

Being in the hospital with Avi as often as we were and seeing as many other sick children as we did, we couldn't take it for granted that I would give birth to a healthy baby. Marc and I cried tears of joy when I delivered a healthy daughter, Rebecca. After my experience with Avi's birth, it was overwhelming simply to be able to hold her and nurse her for as long as I wanted. The only thing that would have made us happier is if her marrow had been compatible with Avi's, for the bone-marrow transplant.

He was not thrilled by Rebecca's arrival. She was a fussier baby than he had been. She hated the car—which meant the end of the road trips that he loved—and she cried a lot. His jealousy was probably compounded by the fact that, within 18 months, his baby sister was bigger than he was. But there was an upside to having a sister; Avi loved parading around in Rebecca's dresses and bathing suits. We used to joke that on top of everything else, he was a cross-dresser.

By the time he was 18 months old, Avi was sitting up, crawling, cruising like a pro—and just about ready to start walking. Unfortunately, at that point he had to undergo the first of two very painful operations to reset his hips in their sockets. For six weeks after each operation, he wore a body cast from his breastbone to his feet, with a bar between his thighs to keep his legs separated. It was cumbersome, but Avi was determined to be mobile, even if it meant pulling himself along the ground by his elbows, dragging the cast behind him in what I referred to as the "GI Joe crawl."

The surgery didn't work; one year later, Avi's hips popped back out of their sockets. It was almost two years before he would even attempt cruising again. Walking was especially frightening for him because he had become old enough to be afraid of falling; it was also painful, because the operations left his muscles very tight.

Yet true to form, Avi eventually learned to walk in his one-of-a-kind way, a stiff, wide-gaited, Chaplin-esque swagger. He took his first steps when he was almost four, while we were visiting a friend who happened to have a whoopee cushion. After laughing hysterically every time someone sat on it, Avi unexpectedly hauled himself up, determinedly walked across the living room, and plopped down gleefully as the cushion blurted a big fat raspberry. For his fourth-birthday party, we put out a dozen whoopee cushions on chairs around the room. He trekked back and forth from one cushion to the next, exploding into giggles each time he heard the splat.

A Unique Sense of Humor

Whoopie cushions were an important part of the distinctive shtick—a Yiddish show-business term that means a performer's routine, sort of his trademark—that Avi was developing. His was from the slapstick school of pratfalls, funny faces, and silly noises à la Jerry Lewis (one of his father's favorite comedians). Among Avi's best gags was pretending to talk, silently

mouth words in an exaggerated way. Another was collapsing in giggles when we pretended that we were blowing him down.

Our friend Marvin, a comedy writer, had a routine that Avi thought was the funniest thing going. Marvin would fake a very loud sneeze into a tissue and sent the tissue flying up into the air. Avi loved it so much that we filmed it. Whenever he was in pain, that tape would always cheer him up right away.

Avi was obviously goodnatured, but we never really knew much of what was going on inside his head. Although tests showed that he had normal intelligence, he would almost never respond to a direct question unless we persisted. By age three, he knew all of his colors, his numbers, and his alphabet, and yet he never let on to people if they asked. Avi always looked so deep in thought that it frustrated us—we longed to be privy to those thoughts. I was waiting for him to get older so that I could ask him what was on his mind.

An Angel's Voice, and a Genius for Words

Perhaps in part because he talked so little, music and books became an important part of Avi's life. Practically from the day he was born, we brought him every musical windup toy and tape on the market. Even when he was an infant, I'd read aloud to him from whatever novel I was involved in at the time. With no effort at all, he could memorize his favorite books (he was particularly fond of Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen*) and the songs that he loved. He amazed us at times by endlessly reciting and singing words that he would never use in ordinary conversation. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, we would wake up to the sound of him singing sweetly to himself. Sometimes it took an hour or so for him to sing himself back to sleep.

When Avi was about two, we enrolled him in a special school for children with disabilities. He loved it, and the feeling was mutual. His love showed itself, in its usual mischievous way, in a book he made in class called *All About Me*. Among the "things I can do and things I like," Avi listed running, singing, hugging, playing with Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and "making fun of my teachers."

For a boy who didn't talk much, Avi had strong likes and dislikes. After spending his first year on a feeding tube, he developed an aversion to eating. It upset us because he was already so small for his age. Some days he consumed almost nothing—a couple of bites of a cracker and a bit of cheese. He was far more interested in poking his fingers into pieces of ziti and pretending that they were fingernails, "smoking" his fish sticks, or playing tiddly-winks with his Cheerios.

One day when he was two and a half, Avi put away 72 Rice Krispies at one sitting. It was the greatest amount of solid food that he'd ever eaten. By the time he was finished, Marc and I were so happy that we made a tape-recording of all of us singing "It's Avi Ate