

Case of abandoned baby stumps Vancouver police

Authorities appeal for infant's mother to give information about child's ailment

By JANE ARMSTRONG

VANCOUVER -- She was found squirming in a plastic bag at a Vancouver bus stop, just a few days old. Apart from a puzzling breathing ailment, little else is known about an abandoned baby girl left on a gravel patch last weekend beside a busy boulevard.

Police are appealing to the infant's mother to come forward, if only to provide some clues to her health.

"We would like the mother or the parents to remember that the well-being of the baby should be uppermost in everybody's minds," Constable Anne Drennan said yesterday. "A medical history would be very helpful for the medical staff."

The little girl is in stable condition in hospital and is undergoing tests to determine why she is having difficulty breathing.

A woman waiting at a bus stop in the city's west side made the discovery on Saturday morning. When a plastic bag nearby moved, she peered inside and saw the infant. Overwhelmed and unsure what to do, the woman cradled the baby in her coat for more than three hours before calling police.

The discovery shocked residents in the comfortable residential neighbourhood, where speculation has raged about the motives behind such a desperate act. Opinions run the gamut from sympathy for the mother to disgust that a parent could risk endangering a helpless infant.

The news stirred emotions in Janet Keall, 27, a Vancouver woman who, a few hours after she was born, was discovered in a bundle of blankets on the back steps of a Prince Rupert hospital.

Ms. Keall spent her first four months with a foster mother before she was adopted by a couple in suburban Vancouver.

Now married with two young sons, Ms. Keall said news of the Vancouver baby brought pangs of sympathy for both baby and mother.

"That is so similar to what happened to me. I look at that and go: 'Oh my gosh. That's like me.' It just brings me back to Oct. 13, 1977, and I think, 'That was the day [my mother] said goodbye.'

"Even though I hear these things and feel bad for the baby, I really feel bad for the mother because I can only really imagine the things she's going through. I'm not saying it was right, I'm not saying it was wrong. But I think people are so quick to judge and I don't know if they should be."

Vancouver police have tried to sound a compassionate note in their search for the baby's parents. Constable Drennan said police cannot promise that no charges will be laid, but said they will take into consideration the circumstances.

"Our purpose is not to come down hard on whoever has found themselves in such a difficult set of circumstances here," Constable Drennan said.

"Our focus is on finding out who the baby belongs to and take it from there.

"We would hope that anybody . . . a young mother, perhaps a young mother in difficulties, wouldn't be afraid to come forward to us."

Ms. Keall urged the Vancouver parents to identify themselves, if only to provide a future paper trail for the little girl.

She said her adoptive parents raised her in a loving home with another sister and two younger brothers. From an early age, they told her the truth about her background and she resolved to find her biological parents. She has been searching for nine years, combing records in Prince Rupert and beyond. She has appeared on TV and radio and been the subject of several print articles, but she has not unearthed one solid lead.

Despite a full life, Ms. Keall said her unknown origins invade her everyday life. She doesn't know her ethnic background or any medical history. She wants to know where she inherited a gift for oil painting.

"What I want to know is: Who am I? Where am I from, who is my grandmother?"

Right now, the Vancouver baby is a ward of the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Police have no leads except that a woman was seen getting into a white car near the bus stop at approximately the same time the baby was abandoned.

They plan to comb the files of Vancouver-area hospitals for records of baby girls born last week. Doctors said it appears the baby was born in a medical facility.