



In Memory of
Virginia May Luck
24 March 1951 – 10 January 2006

I remember the day we brought her home from the hospital. Though I was only five I vividly recall standing in the back seat of our car with my younger brother Bill, looking over with great curiosity at the baby in my mother's arms. I remember my father telling us that this was our new little sister Virginia May. My parents had wanted a daughter for so long. My mother was 40 when Virginia was born. Back then no one knew the risks of such a pregnancy. As we rode home from the hospital my brother and I were told that Virginia was different from other little babies. Our family would have to take care of her for the rest of her life. Of course I had no idea what he was talking about. She looked like a regular baby to me. But Virginia had been born with Down's syndrome.

The fact that we were taking her home at all was unusual for that day. Out of their infinite storehouse of wisdom, the doctors had told my parents that my sister would never walk or talk. She would remain a human vegetable and the wisest thing would be to put her in an institution where she could live out her short miserable existence under the care of strangers. To their eternal credit, my mother and father rejected such ugly lunacy. My mother was a registered nurse. She knew how to take care of babies. And my father, well, he had always wanted a daughter. Since Virginia was the one God had given he was going to take joy in her no matter what.

That day as we drove home from the hospital, I didn't realize it but our family had been changed forever. Together we began to climb jagged hills of joy and sorrow. For the most part, the joy came from my father who made his little girl the center of his life at home. Very quickly we discovered that my parents had been right. Virginia was anything but a vegetable. She might have "special needs" as we say today, but that didn't preclude her from having a strong personality. Over those first years Virginia learned to talk, sing songs, and in general communicate her desires quite effectively. This was due to my mother's wonderful physical care combined with much loving time spent by my father who taught her all he could. But he was a busy professor at the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago. Teaching the Bible brought little money and often he had to work late so his time at home was limited.

My sister's birth was the beginning of real suffering for my mother. And much of that suffering she did alone. Her response to Virginia's condition was unmitigated sorrow and anger. Back in 1950 it wasn't known that Down's syndrome was caused by a genetic defect. So for many years my mother believed that Virginia had been injured at birth by a careless doctor. Even when the evidence to the contrary was overwhelming it took decades for her to begin to accept it. With grim determination she committed her life to protecting and caring for the child God had given her. But her broken heart did not mend and her anger did not fade. (In a few months she will be 96. Her mind is no longer clear and she really isn't aware of Virginia's passing.)

When Down's syndrome children are small they are cute and loveable. And that's the way my sister was through her early years. For a while her health was fragile. Several times during infancy it took all of my mother's nursing skill to keep her alive. But finally, she became quite healthy. In the 1950's families with "retarded" children didn't take them out very often. Soon I understood why. As I grew older I began to realize that when we were at church or in a restaurant people stared at Virginia. I came to hate those stares. They made me angry. But I understood why they were staring. My sister looked strange. Though I loved her deeply, slowly I began to dread being seen with her in public. It didn't help that like many children with her condition she developed a whole series of odd quirks such as wrapping napkins and strings around a stick and swinging it endlessly in front of her while she made grunting noises. As a teenager I found it quite horrible when it happened outside our home. When you're a teenage boy filled with every kind of insecurity sitting in a restaurant next to someone who is swinging a stick and grunting is not where you want to be. How can you get a cute girl to look at you when she's transfixed by the manifold oddities of your sister? There were times when I felt like our whole family must look retarded.

As I remember the years of childhood, I think it was very difficult for my brother and me. In countless ways our home was a good one. My mother and father loved us deeply. They cared for our physical needs and instilled values that have guided me over my entire life. But our little sister took so much time that there wasn't a lot left for two rowdy boys. Our father left for work before the family awoke and worked late several evenings each week. Our mother didn't drive and didn't feel that she could leave Virginia with anyone, so she stayed at home which meant that we were on our own. For most of the

little events of our lives, whether sports for my brother Bill or various kinds of dramatic performances for me, our parents just weren't there. Now don't get me wrong, I wasn't always unhappy about being on my own. It meant that I was free to do pretty much as I pleased. As the years passed "doing what I pleased" gave me the reputation of being the "bad" kid of the family.

