

An intricate bond few other sisters could share

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BY ROY WENZL

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Even at age 3, Tammy Goering showed signs of the sister she would become. Her mother sat her down in their home in Valley Center in 1975, a few days after her baby sister Kristie was born.

"Your sister is very sick," Gloria Goering told her.

Tammy looked at her, silent, reserved.

Gloria didn't tell her about the two holes in the baby's heart, didn't tell how she'd almost died, how the doctors said she might still die.

She just told Tammy that Kristie's heart wasn't right, that she would need to have surgery.

Her mother said she would need all the help Tammy could give.

Tammy nodded.

"OK," she said.

She would keep that promise. But no one knew then how far she would go to keep it.

Kristie survived.

Six years later, she went for a ride on her bike.

On the street, she collided with an older boy on a bike, and she fell. On the way down, a bike pedal stabbed into her right eye.

Tammy came home from soccer practice to find the house empty, and a frantic neighbor waiting to tell her that Kristie had been taken to the hospital.

"What happened?" Tammy demanded.

"How bad is it?"

No one could tell her.

"Can I go see her?"

No.

She sank down on the porch, a 10-year-old girl sobbing. Grief came accompanied by rage.

"No one would tell me anything," she said later. "They either didn't know, or they didn't want to tell me."

Gloria came home and told her that Kristie's eye was now blind.

Tammy felt sick.

In the six years since Kristie's birth, Tammy had done everything she could to care for Kristie, to fulfill that promise she had made to their mother.

She had brushed Kristie's hair, comforted her in sickness, cleaned her room when she seemed too tired.

Kristie had undergone many surgeries. And Tammy had felt an ache in her own chest, the kind inflicted by helplessness.

Now, sitting there in the house, with her sister in the hospital again, and Gloria telling how bad it was, rage and anger bubbled up with tears.

"Why do bad things always happen to her?"

A month and a half passed before Kristie got out of the hospital.

Her teachers at West Elementary School in Valley Center decided to hold her back a grade.

When she went to school, she wore a patch over her eye.

"Kids can be very cruel," Kristie would say later. "You go to school with a patch, they'll make fun of you for it."

At night sometimes, Gloria had to clean and treat the damaged eye socket. Tammy had to help hold her sister down and listen to her scream.

Six months later, at a school crosswalk, Kristie tried to cross the street to go home.

When a car approached from Kristie's blind side, she didn't see it. The car knocked her down.

At the hospital, doctors decided she was OK this time. They sent her home.

No one saw then how much the older sister was hurting.

By this time, Tammy had become a child of steely resolve.

Quiet, yes. The loving sister, yes. But where her family was concerned, Tammy was not to be trifled with.

The following summer, a few months after the car accident in 1982, Gloria got a call at work.

It was the mother of a teenage baby sitter Gloria had hired to watch Tammy and Kristie.

Tammy had ordered the baby sitter out of the house.

When Gloria called home, Tammy explained that the girl had done nothing to baby-sit, nothing to cook for the girls. All she did was watch television.

"I told her to leave," Tammy said. "We can take care of ourselves.

"I'll take care of us."

On Feb 3, 2001, Tammy Ferguson-McNutt boarded a plane in Shreveport, La., and flew to Wichita.

She hoped to arrive before Kristie's baby died. But she was too late.

The baby had lived three hours. It was 17 weeks premature.

Tammy sat with her sister, crying.

"I wished it had happened to me."

It was a variation on what she had often thought after Kristie lost her eye: Why do all the bad things happen to Kristie?

"I wanted to take on her pain.

"It's not fair."

After Kristie's miscarriage, the doctors tied her tubes. She would never give birth.

There was a funeral.

Tammy flew home.

Six months passed.

At home with her husband, Milton George, Kristie cried and came to terms with death and barrenness.

The doctors had always told her that she should never have babies because of the strain on her heart.

Kristie had tried to follow the doctors' advice. She had planned on adoption.

Then she had met Milton.

She disliked him at first. He was divorced, and he had an attitude about women, she said.

But then she fell for this big, blond guy with the big shoulders -- with a love so deep that nothing mattered, not doctors' warnings nor the fear of death.

They would have a house, and a home. And babies. His babies.

Milton tried to tell her no, it was OK, don't risk it.

But she wanted to try.

She had a miscarriage on Dec 2, 1999. Then the second one in 2001.

Both pregnancies nearly killed her, just as the doctors had warned.

