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## The sweet miracle of Moranda

By Francie Healy



**They put helium balloons** on her grave: pink, her favourite colour. It was a surprise to see them there in that grey place. They bounced in the wind like laughter. Her laughter. You could hear it, feel it, rippling through the grass, rising to the sky.

It was her birthday. She would have been eight years old. She would have had all the balloons she wanted. And oh, how she would have laughed. She would have hugged us all and told us over and over and over again it was her special day

Christmas was a great day, and so was the first day of school. But nothing was quite so grand as Moranda's birthday.

Born with Down Syndrome, she was the sunniest person you could ever meet. Everyone said so. Her parents

and family knew it. So did her friends, her schoolmates, and everyone who had the good fortune to meet her.

To know Moranda was to feel blessed, enriched; and you knew something magical was happening. It was an experience you knew you might never have again: a moment in time to be cherished and remembered.

And now, years after her death, I can't get her out of my mind. She is with me, her own special spirit part of me now, as good friends are. Moranda was my dear, dear friend.

I worked with her at school. I was supposed to be her helper, but it didn't quite work out that way. She helped me to see the world in a new and special way. I was just her guide. She was my inspiration.

When she began kindergarten with all the other four-and-five-year-olds, she was shy and frightened. Loud noises and confusion scared her most of all and she needed constant reassurance. But when other kids rolled in the grass or knocked each other over, Moranda was taking in the tiniest and most precious elements of creation.

She would hold a leaf in the air and watch how the wind blew it. Then she'd let go and watch it dance through the air. She'd laugh and hug me, then run after the leaf to try it again. Some days we'd spend whole afternoons chasing leaves.

This was her legacy to me: leaves, and laughter. And now as the autumn winds begin to blow and the leaves fall at my feet, I remember her.

Moranda was probably not destined to become a lawyer or doctor or politician. She was destined to be happy and to make others smile. She might have had to face discrimination or ridicule. Because of her fragile health, she might also have had to deal with a failing body. But in her almost-eight years, Moranda knew only love. Her parents and family adored her and their ache now is intolerable.

This tiny pudgy child managed to enchant a whole school with her spirit of joy and mischief. When she died, there was a line-up all the way up the street and around the block to the small-town funeral home. Children, teachers and parents wept openly. In a small, sweet miracle, Moranda had marked their lives forever.

Shortly after her death I stood overlooking a river, and beyond, a waterfall. In the rhythm of that silence, I heard her. I knew she was there, one with the earth and with a God I thought I could no longer comprehend. And for that fleeting moment it all made sense. Moranda was our gift in a broken and difficult world. When she died she left us with a spirit of celebration and a reminder of true, uncomplicated beauty.

The leaves will fall every year of my life. They will blow in the wind and somehow my little friend will be there, her tiny hands touching my face, touching my soul. My tears are silly, though they continue to fall at the oddest of times.

Life, death. Sorrow, joy. Miracles. So much, so much, to try to celebrate, grieve...and understand.