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Words for Kallie

by Mary Lynn Bahr

The triplets came when I was a senior in high school. Dad told us about the ultrasound, three little heartbeats with their heads together, planning the havoc they would wreak on the unprepared Bahr family. Mom was in bed for months. My sister Kathy and I went to the hospital the night the triplets were born; we snoozed in the waiting room until Dad came in and announced—three girls!

In a few minutes he was back. They are not identical, and the smallest baby . . . looks different. Don't tell Mom yet. Kallie has shorter fingers, a longer tongue, and slanted eyes. Dad wept on the way home from the hospital. I saw the chromosome charts three days later: Down's Syndrome.

She says her name is "Tallie"; at Mom's prompting, she renames herself correctly, with a hard, back-of-the-throat "K." I ask about school, the soccer game, the new Sunday shoes. Kiera answers. "No," I say, "let Kallie tell me." When my visitor ear can't untangle her consonants, Kiera plays interpreter.

A Down's Syndrome child in triplets is hardly everyday news. Special education researchers from Utah State University came to observe and test Kallie. Our family (the triplets made fourteen children) was written up in the local paper. My parents started reading about Down's Syndrome and attending conferences for Down's Syndrome parents. My mother decided that Kallie would

speak and run and dance and go to school and look as good and behave as well as any Down's Syndrome child ever did. By parental fiat Kallie became the cutest and brightest of Down's Syndrome babies. She did special exercises as an infant; she has had speech therapy since she was two; she takes dance lessons with her sisters; she is "mainstreamed" at our local elementary school. Her classroom has an extra teacher—a woman trained in special education who works with Kallie. We and the system are doing everything we know.

But she can't read yet. She cannot carry a tune. Her Christmas necklace was the first to break. She lost her ring first. She does not color inside the lines. The chromosomes will not change.

The triplets follow me downstairs to "exercise." They imitate my movements. We do jumping jacks. We twirl around. When I start jumping on one foot, Kallie sits down and announces—without emotion—"Can't."

"Yes, you can."

"Can't."

"Yes."

"No."

She really can't. I lift her by the arms and we jump on the mini-tramp.

Kallie knew she was different long before the day she came home from preschool and announced, "Me handicap." Mom told me about it with half a smile. How much will she finally understand about the difference between her and her sisters? I wanted to sue the teacher who had taught her the ugliest of labels. I wanted to punish the kids who one day tied her up as the captive for their cowboys and Indians game. They cast Kallie as the powerless one.

Sometimes I am afraid she believes them. Sometimes she sits down on the soccer field; she never kicks the ball. Sometimes when

you ask where she put her glasses, she shrugs silently. Sometimes she lets her sisters speak for her.

At dinner, Kallie starts to say something and ends up giggling wildly.

Klarissa announces, “Kallie says she’s going to marry Jamison and kiss him!” She turns to me semi-accusatorily, “Kallie already knows who she’s going to marry!”

“Well,” I say, “you can’t *really* know who you’re going to marry until you’re at least as old as I am.” (My whole family holds their breath every time I bring someone home.)

I would sell my teeth to buy a husband for Kallie.

When Julie Clayton comes over to play Barbies and dress-ups, Kallie wanders upstairs alone. The girls don’t usually exclude her deliberately; she just leaves. She watches whoever is cooking. She sits on my lap while I talk on the phone. She puts placemats on the table.

It’s Mom’s birthday and we are on our way home from her great-uncle’s funeral. He was 103. Kallie has resisted several suggestions that she put on her seat belt. She hands a sheet of paper over the seat.

“Guess.”

The page is half filled with bright markers—a blue square inside a red line inside some green lines. Mom guesses, “Trampoline.”

“Nope.”

“Swimming pool?”

That was the right answer. A few minutes later Kallie leans over the seat again. Her lower lip is stained with blue ink.

“Cake.”

Mom doesn’t get it. “Cake?”

“Buy cake.”

“Buy a cake?”

“Birthday.”

Klarissa fills in the blanks. “She wants you to buy a cake for your birthday.”

We are headed for southern California. Dad has a week-long conference there, and plane fares are low enough that the family can come along. It will be the girls’ first time in an airplane. We sit in the terminal. Dad talks to the clerk at the ticket counter. The boys are all wearing baseball hats; two of them hold their hands over their noses because a woman near us is smoking. Kiera hangs onto Mom. Klarissa dances around. Kallie fiddles with the bow in her hair and says, “I’m so embarrassed.” She means, Mom tells me, that she is nervous.

Kiera holds the book and reads, “Goodnight moon,” tracing the words with her finger. Then she turns to Kallie, “Now you read it,” and traces the words again. Kallie mimics, “Goodnight moon.” She got it right: she grins at me. She will read.

But she will never write an essay like this one. Letters and ligaments do not always obey her. Like Kiera and Klarissa, I am speaking for Kallie, telling her story in my voice. She may never hear this voice; she may never read at even a high school level. And yet I live by reading: I know the published voices of Donne, Eliot, Dickinson, Melville, Austen, Keats.

I hope I can hear Kallie.

Tomorrow Dad and the kids are going skiing. The little girls went once last year; this is their second time. The boys are getting the skis ready, seeing whose hand-me-downs fit who. Someone yells for Kiera to come downstairs and try on her boots. Mom reminds the triplets to find matching gloves.

Kallie says with emphasis, “I *don’t know* how to ski.”

I say, "You'll learn how to ski." I put more dishes in the dishwasher.

In a minute she says it again, with the same intonation, to no one in particular: "I *don't know* how to ski."

On February 12, the kitchen windows are full of lopsided paper hearts. The girls stand on chairs to break eggs into the bowl. Klarissa turns to me and says brightly, "Kallie says 'tookie.' "

"So?" I say, "I know what she means."