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## "She's my best friend ... but sometimes it's complicated"

By **Jerry Brewer**  
*Seattle Times staff columnist*

While coloring a picture of a bird, Maria Strauss recounts the previous day's most stressful event.

"Yesterday, we had a biiiiiiig problem," the 9-year-old says. Maria's sister, Gloria, missed a dose of pain medication, and cancer blitzed her body. Gloria cried. Mom and Dad gasped. Eventually, Gloria swallowed eight pills, and the drugs soothed the 11-year-old's discomfort.

Then came the big problem.

All of Gloria's jewelry was in Maria's jewelry box.

The Strauss girls quarreled until their parents and older sister intervened. Then they battled some more.

My jewelry box, Maria said. You have no right. But you're not using it, Gloria said. What's the big deal?

Not fair; chill out. Respect my space; clean your space. Whatever; shut up.

They're kids, still. Three hours ago, they were dealing with Gloria's cancer. Now they're fighting over a pink-and-white box Maria bought for \$2. Even on the most fidgety of days, there's always time for a petty argument.

The next morning, the



[enlarge](#) STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Maria does a flip on the family's trampoline June 8, when the family got a special visitor: "American Idol" finalist Sanjaya Malakar, who grew up not far from the Strauss home in Federal Way. Behind Maria, 9, is Alissa, 13, and Joe, 6. Three-year-old Sam peeks from behind.

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fight is forgotten. While Maria makes her bird orange with yellow wings, Gloria stands a foot away and plays bouncer as three younger brothers attempt to pester little sis.

"She's my best friend," Maria says. "It's fun, but sometimes it's complicated."

**SHORTLY AFTER**  
GLORIA shoos away

the boys, Dad trudges into the living room. It's 10 a.m., but Doug Strauss' face shows 10 p.m. drowsiness. His voice, usually soothing, is grating. He shakes his head and apologizes for not feeling well.

Doug fears he might have pneumonia, but he won't go to the doctor, not even when his wife, Kristen, urges him. The focus must remain on Gloria.

Her pain medication had to be increased recently. She needs 24 pills a day now. Gloria takes them in eight-pill clusters every eight hours. The drugs include Tylenol, Advil and methadone, the most potent of them all, which accounts for half of her daily intake.

After missing that dosage, Gloria ached so badly her father had to guide a cup of water to her mouth so she could swallow the medicine.

It has been eight weeks since Dr. Julie Park told the Strauss family that neuroblastoma is overtaking Gloria. Four years after being diagnosed, Gloria was given a timeline of weeks to live, possibly as short as one month.

Gloria has lived twice as long as the bleakest scenario. But whenever those drugs wear off, the cancer's intensity emerges. Pain is severe at this stage, Park says. Because Gloria doesn't want to endure more chemotherapy, Park is most concerned with her aches and the medicine's side effects, especially the sluggishness and itchiness.

Gloria still naps often. She scratches until her arms turn red. And she's more vocal about her aches. Her parents try to conceal their distress. It's impossible, however.

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**A prayer for Gloria**



As Gloria Strauss' medical options run out, her family is relying on a miracle from God. Meanwhile, the 11-year-old cancer patient remains certain:

“ I'm going to make it. ”

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Doug remembers watching television alone one March night. He saw "a spitting image" of Gloria on the screen. The Gloria look-alike had cancer. Doug watched the show until the end.

[Gloria's school site](#)  
[Strauss family blog](#)  
[Lisa Tran's song "A Prayer for Gloria" on YouTube](#)

The girl died. And then the narrator said, "Neuroblastoma still eludes us."

"I'm like, 'No!' " Doug said. "I just saw a girl who looks like Gloria die of the same cancer. If my daughter dies, am I going to have faith?"

After getting little sleep, Doug went to school the next morning. He's a teacher and basketball coach at Kennedy High School in Burien, a Catholic school. This was during Lent, so Doug began class reading from a pamphlet to reinforce the religion's beliefs.

At the end of this lesson, the summation said, "You have to turn to God, during good or bad, even when you lose a child to cancer."

The teacher stood before his students and wept.

