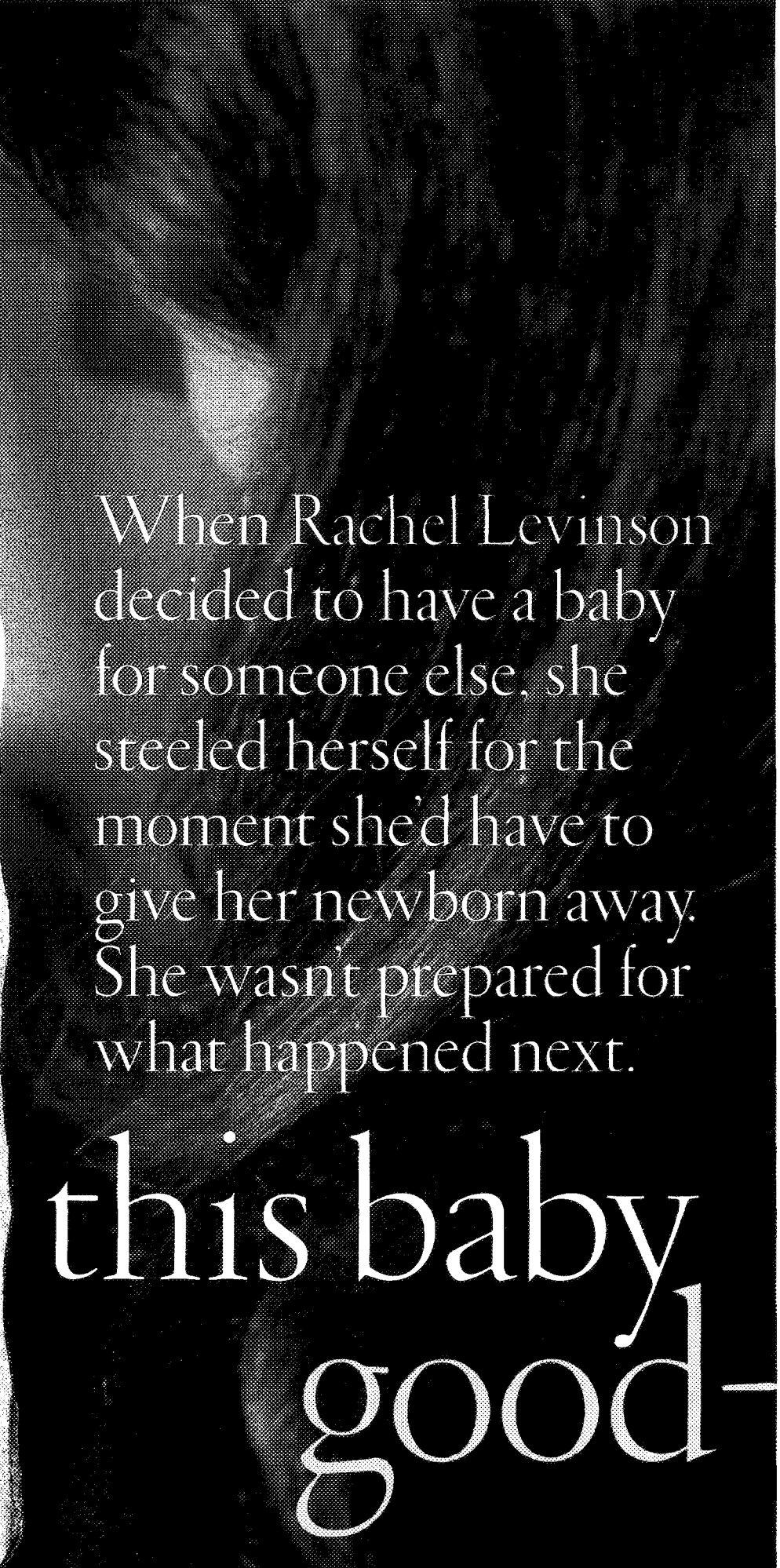
Could you kiss

By Alexis Jetter PHOTOGRAPHS BY Jennifer Bishop



When Rachel Levinson decided to have a baby for someone else, she steeled herself for the moment she'd have to give her newborn away. She wasn't prepared for what happened next.

this baby good-bye?

