

The Magic of Matching Accessories

It's not about hair; it's about friendship, love, and healing.

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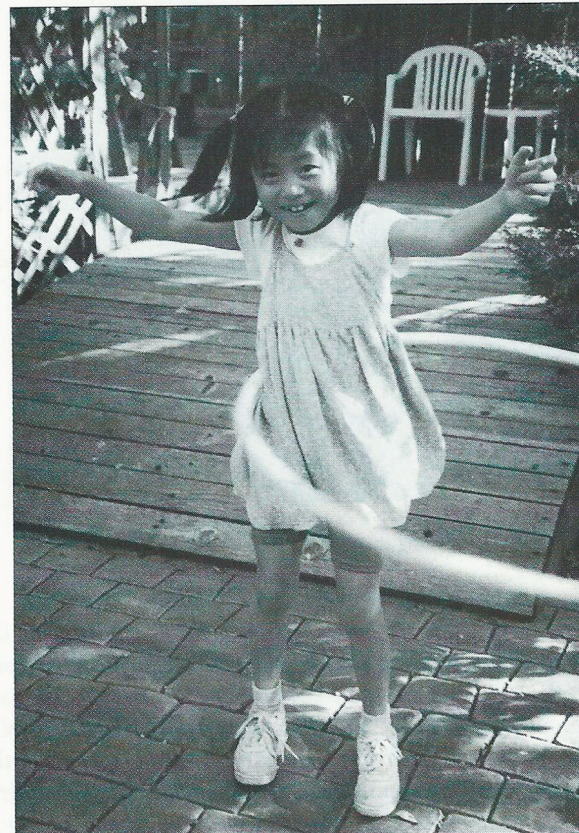
On into the night, with hollow-sounding rushes of air, the respirator did its work. And Nini's blue-white chest lifted and lowered, lifted and lowered, in the aftermath of the accident that brought her to Children's Hospital.

Her mother and I held onto each other at Nini's bedside in the Intensive Care Unit. Ying Lowrey was my friend and neighbor. A scant six months earlier her husband had died suddenly. That tragedy had brought us and our two families closer together, a bond strengthened even more by the unlikely friendship of our daughters.

When the girls first met, Nini was in kindergarten, though she was six-and-a-half, old enough to be in first grade, maybe even second. She came to San Diego from Wuhan, China, just a few weeks before that school year began, a motherless child adopted by the Lowreys: Preston, Ying, and their young son, Kendall. Nini knew no English, and the kindergarten of Adobe Bluffs Elementary seemed a good place to start, especially for someone who weighed less than forty pounds in her new Barbie socks.

My daughter Anne was fourteen at the time, a high school freshman with things on her mind like babysitting, piano lessons, the Pythagorean theorem, and the boy who smiled at her between geometry and English.

It was early evening in late summer the first time Nini's mom tugged her across Vintage Drive to say "Hello" to our family. But Nini said nothing.



Nini Lowrey demonstrates her twirling abilities.

Instead, she clung to her new mom's hand with both of her own, and tried to disappear into Ying's long skirt.

Ying, who had lived the first two decades of her life in China, stroked Nini's short black hair and spoke Chinese to her in a soft voice. Nini paused, looked up, then dove into another fold.

During that short visit, Nini's dark eyes never met mine, nor my husband's, nor our twelve-year-old son's. They did, though, peek shyly at Anne. Tall, thin Anne, with her dainty pierced earrings and her long brown hair, streaked the color of new pennies by the San Diego sun.

Nini, whose dresses in China had been threadbare and plain, was drawn to

pretty things like a hummingbird to a bright red hibiscus. In time, the top of her dresser would teem with pink barrettes; purple, green, and yellow ribbons; lacy hair clips; and wide, iridescent rubber bands. In time, the top of her dresser would look a lot like Anne's when she was six-and-a-half.

That first year Nini's early-Beatle hairdo grew almost as quickly as her vocabulary. In no time at all, her hair brushed against her small shoulders, or fell across her eyes, loosened from a side barrette when she'd pull on her bike helmet or wriggle madly to keep her hula hoop spinning.

At least once a week, Nini came over to invite Anne to play. If she didn't have a biology final to study for or a fugue to practice, Anne obliged her. "Dance party" was one of Nini's favorite

games. But in order to play, Anne had to learn Nini's Basic Rules of Twirling, the first being: "Twirling is strictly forbidden to all girls wearing blue jeans." In other words, only Nini was allowed to spin around with abandon to the music of her clock radio. Anne, in denim cut-offs, could either watch or shuffle.