STILL COLORING HER BIRD, Maria describes her sisters.

Alissa, 13, talks on the phone. A lot. She has her own room, at the back of the house. But it doubles as a playroom for all the children.

Sometimes, Alissa locks the room for privacy, but the door locks on the outside, not the inside, so her siblings twist the knob and come in. Alissa gets so annoyed. She plays with them some, and that's fun, but she gets to do her own thing. A lot. Gloria tells Maria that's called "older privileges."

In contrast, Maria says Gloria likes to play all the time. She dresses Maria up like a Hollywood star. They play "house." They pretend the room they share is a college dorm. They used to jump on the trampoline quite a bit, but now Gloria often lies on it and watches Maria jump.

Maria sleeps closest to the window in their room, and when she gets what she calls "frightened out" by noise, Gloria calms her. But Maria is jealous of attention Gloria receives. Alissa tells Maria that's called compassion.

Four years ago, Maria was 5. She had no idea what cancer was. Today, she notices Gloria limping and offers her shoulder for support.

"Sometimes, it's heavy weight on me," Maria says. "My dad says the limp is because cancer is growing. Once I pictured that, I was like, 'Now I know how Gloria feels.' She's my best friend. I'll do anything to help her."

She's done coloring. Now Maria, the most artistic Strauss, wants to show another picture. It's hanging on a wall near the front door.

Her drawing is of an angel giving Gloria a miracle, Maria says. Gloria is in a pink shirt with her nickname "Glow" written across it. She has on a skirt with "her boots that she got for Christmas." The angel flying above Gloria is a ballerina angel, Maria says.

"I wound up giving her some shoes," Maria says while looking at her angel. "I don't know why. It just came to me. Usually, angels don't have shoes on."

ALISSA HAS A CONFESSION: She hates needles. Once, she avoided getting a flu shot for three years. Last year, during sixth-grade immunization, she locked herself in a bathroom stall. After teachers and administrators coaxed her out, it took 20 more minutes to calm her.

"I wasn't so sure I wanted to go to sixth grade," jokes Alissa, now a seventh-grader.

Gloria laughs and asks her sister, "Are you serious? Those shots are little."

Doctors have jammed needles as long as No. 2 pencils into Gloria's pelvis to biopsy tumors. Alissa respects her sister's pain threshold.

"I've cried myself to sleep a couple of times just thinking about it," Alissa says. "I don't want her to be in pain anymore."

At times, Alissa observes her classmates and notices differences. Her friends with smaller families are more "catered to." Alissa says she has more responsibilities than most 13-year-olds. She is asked to baby-sit her six siblings. She is asked to be a mature and unselfish kid. She is asked to understand when there's no spotlight for her.

She admits to wondering about justice. Why her family? Why her sister? She asks herself, "If Gloria didn't have cancer, what would life be like?"

The answer is always the same: normal. But what's normal? Alissa isn't sure normal would be as meaningful.

"It's like ... "

Alissa pauses. Maria is crying. Trampoline accident. After she helps her sister, Alissa can't remember her point.

"Guess it wasn't that important," she says.

THE GUYS USED TO HECKLE DOUG. After Kristen had three consecutive girls to start their family, Doug's friends joked he couldn't make male babies. The last four kids have been boys, however. The parents love the coincidence.

The girls are a little older, more mature, able to support each other and police their brothers. Three of the boys — Joe, 6; Anthony, 5; Sam, 3 — are close enough in age to have a similar bond in a few years. The baby, 8-month-old Vincent, doesn't fit into any cluster, but Mom and Dad already joke about child No. 8.

"Sometimes, you want to feel sad," Doug says. "Sometimes, you want to have a pity party. But these children never let you. It's precious, so precious."

The boys return to nag Maria. Joe stands by her right shoulder as she talks about her art. Sam yells into a digital recorder. Anthony asks, "When is it

my turn? When do I get to tell my story?"

"You're next," Maria tells him. "Now move!"

Gloria drags the boys outside again, but they return five minutes later. The sisters look at each other and sigh.

"My turn!" Anthony yells, signaling the next big problem. "Ahhhhhhhh!"

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