ON THE BULLETIN BOARD of the Surrogates' Corner on the Internet, where surrogate mothers swap tips, anecdotes, and medical advice, the recent warning caused quite a stir.

BEWARE OF TOO-GOOD-TO-BE-TRUE

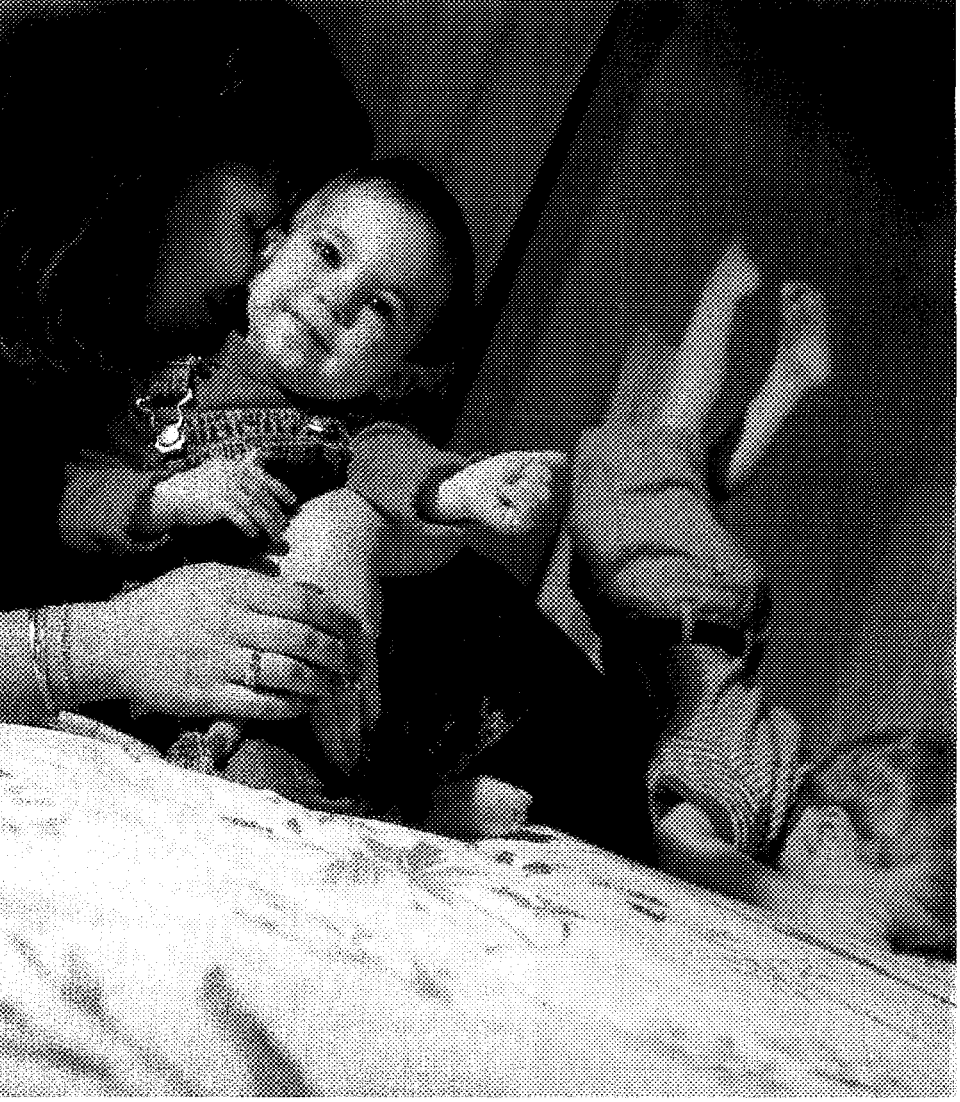
I want to take a moment to warn any women out there who are contacted to be a surrogate by a single male on the East Coast. He seems like the greatest guy. He is not what he seems. . . .

