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# On Becoming a Family: Melanie's Story of Benjamin's Adoption, 2002

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# On becoming a family: Melanie's story of Benjamin's adoption, 2002

I became a mother in the back of a taxi cab.

No sit-com cliché, this. The taxi was a late-model, jacked up Honda, its plush chairs bedecked by delicate white doilies. Traffic dared not impede my driver, a silently brooding young man who weaved between Cyclos and motorcycles freighted by fruit, vegetables, live chickens, entire families. I sat tensely in the backseat, holding my son, incredulously wondering into what I had just gotten myself.

*Just*, of course, is a misnomer: we had been planning our adoption for almost a year. We had known about our son, Benjamin Quan, for four months. On the day of our adoption, as paperwork was being finalized, my husband and I took turns holding Benjamin in his second story orphanage room. We fed him a bottle, changed his clothes, smiled and nodded to his caregiver. For three hours, we were his babysitter. We felt fine.

And then, after the decrees were signed, after the caregiver said her goodbyes, I climbed into the taxi, gunning its engines at the orphanage gates. Benjamin was handed to me, as was his now-lukewarm bottle, and we were off.

I was now a mother. I no longer felt fine.

As the taxi weaved its way towards Ho Chi Minh City, I looked down at the infant-sized tempest crying on my lap. The taxi horn's constant bleating did little to quell my nerves, nor did the large delivery trucks careening towards us on the narrow unmarked road. We swayed in the back seat without seatbelts or car seats, and so my mother-instinct was nudged to life; I felt my arms wend tighter around my new son, as if I could protect him from the car wreck that now seemed inevitable.

I also thought about that other inevitable car wreck: my life, now that I was a new mother. In the taxi hurtling through Vietnam space, I said goodbye to late mornings in bed, my upwards career trajectory, last-minute trips to the beach. The changed lifestyle wrought by parenthood had at once seemed a distant mirage, but now that distance had closed, the mirage vaporized. This was it: I was now a mother.

During the time it takes for a speeding car to reach Saigon, I recognized the life-long sentence I'd been handed, through the taxi door, with my son: I would be obligated to serve this small stranger for the rest of my life. The rest of my life suddenly stretched far too long—and, perhaps, far too short.

At the city's outskirts, a misting rain settled on the crowded streets. Benjamin, still squeezed tightly in my arms, started to relax, his cries muted to a soft murmur. Our taxi driver pulled under the canopy of the New World Hotel, and white gloved bellhops opened my door. Ungraciously, I gathered Benjamin to my shoulder, pulled ourselves out of the taxi, and took my first faltering step into motherhood.

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