



Rowena

I told the receptionist at the fertility clinic that a baby would be the perfect present for my thirty-ninth birthday. She seemed pessimistic as she wished me happy birthday. The treatment worked and I got my birthday wish.

The pregnancy was a little rough. We started out with twins but said good-bye to one heartbeat at 12 weeks. Shortly after that an amniocentesis showed that Rowena would have an extra X chromosome. Neither Don, my husband, nor I had any doubts about continuing the pregnancy. Being asked about termination, however, stirs tremendous emotions. We found ourselves feeling extremely protective of our yet unborn daughter.

By twenty weeks gestation I was having contractions. I was confined to bed by mid-January. My due date was April 15th. The worst of the pre-term labor ended in mid-February and I began to look forward to getting off the medications. Rowena's growth had slowed though and the doctor didn't want to risk having her come early when she seemed so small. On April 7th my water broke and Rowena was born via cesarean-section on April 8, 1998.

She was the perfect baby. At four pounds thirteen ounces, she looked like a miniature adult rather than a baby. She was captivated by people and them by her. If she was fussy we could take her to a crowded place and she would be instantly appeased. She loved music and movement. People would walk out of their way to comment on how beautiful she was.

She got her first tooth at nine months and crawled a little before her first birthday. She walked at 14 months. She was compliant and sweet though she didn't laugh or chatter as much as some children.

Rowena's speech developed in an odd way. She spoke in a super high voice. She used complex words but had a space between each word. At three we had her evaluated at the local University. Like most adults the professors were enamored with her. Each evaluator wanted another person to hear her. By the end of the session five professors were in the room with "the confident little girl with the Minnie Mouse voice." It was decided that there were five anomalies in her speech development but she would probably out grow them all. By kindergarten it had become a stutter and delays that required speech therapy.

Rowena's first day of kindergarten she said, "Now, remind me, who is supposed to cry, you or me." I explained that neither of us needed to cry as she was going to have a great day at school. She bounced out of the classroom that day and announced, "You were right. It was fun, fun, fun!"

She failed the kindergarten intake assessment twice. Her teacher thought she would probably catch up by the end of the year so we didn't have any further testing done. She made friends and was happy in her classroom. She never complained about the other children and seemed to be able to get along with everyone. In the spring of the year she casually explained to me that if you hold hands with your friends the class bully wouldn't hit you. I was appalled. I asked if she had been hit. "Not if I hold hands with my friends," she explained. She later told a story about how nice her friend was for telling a boy to stop spitting on her. I was alarmed by her passivity and asked the teacher and counselor to watch and see if she was being targeted by the bully. They thought she was being somewhat targeted and addressed the issue with the other child.

First grade was a wonderful year. Rowena learned to read and loved her teacher and friends. She seemed to enjoy math but corrected me when I said she was "fast" at getting her math concepts. She said, "No. I am good at math not fast." I was nervous about the teacher going on maternity leave but Rowena adapted quickly. She seemed to be thriving in every way.

In second grade she began to fall behind her peers in reading. She attended a lunch time reading program and was becoming self conscious of her poor spelling abilities. Her friends tended to be in higher reading and spelling groups. She began to try to fit with them by being uncharacteristically silly. She began to act silly at recess to get attention. She was being treated poorly by children she had thought were her friends. A new principal took over the school in the spring of Rowena's second grade year. The first day of school under the new administration, Rowena announced that she would have to be homeschooled. How I wish I had listened to her that day.

After months of dramatic departures, hours of tears, and much confusion we pieced together that the new administration had a policy of locking the children out of the building.

Rowena had tried to enter the building for her lunch reading program and found herself locked out. She had panicked and “thought she would die” which related back to an instance in first grade when a janitor had accidentally locked her in a bathroom. Her inability to communicate her fear and her sense that her friends would no longer protect her left her feeling unsafe. She perceived the new administrations heightened security as a sign that the Principal was afraid, too. The anxiety grew worse every day.

We became uncomfortable Rowena’s worsening condition and with the administration’s response to our attempts to meet her needs. We transferred her to a charter Montessori school for third grade. Her confidence had been shaken. She was timid about groups but the gentle nature of her teacher and the self-paced curriculum seemed to suit her. By spring she went on a camp out with her class without either of her parents.

She arrived at her new school behind grade level in both reading and math. The charter school was cooperative about testing her and she has two Individual Education Plans in place. One is for the learning disabilities and the other is “Other Health Impaired” with an emphasis on meeting her needs concerning anxiety. None of this, however, has been as important as having her in a classroom with a compassionate teacher and supportive classmates.

In fourth grade she established healthy friendships and seemed to be thriving again. She continues to test low but as she told me, “At this school it is o.k. to be different.” She continues to be meticulous in her math work and when asked about trying to catch up to be at grade level she explained, “I process more slowly so I don’t want to rush anything.” She is, of course, right.

She loves yoga, caring for animals, reading, swimming and skiing. She doesn’t understand sarcasm but likes a good joke. She is and always will be one of my favorite birthday presents.