And after that came a grief that didn't seem to have a bottom to it.
On the phone, and in person, Gloria and Tammy tried to console her.
"Perhaps you can adopt," Gloria said.
Kristie knew she would be able to go on with life.
"But life won't mean as much."
One night in August 2001, six months after the second miscarriage, the phone rang in Kristie and Milton George's home near Peck.
It was Tammy, calling from Louisiana.
"There's something I've been thinking about doing," she said. "I want to ask you about it."
Tammy began to tell what she proposed to do.
Kristie listened.
She burst into tears. She was so startled that she could barely get out any words. When she did, it was to ask, repeatedly:
"Are you sure?"
"Are you sure?"
"Yes," Tammy told her. "I'm sure."
Tammy had flown home to Louisiana after Kristie's baby's funeral filled her with wrath.
"Why her?"
Dark thoughts. Anger. Grief. Loss.
An idea occurred to her.
Characteristically, Tammy told no one, not Kristie, or Gloria back in Wichita, not even Earl McNutt, that genial guy from Sterling, Kan., who was her second husband.
Tammy logged onto the Internet and began searching every site she could find that related to her idea.
She compiled lists, considered, talked to doctors, pondered.
When she knew the subject backward and forward, she was ready.
At about that time, Gloria called Tammy.
She said she'd heard an idea in her hairdresser's shop in Wichita.
It was called in vitro fertilization, where doctors take an egg fertilized by sperm outside the womb, then implant it in a healthy woman who is better able to carry the baby to full term.
"I wish I wasn't so old," Gloria told Tammy. "I'd carry Kristie's baby myself."
Tammy listened but said nothing. She didn't tell her mother that the idea was the same thing she had researched thoroughly for six months.
She waited 24 hours.
That was when she picked up the phone and called Kristie.
"There's something I've been thinking about doing."
For 26 years now, she'd watched Kristie suffer.
Kristie had sat quiet and frail while Tammy played soccer. Kristie lost an eye. Kristie endured taunts, suffered through more than 20 operations, risked death in pregnancy, sobbed through the deaths of two babies.
Tammy had spent 26 years watching fate treat Kristie with cruelty.
It ticked her off.
And now, the same Tammy who had once sent a baby sitter packing had decided to take matters into her own womb.
If fate wouldn't give Kristie her babies, Tammy would.
When Dr. Bruce Tjaden met Tammy at his clinic in Wichita weeks later, he listened to her story

and looked at her in wonder.

He's a doctor of reproductive medicine, so there's not a lot about in vitro fertilization that surprises him anymore.

But people can still surprise him, and this woman with the glasses and the serious demeanor impressed him.

A hero, he thought.

"There's no other word for it," he would say later. "What she wanted to do for her sister is heroism."

But this procedure was nothing to treat lightly. Tammy was proposing to have Kristie and Milton's babies, then legally terminate her own parental rights to children she'd carried in her womb.

That's a tremendous demand on a mother's soul, even a steely soul.

Good doctors don't do the procedure unless participants sign consent forms and go to counseling. They don't do it unless the mother swears she is sure.

Tammy said she was sure.

It would take more than nine months out of her life.

It would delay the completion of her master's degree in accounting at Louisiana State University.

It would be interesting to explain to Erin and Julia, her own children.

But this wasn't about giving up something, she would say later. This was about putting something right.

This was about family, and a sister she felt so close to that she could feel Kristie's pain even when she wasn't there. Every time something bad happened to Kristie, Tammy could feel it, even in Louisiana.

For such a sister, any risk was worth it.

"I wasn't doing this just for her," she would say later. "I was doing it for myself, too."

"I couldn't stand it when she was hurt."

On Oct 12, 2001, Dr. Tjaden implanted two eggs into Tammy. Two days before, he had collected sperm from Milton and eggs from Kristie.

Implanting the eggs, Tammy said, was the easiest, quickest medical thing she'd ever seen.

"We all went out shopping at Towne East right after," she said. "We were happy."

Tammy went back to Louisiana.

And boom.

It hit her.

She knew.

"I was pregnant."

Like so many other events in their lives together, the delivery on May 30 in Louisiana came with complications.

Tammy was giving birth and yelling at the doctors to watch over Kristie. The doctors kept saying, "You are the one having the baby," but Tammy kept telling them to take care of Kristie.

And sure enough, right after the birth, Kristie passed out, right there alongside her sister.

"I told them," Tammy said.

Baby Milton and Baby Megann were born alive and healthy.

Soon after, Kristie took them home.

Back in Louisiana, Tammy began court proceedings to sever her and Earl's parental rights.

Now, back in Kristie's living room this July, Erin, 8, and Julia, 5, play with their baby cousins, the babies their mother gave birth to.

They remind their mother how pitiful she looked during the pregnancy.

"You puked in your soup, Mom," one girl said.

"You puked on your socks," the other said.

Tammy grinned.

Milton sat off to the side, watching.

"There's really no way I can ever even the score for what she did," he said.

There is one thing, Milton said, but it's small. Earl and Tammy are moving back to Kansas, to Sterling, and Milton is helping fix up their house.

They will be close, a little over an hour away.

"Close enough to see each other, far enough away where I won't drive them crazy by showing up all the time," Tammy said. "I've had to fight the urge every day now to keep from calling here 45 times a day to ask if everything's OK."

A few minutes before, when she started to tell why she did it, Tammy had begun to choke up.

She was sitting on one side of the room, with the infant Milton in her arms. Kristie sitting across from her, holding Megann.

And the woman who never said much, who never showed much to strangers about what she was thinking, broke down and cried.

Kristie cried, too.

They cried so much that for a moment neither of them could talk.

No matter.

The look that passed between them said enough.