As an adult it's normal to look back and try to understand your childhood. As I look back the hardest thing to deal with for me was my mother's anger and sorrow. Many times I remember waking up in the middle of the night to hear her sobbing as she worked alone in the kitchen. Children don't understand such experiences. They tend to blame themselves for whatever is wrong. As a young child seeing my mother in such agony made me afraid. When a child is afraid and there's nothing he can do to change the situation often he responds with anger of his own. I think I was angry through much of my childhood and didn't really know it. This led to a kind of rebellion. Mainly it was expressed with extreme laziness which included doing very badly in school. But one form of rebellion turned into an unexpected gift. I had a vivid imagination. So when I faced unpleasant circumstances and emotions it was easy to vanish into a world of my own. I would tell myself endless fascinating stories. Ultimately, from that form of escape came my career as a writer.

My parents nicknamed my sister Gingy. I never liked the name. I thought it was ugly. But Gingy is what we called her. As she began to grow up with my father's joyful presence, Gingy developed a delightfully loving personality. For the first 25 years of her life she sang and laughed as her world slowly expanded. Wonderful teachers tried to help her learn. In her late teens she began attending a workshop where she found many friends. (Have you ever been to a Halloween costume party with 20 Down's syndrome adults? It is truly unforgettable.) People at church and in the neighborhood loved Gingy. She was a cheerful happy little soul. Then in March of 1976 a great tragedy struck our family. Unexpectedly, my father passed away. He had been in the hospital in traction with a broken leg. During the weeks that he laid in bed a blood clot had formed. When they got him up to put on a cast it went to his lungs and heart and he was gone.

By that time I was married. My wife Carel and I had three children and we were living close to my parents. I will never forget the day of my father's passing. I drove over to the workshop to pick up my sister. On the way home I tried to tell her what had happened, that our dad had gone to be with Jesus in Heaven and we wouldn't see him again in this world. Of course she didn't understand a word that I was saying. I remember feeling a profound loneliness. At that moment more than anything I wanted a sister I could talk to. People with Virginia's condition don't mourn like the rest of us. It took her a long time to understand that our dad was really gone. About the time my mother was beginning the first steps of healing Gingy was entering her time of sorrow. And her mourning went on for years. My father had been the light of her life. For a very long time, she cried every day for him.

After his death Virginia's personality slowly began to change. Oh, she was still loving, but the bubbling happiness passed away. Like every member of our family she had

tended toward stubbornness. Now it became a major trait of her life. Often this created some horrifying and hilarious situations. For instance if Gingy decided that she liked a particular location, well, that's where she would stay. If she liked church she would sit in the pew for hours after the service had ended. And no amount of coaxing or coercing could get her to move an inch. Like many Down's syndrome people a lethargic lifestyle led to a problem with weight. If she didn't want to move it was almost impossible to move her. This led to a number of interesting experiences such as Gingy sitting in a restaurant for hours or Gingy sitting in a stall in a women's room as though it had become her new home. There was the time Gingy flew to California with my mother. They needed to change planes in L.A. to continue on to Fresno and our mountain home. But when she entered the terminal in L.A. she decided that this was the end of the journey. She sat down and no one from my mother to several large security personnel could get her to move. Such experiences were lessons in patience and in retrospect, most were hilarious. I say *in retrospect*. But when you're driving hundreds of miles to pick up your mother and sister because your sister forced them to miss a flight the humor can escape you.

Our family is full of "Gingy stories." Like the time we all went to Chicago to experience the Chinese New Year. The parade was over in Chinatown. We were walking back to our car. Gingy was with my brother. On the street we passed a little group of venerable Chinese women conversing in their native language. My sister stopped and stared in wonder. Never had she heard anything like it. Thinking this must be some kind of game – old ladies babbling at each other – she decided to join in. Rushing over she stuck her face between them and started babbling too. Then, she laughed uproariously. Neither my brother nor I quite had the courage to go and extract her from her new fascination. My wife Carel had to do it.