Welcome to the future, where one rather ordinary family finds itself in extraordinary circumstances and the only sure thing is a mother's love. The saga of Baby Ariel* is, depending on your point of view, a love story or a cautionary tale. Either way, it provides a rare window into the world where women carry babies for couples who aren't able to have children themselves.

"Watch out," the Internet message warned in essence: "Do not bear this man's child." But Andy hardly seemed predatory when Rachel Levinson met him a few years ago at an adoption and surrogacy agency. Andy, in fact, looked like he'd make an ideal dad. He was an engaging man, successful in business but, he told Rachel, unlucky in love. At 37, he was anxious to begin parenting on his own, and so he arranged to adopt a little boy.

Rachel, who enjoyed almost all of the agency's clients, particularly liked Andy. Then 32, she had just landed a job as an

**All of the names in this story and the individuals' identifying details have been changed.*



Rachel thought about her surrogate daughters every day, kept a photo album of each in her family room, and worried about how they'd feel when they grew up. "Maybe these girls will come back and ask me, 'How could you give me up? How could you walk away?'" Rachel says. "I'll be honest: It isn't easy. But I got to know their parents. I listened to their story. And these children will probably be more loved, if that is possible, because their parents went through so much to get them. Besides having my own children, being a surrogate is the best thing I've ever done."

Thirteen years after the famous case of Baby M., in which Mary Beth Whitehead fought to keep the baby she had borne, Americans still know little about the women who bear children for infertile couples. Yet they are all around us, and their numbers are increasing. Since 1979 an estimated 12,000 children have been born to surrogate mothers in the United States, most in the last five or so years.

The prevailing images of surrogates are the financially strapped, remorseful women who are a staple of daytime talk shows. But the few studies of surrogate mothers indicate that the majority are married, moderate-income women with

administrator at the agency after years of staying home with her children and attending night school. Suddenly she was conversing with prospective parents around the globe, and their vulnerability moved her. Andy, even more than most, eagerly shared with Rachel his excitement at the prospect of raising a child.

Andy proved to be an excellent father. After three-year-old Lucas arrived by plane from a South American orphanage, Andy never left his side. He arranged to take his son to work every day and fed the half-starved boy by hand; Lucas grew two inches in a month.

But Andy's experience with the agency had opened his eyes to the possibility of surrogacy, and he longed for a child who shared his genes. Rachel knew that finding a surrogate for a single man would be a problem. "Honestly, surrogate moms want to do it for a more stable family," she says.

The more difficulty Andy encountered, though, the more certain he became that he wanted a child with his bloodline. And what began as a little joke gradually grew serious, until one day Andy asked Rachel in earnest: Would she have a baby for him?

"I'LL BE HONEST: THIS ISN'T EASY. BUT BESIDES HAVING MY OWN CHILDREN, BEING A SURROGATE MOTHER IS THE BEST THING I'VE EVER DONE."

RACHEL HAD TO THINK hard. She knew the emotional costs of surrogacy—of conceiving and carrying a child, laboring through the delivery, then kissing her baby goodbye. For she'd done it twice before, in 1993 and again in 1995.

children at home. More than a third of them choose, after their first contract pregnancy, to bear children for others again. Some use their own eggs; others are "gestational carriers" with no genetic link to the child they carry. But they all share the ability to conceive and bear children, a need for extra income, and compassion for couples who want but cannot have children on their own.

From the outside, Rachel and her family couldn't look more conventional. She and her husband, Brad, live in a new subdivision, drive a minivan, and argue over

who's doing more of the housework.