At the end of that first school year, after Nini had learned her colors and letters and fad-phrases like "Not!" and "Hel-lo," Ying hired Anne to tutor Nini for an hour every day during the summer. They would review letter sounds, read together, fill in the blanks of phonics work sheets. But it became something more than a job. For Nini, it was

a chance to have the undivided attention of a patient young woman who, like her, knew the magic of matching accessories. For Anne, it was an opportunity to enter once again into a little girl's world, a world of make believe, a world where glamour could be created instantly with a hairbrush, a handful of rubber bands, and a friend willing to sit still.

"OK, OK, Nini," I'd hear Anne saying. "If you do a good job on this workbook page, yes, we can play beauty shop."

With that, Nini would grip her pencil a little tighter, scrunch up her nose, and carefully form the letters under the next workbook picture. "P-O-T" she wrote under a line drawing of a sauce pan; "C-A-T" under the animal with whiskers and a curled tail. Pictures of P-I-Gs always made her laugh.

When the lesson was finished, the fun began. An ordinary bathroom became Nini's Beauty Shop. She'd put the fuzzy cover down on the toilet, and command Anne to sit. Then Nini would get busy, brushing, parting, twisting, and twirling her tutor's hair. "Don't move," she'd snap, as Anne cut her eyes toward the mirror. "There," she'd announce, when no fewer than four ponytails protruded over each of Anne's ears. "Pretty!" she'd coo.

After summer, Nini moved on to first grade; Anne, tenth. Tutoring sessions changed from every day to every Wednesday. In between, Nini often rang our doorbell with a new picture she'd drawn for Anne. Whether it was a sketch of a ship afloat on pointy waves or a v-shaped bird flapping over a wobbly rainbow, somewhere on the paper—in a corner or at the top—Nini would inevitably draw a heart with two names inside: "Nini" and "Anne."

On a Sunday in February, Nini, her mom, and her brother went to a nearby school for a community celebration of the Chinese New Year. A four-lane street separated the school grounds from a park with an enticing assortment of swings, slides, and mon-

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The author's daughter and neighbor: working through the stages of grief.

key bars. Nini asked her mom if she could go to play there with a group of friends from the festivities.

"Well, OK," Ying answered. "Just stay together and be careful."

Nini reached for the hand of her ten-year-old playmate, Cindy, and scampered to catch up with the kids already heading toward the park. Looking both ways, the two girls crossed together to a tree-lined median that separated the street's two west-bound lanes from the two going east. They waited there for the approaching car on their right to pass. But instead, it stopped. And its driver, with a quick wave, motioned both girls to continue on to their way.

Just then, unseen by that driver and hidden from the girls' view, another car cruised by in the lane closest to the park, the lane Nini and Cindy were hurrying into. The patter of two pairs of sneakers across the pavement was lost in a screech of brakes. At the same instant, both girls were hit. Nini died that night in the hospital; Cindy, the next day. For Anne, Wednesday afternoons became an eternity.

One evening not long after the accident the Lowreys were at our house for dinner. Ying looked over at Anne and said with a wistfulness beyond words, "You have such beautiful hair. You know, Nini used to love when I'd style hers, especially when I'd braid it."

"Do you do French braids?" Anne asked. "My mom always had such a hard time with those, I gave up hope of ever having one."

Anne was right. My French braids were, in fact, hopeless. I'd start off OK with the usual three sections of hair, but things got progressively muddled as I'd attempt to incorporate additional strands with each cross-over.

"Come over tomorrow morning before school," Ying said, brightening for the first time in a long time. "Bring your brush, I'll show you what a real French braid looks like."

Every school day morning in the weeks since then, Anne heads out our front door, brush in hand,

to the home of Nini's mom. And every morning she returns with her hair in another beautifully intricate braid. One day, it'll be a thin braid that lays softly in the middle of her loose and flowing hair. The next day, a much thicker one that gathers every strand into a classically balanced pattern.

Counselors and psychologists have written about the stages of grief, how to cope with a devastating loss, how to carry on. But Ying and Anne happened on a simple way all their own. As the sun slants through the Lowrey's living room blinds, a mournful mother and her daughter's special friend come together for a few minutes every morning. And while they chat about the weather, or the movies, or Anne's post-SAT plans, their memories of a little girl named Nini are woven into every pretty braid. It's about more than hair. Intertwined in those moments Anne and Ying share is so much we need to know about friendship, love, and healing. ▲

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