Then, there was the time that Gingy vanished. She and my mother had been visiting in California for several months. My mother had taken a small apartment on a second floor. She had decided to move to the first floor so we were helping her make the transition. Finally ready to bring Gingy down to her new residence, my oldest son and his friend went up to get her. A few minutes later they came back in shock. GINGY WAS GONE. SHE HAD VANISHED FROM THE APARTMENT. It seemed impossible. The last thing my sister would do would be to go out and wander off. She hated getting out of her chair. Unable to believe she was gone, I rushed up to the apartment to see for myself before we called the police. Sure enough the room was empty except for a couch, a chair, and end table. On the floor under the table were two large pillows. Wait a minute. There was something wrong with this picture. My mother didn't own any pillows. Upon closer examination I discovered that they weren't pillows at all. It was my sister's rather expansive posterior. She had always had the most amazing ability to fold herself in half. And that's what she had done. She had fallen asleep on the floor under the table folded completely in half face down between her legs with only her bottom sticking out. And it looked exactly like two pillows.

There are so many stories about Gingy that could be told. It's so hard to believe that this wonderful loving quirky person is gone from us. From the moment she entered our lives

we were changed forever. She taught us patience, love, and compassion. She also taught us to have a strong taste for dark humor. I think almost every family with someone like Virginia will know what I mean. At certain moments, you've just got to laugh hysterically at the embarrassment and frustration. C. S. Lewis once called certain kinds of suffering a "severe mercy." In all of her suffering and in the suffering that we experienced together Virginia was a gift to us. And I'm very thankful for that gift. Her life has enriched mine in so many ways. Certainly, it has enriched my writing. A script that I have written that means so much to me is called "The Singing Place." It's about a young man with Down's syndrome who finds miraculous healing. For every family with a Down's syndrome child that is the Impossible Dream. Your loved one healed! Oh if only it could happen, what would he or she be like...at this age...and this age...and this one?

Virginia gave us all of the love that she had to give. And there was a lot in her. There's something else that you should know. My little sister loved Jesus. From her earliest years my father and mother taught her about Him. She sang His songs and learned about His love in simple Bible stories. Though she could never read, for years Gingy carried around a little New Testament. Every page was folded and messed up because she would sit for hours and leaf carefully through it somehow knowing how important it was though not understanding why.

As a Christian my hope goes far beyond this world. Jesus died for my sins and the sins of my sister. And He promised Eternal Life to all who would believe in Him. With utterly child-like faith Gingy believed. One of the great glories of Christianity is that it's for all people even ones like my sister. If going to Heaven required her to do anything she would never get there. If earning her own salvation was the only way for God to accept her she would have no hope. But of all the religions of the world Christianity is the only one with a Loving God who came to this earth as the Good Shepherd and who reaches down with gentle compassion to the littlest and most damaged of His lambs.

To the Christian this life is only the beginning. While I sorrow for my sister, in my heart there is a deep joy. What a moment! When Jesus came into her hospital room and called the real Virginia out of that broken dying body that had been her burden for so long. What an awakening! To be able to think and speak clearly. To remember and see and know! What a meeting when she entered the Gates of Heaven. I know that waiting there for her was our dad. Finally his real daughter in all of her beauty has come home.

I used to imagine that if Gingy had been born with a normal mind and body she would have been a brilliant and beautiful woman. Maybe she would have had a blazing career, a loving husband and children. (Often she would ask my mother when she was going to get married.) In this world such blessings were not for her. But in the next her blessings will be far greater and they will never end

This much I know. My sister is not lost. Someday I'm going to walk with her through golden streets in the Great City of Jesus our King. In that wonderful place we'll walk and

talk for a long, long time. And there will be so much to talk about because, after all, we will have a lifetime of catching up to do.

Blessings on you sweet, little sister. Goodbye...for now.