But while Brad, a shy man with a dry sense of humor, might jokingly pose as Ozzie, Rachel is no Harriet. She's an outgoing, funny woman who doesn't worry about what people think but cares deeply about how they feel. Aside from her family, life has been a series of compromises for Rachel. She would like to have been a doctor but is instead a part-time nursing student and a full-time mother. But nearly ten years ago she made a firm decision: Someday, she would be a surrogate mother. And it wasn't, she says, about the money. "Surrogates do it first from the heart."

In 1990 Rachel was 26 and six months pregnant with her second son. She was working in an OB-GYN clinic when a patient she knew walked in the door sobbing. The woman had just suffered her fifth miscarriage, and though there was no fetus left, the doctor wanted to scrape her uterus to remove the remaining tissue.

Rachel held the woman's hand during the procedure. It was the second time she'd tried to soothe her after a miscarriage. And this time Rachel found it nearly impossible. For she had undergone an abortion a year earlier, when she and Brad were unemployed, uninsured, and in debt. Rachel still feels the abortion was the right decision at the time. But it left her with great sadness and a sense of being trapped by her fertility. The contrast with the grieving woman on the table proved too much. "I went out in the hallway and sat down on the floor and cried," she says. "I felt that I needed to give something back that I had taken for granted."

A few months later she spotted an ad in the local paper seeking surrogate mothers. It had been placed by an infertility center in New York. Manhattan seemed a million miles away, but Rachel cut out the ad and tucked it in her wallet.

Two years later she pulled it out and showed it to her husband. Rachel wanted to go to nursing school, but with Brad in technical school, they couldn't afford it. As he read the clipping, Brad remembers thinking, If this is legitimate, would it really be an ad in a newspaper? It was sandwiched between get-rich-quick schemes.

But he agreed to consider the idea. Surrogates see only a fraction of the $50,000 that parents usually pay, but the $10,000 to $13,000 fee would go a long way toward her nursing degree.

Rachel initially told the agency that she didn't want to use one of her own eggs. She wasn't sure she could give away a biological child. But to synchronize her ovulation cycle with that of the egg donor, she would have to take a mega-dose of hormones. And Rachel couldn't even tolerate birth control pills, which gave her dizzy spells and migraines.

"ARE YOU SURE?" THE PARENTS-TO-BE ASKED RACHEL WHEN THEY SAW HER IN TEARS. WERE THEY WRONG TO TAKE THE BABY?

So she agreed to use her own egg, but she waited for the right match. One woman asked her to bear a child for her brother in Korea, whose young son had died in a car crash. The mother was too old to bear another child. But the plan struck Rachel as cold: The baby had to be male, would be raised by relatives in the United States, and would not be sent to his parents in Korea until he was fully grown. Another couple asked her to join a roster of surrogates, any of whom might be asked to be inseminated at any time. That didn't feel right either.

Finally she was asked to fly to New York to meet a couple from Germany. Despite a language barrier, they were all soon laughing and talking easily. In Gerda and Wolfe, Rachel felt she'd found the right parents.

But she wanted Brad's support, and he was resistant until the couple flew in to meet him and Rachel. At a local restaurant Brad gathered the courage to ask Gerda why she wanted to use a

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Surrogate Mother *(continued from page 124)*

surrogate. She gazed at him for a moment, then pointed silently to her plate, glass, and silverware. "Imagine for a moment," she said. "I have all these things: a house, an orchard, farmland, money in the bank, and I've traveled all over the world." With dignity but profound sadness she pushed her place setting over to Brad. "I would gladly give them all to you, for a child."

Gerda and her husband had tried for years to conceive. Eight years earlier she had become pregnant, but the umbilical cord had collapsed in the fourth month. The uterine scraping after the miscarriage caused enough scarring to make her sterile. But Gerda didn't learn that until a few years later, when she came to the United States for an examination. By then she was too old to adopt in Germany, where adoption is severely restricted.

Their story won Brad's sympathy and convinced him that Rachel was right in what she wanted to do. Explaining the decision to their parents would take some time; they groaned when they thought of telling their neighbors, the grocery clerk, Brad's coworkers. But Rachel and Brad wanted to talk to their two young sons right away. (Surrogates almost always have to figure out a way to "tell the kids," since a proven ability to bear children is usually a job requirement.)

