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Bio Clip 4 - My Sister Maria

My sister Maria is a year older than I am. Of the two of us, I inherited from our mother's side of the family graying prematurely. By age 35 my hair was totally white while Maria kept sporting her brunette mane. She then began to tell people that I was ten years older and that she was the younger sister. It didn't bother me, but after two decades of her rhetoric there came a point when I thought she was really starting to believe it. I told her, "Maria, you're silly. Don't you know that no matter how many times you repeat it, still you will *never* be younger than me?" She laughed, and I shook my head and laughed too seeing how she enjoyed her own silliness.

When Maria was in second grade, I noticed her jotting down numbers forming the pattern of a downward staircase. "What are those stairs?"

She paused. "These are not stairs. It's called division."

"Teach me." She did. It opened for me a new, fascinating world and I got hooked on math.

Almost ten years ago Maria had a kidney removed due to a tumor inside of it which was almost the same size as the kidney. When the lab results came back confirming that the tumor was not malignant, Maria felt as if she had just won the Florida lottery. Then, four years ago and a month after her 61st birthday, Maria went into a coma. She was in the last stages of liver disease and her kidney was failing. Only a double transplant, liver and kidney, could save her. Her ammonia levels were about 300% of the highest normal range. With medications the doctors were able to bring it down and also stabilized other bio-chemistry substances and her vitals. A couple of days later, Pr. Glenn Aguirre and friends from her church and work visited her as she came out of the coma. Maria was scheduled to start dialysis that evening. Pr. Glenn prayed, Bible promises were read, and many words of encouragement and goodwill were expressed. In mid afternoon most everyone had left, including Maria's daughter, Dina, who went home to rest after having spent those two days with her. The only ones who remained with Maria were a life-long friend of ours also named Teresita, and my husband and I. That's when the party began. The three of us spent the next four hours telling jokes to Maria, until she begged us to stop because she just couldn't laugh any more. Soon thereafter she was taken to her first dialysis treatment, at which time it was discovered that she no longer needed it. Her one kidney had started to work again. My oldest son, who had spent some time living and learning at Wildwood Sanitarium in Georgia, told me, "Mom, I learned at Wildwood that when you laugh you massage your internal organs. You guys stimulated her kidney and it kicked-in." Praying and laughing. That was Maria's menu that afternoon. "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine." (Proverbs 17:22)

The year prior Maria had gotten so bloated from fluid retention due to her illness that she gained 75 pounds. By the end of that year the skin around her ankles could no longer stretch fast enough and cracked, and fluid started sipping out. Twice she had abdominal fluid drained, five liters each time. But finding a donor organ two weeks after she came out of her



Maria on her 62nd birthday

From the Desk of Teresita Pérez

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coma was providential, because as the new liver was being harvested and examined, Maria was again starting to come in and out of consciousness. Dina and I followed the stretcher as far as we were permitted to go when she was being taken into surgery. We prayed with her. Maria made an effort to speak. I thought she had a parting word for her daughter. Instead, she looked at me with pleading eyes and whispered, "Help Dina." She was wheeled away. Two more gallons of fluid were drained just to begin her liver transplant. The operation was successful.

Two weeks later Maria was out of ICU. I was sitting across from her bed in her hospital room and she started to cry. Between sobs she told me, "Terry, I just learned that the donor was a woman who was only 54 years old."

What could I say to console her? "Maria, your liver is younger than me." She had to laugh, but we both cried.

Maria remained hospitalized five weeks after surgery. During that time she lost 80 pounds and went home with a healthy new liver and a healthy old kidney. Soon thereafter she gave her testimony in church, a video clip of which is archived in my website.