"ARE YOU TELLING ME YOU DON'T WANT HER?" RACHEL ASKED, PANIC IN HER VOICE. "I DON'T KNOW," ANDY ANSWERED.

Rachel told her sons that the "other mommy has a broken stomach" and couldn't have a baby without her help. Although there would always be a special bond with this child, Rachel added, she wouldn't be bringing the baby home from the hospital. That explanation sat fine with her boys.

But initially, at least, her first surrogacy seemed like a comedy of errors. The agency's New York lab repeatedly missed her ovulation date. Rachel persuaded Gerda and Wolfe to switch to the clinic where she worked. But when she marched into the office to be inseminated with Wolfe's sperm, Rachel found that the doctor had been called away on an emergency. And so Rachel's mother, Sylvia, a medical assistant, grabbed a plastic inseminator and performed the task instead. It worked.

If the conception took place in comforting familiarity, the birth was a different matter. Several weeks before her due date, Rachel and the German couple flew to Arkansas, where the agency rented condominiums to its clients. Arkansas has no specific surrogacy laws, but it allows couples, even foreigners, to adopt children after residing in the state for only 30 days. Brad wasn't able to get time off from his job to attend the birth, but Rachel's mother and younger son came for the delivery.

And so, with Sylvia on one side and Gerda on the other, Rachel gave birth to her first daughter, Gretel, at an Arkansas hospital in December 1993. She was a lovely child, round and pink, with Rachel's dark shining eyes. The nurses immediately placed her on Rachel's belly. "I held her for a few minutes, and then I handed her to her mother," Rachel recalls. "I could see in Gerda's face that she was afraid she was hurting me. But I kept saying, 'It's okay. It's okay. Go.'"

The next day, before being discharged, Rachel asked for the baby to be brought to her room. She held Gretel close. She and Brad had always wanted a daughter. They'd even talked about adopting a little girl someday, since it seemed that together they would always have boys. But that was a far-off dream, and here was her daughter in the flesh—so tiny and alive.

"She responded so much to the sound of my voice," Rachel whispers, her voice quivering. "But I gave her a little kiss on the nose and told her she was going to

be fine. And then I put her back in the bassinet."

Gerda and Wolfe came in at that moment. Seeing Rachel's tears was a body blow. Were they wrong to take the baby away? "Are you sure? Are you sure?" they asked her in heavily accented English. Rachel smiled, wiped away her tears, and said, "Of course I am."

Rachel knew she needed to get away from Gretel immediately—no breast-feeding, no toe counting. When she got on the airplane, Rachel's milk-engorged breasts were sore, and her heart ached. But by the time she arrived home, all she wanted was sleep. And when she awoke two days later, she felt at peace.

With that surrogacy and the next one, Rachel learned to buffer her heart against the impending separations. She forced herself not to anticipate watching the babies grow up and focused instead on her affection for the prospective parents.

Karen and James, university professors in Australia, were just as concerned about Rachel's well-being. Years of fertility treatments hadn't helped Karen conceive, but they had rendered her a less desirable adoptive parent in the eyes of Australian social workers; her attempts at pregnancy meant she hadn't "adapted" to infertility. In a final try for parenthood, Karen and James decided to look for a surrogate in the United States. But Karen, a reformer of women's health care, worried about surrogacy's potential to exploit women.

"It would not be fair for me to grab my own happiness at Rachel's expense," she says. "We lived with the ambiguity that we might be honor-bound to let her keep this baby.

"I found myself holding back a bit," Karen continues. "But Rachel wanted to give us that feeling of excitement."

So when Karen arrived shortly before the birth, Rachel dragged her off to the mall. "You'll need a heavier blanket than that. You want this kind of car seat," the expectant mother told the mother-to-be.

"Rachel got me shaped up and organized and right into this baby thing," Karen says gratefully. "That was a turning point for me. And when Hannah popped out, I volunteered to cut the cord. She passed from being Rachel's baby to my baby as I cut the cord. She was crying in that jaggedy newborn way, then grabbed my finger and quieted."

That moment was harder for Brad. He was able to be at this birth, but he didn't know what role to play. He held Rachel's hand and then her legs during the final moments of labor, and Rachel watched his face as the baby emerged. "I saw that look on his face for an instant: He forgot that this wasn't our child. Then the smile just went, that quickly."

Hannah was handed first to Rachel, then to Karen and her husband, who was sobbing so hard that he videotaped the floor instead of the birth. "I was basically not involved at all," Brad says. "I didn't touch the child. I didn't hold her. That's when it hit me: This really isn't my child, even though Rachel's giving birth. And I remember walking out of the room with tears in my eyes."

AFTER THEIR THIRD SON, Jason, arrived in 1996, Rachel decided she would not be a surrogate again. It was too hard on her marriage. Even though Brad outwardly supported Rachel's commitment to surrogacy, a feeling of distance had gradually grown between them.

Besides, Rachel's five pregnancies had been hard on her body. And she wanted time to care for her newest son. So she took a part-time job with the agency that had arranged her second surrogacy.

That's when Rachel met Andy. She'd had few friends during her years as mother and night student, and she found Andy's banter invigorating. During the long months of waiting for his adoption of Lucas to be finalized, Andy would call Rachel with questions, then stay on the line to talk and laugh about music, politics, their quirky family backgrounds.

Soon she, Brad, and the boys were visiting Andy and Lucas at their vacation home. But Brad had begun to feel uncomfortable about his wife's charming new friend. And he definitely didn't like it when Andy asked her to bear his child.

"She was having a child for another man," he says. "And even though I know she didn't sleep with him, that was tough on me."

Rachel, however, had made up her mind. Andy was a fine man, a devoted

father, a dear friend. And she'd realized, to her surprise, that she wanted to experience another birth. Eventually Brad agreed: She would have one last baby.

Andy and Rachel quickly settled all the particulars. Since she lived close by, she would stay in the baby's life, perhaps as "Aunt Rachel," until and unless the child wanted to know more about his or her origins. Rachel would be there to help Andy too, should a single-parenting crisis arise. As an added act of generosity, Rachel didn't charge Andy what she could have earned as someone with a proven ability to conceive, bear, and part with a healthy child. After all, this surrogacy was even less of a business proposition than her previous ones.

But on the advice of Rachel's boss, who doubled as Andy's lawyer, they signed a detailed contract, including a standard clause enabling Andy to get out of the deal for a set fee. The "breach of agreement" clause had always struck Rachel as a formality. "No one," she says, "ever backs out." In fact, of the estimated 12,000 surrogacies in the United States, fewer than 20 have gone to court.

Andy seemed likely to cherish the child Rachel would conceive. He had happy memories of helping to raise his younger sister, and he adored Lucas. There was, however, one complication. He wasn't sure he was up to the challenge of raising a girl, who might, even more than a boy, long for a mother. "How am I going to french-braid her hair?" he joked. The thought of dealing with female puberty fazed him completely. And so he asked if Rachel would consider using a sperm-washing technique to increase the likelihood of having a son.

Rachel wasn't offended. She and Brad had once discussed trying to raise the odds of having a girl, but they'd dropped the idea after Jason was conceived because they couldn't afford any more children. And Andy seemed satisfied with the knowledge that the procedure could increase his chance of having a boy, not ensure it.

A month after the insemination, a pregnancy test confirmed that Rachel had conceived. When she faxed Andy the results, "I got this happy, hysterically crying man on the phone," she recalls. "He sent me flowers."

It wasn't until the sonogram, five months later, that Rachel learned how adamant Andy was about the gender of his planned namesake. Squinting at the monitor, he seemed concerned when he didn't see a penis. Rachel offered to have amniocentesis. And when that test conclusively showed Rachel was carrying a girl, Andy turned icy. "What happened?" he demanded in a phone conversation.

"She's all there, all ten fingers, all ten toes," Rachel told him, heart beating against her chest. Andy was silent. "Are you telling me you don't want her?" Rachel asked, panic setting in. "I don't know," Andy responded, and hung up.

He called once or twice after that, but only to talk about Lucas. He never asked about the girl growing in Rachel's womb, never talked about a name for her or his preparations for bringing her home. "I felt it falling apart," says Rachel.

The bottom fell out soon afterward. Andy accused Rachel of moneygrubbing, then of having sex with Brad near the time of insemination. Maybe the child wasn't even his. Then he came up with a plan: Rachel should keep the baby, then try again to have a boy. If this child, too, was female, she could have an abortion.

"You can't play God this way," Rachel told him angrily. "You don't pick and choose. That's not moral."

Finally Rachel's boss asked her and Brad to dinner. Halfway through, he told them that Andy had decided he didn't want the baby. Rachel hadn't prepared Brad for that possibility. His pale face turned blood red. "I thought his head would explode," recalls Rachel. Her boss added that she would still collect her fee, plus an additional sum to help with the expense of raising the child. "You think this is about money?" she screamed at him through tears. "This is about a life."

There they were: six weeks from delivery and nearly out of their minds with anger, confusion, and a sense of betrayal. Brad wanted to put the baby up for adoption. Rachel, who felt fine about giving her daughter to a biological parent, did not feel the same way about handing her over to a stranger. "If I put her up for adoption, she would have been rejected

by both biological parents," she says. "I didn't feel I could do that." But she knew the decision had to be Brad's as well. "It was almost like I had cheated on him to have this child."

So Rachel sat down and wrote her husband a five-page letter. "I will never hold this against you," she wrote. But they had wanted a daughter. Furthermore, they were in a better position to have another baby than they'd been in for years. If her daughter were to return in 20 years and ask why they hadn't kept her, Rachel wrote, "I would not have an answer." But she assured Brad that she would work to get over the loss.

She placed the letter on their bed and left the house. After Brad read it, he paced angrily for hours, made himself sick with worry, and eventually called his mother-in-law. "She's not even throwing a fit," he said. "It's as if she doesn't care." Sylvia talked to him for an hour. "You were talking about adopting a daughter," she pointed out as gently as she could. "If you could love a stranger's child, what makes you think you couldn't love Rachel's?" He ranted and cried and agonized some more. But he confessed that he'd picked out a name.

"If you're already thinking about names," Sylvia said with amazement, "then you've made a decision." And so when Rachel came home that night, he met her with the news that baby Ariel could stay.

They added a bedroom they couldn't afford to the house that was already under construction. Bought a minivan to have room for an extra car seat. Told everyone, from the cashier at the grocery store to their real estate broker, that the unborn child intended for someone else was coming home with them. And they tried, slowly and painfully, to rebuild the trust between them.

Rachel got a tubal ligation, a double stroller, and the daughter she'd longed for, a raven-haired beauty with dazzling eyes and a winning smile. Rachel's three boys are delighted that, after their two other half-sisters were adopted overseas, they get to "keep" this one. And Brad—well, he looks like a man who's woken from a bad dream, only to find that it wasn't such a nightmare after all.

"The feeling that she's not mine, I don't think that will ever go away," he says softly, looking down at the sleeping infant in his lap. "But there's no better feeling than picking her up when she's just woken up, when she's really warm, and putting her head on my shoulder. I love her tremendously. When I look into her eyes, I see Rachel."

Rachel's surrogacy days are over. But half a world away another little girl with dark brown eyes and a generous heart is making plans for the future. Recently, on the flight home from meeting Rachel, Hannah, who's three, announced that she's decided what she wants to be when she grows up. "What's that, Hannah?" her mother, Karen, asked.

"I'm going to be a birth mother," Hannah replied firmly. "Like Rachel?" Karen asked, startled. Hannah nodded.

Karen laughed and gave her daughter a squeeze. "I hope so," she said. ■

Alexis Jetter is a contributing editor.