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Blanket of White
by
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Let me tell you about the extraordinary gift I gave my sweet daughter, Suzy, one bone-chilling Sunday morning in December. Born with Cerebral Palsy, a devastating disease that left her confined to a wheelchair, she tolerated a constant barrage of scrutiny. For twelve years Suzy endured, unable to enjoy life's simple pleasures. Her resilience never ceased to amaze me.

Picture a rose bud, its pale, pink petals on the verge of blossoming when the ravages of disease prevent that rose from flourishing. That's the life my daughter led. I refused to let her fade away...

* * *

My wife, Katherine and I wanted to make Suzy's childhood as normal as possible, a daunting task we took in stride: whenever we brought her to the movies or the zoo, the other children would stop and stare. Suzy sat helpless in her wheelchair and moped—trying hard not to cry—her tiny hands balled up into perpetual fists, always on the defensive.

I remember driving home from the movies one night when my daughter asked me a startling question: "Daddy, why does everyone stare at me? I wish I could disappear when I feel their cold eyes." Suzy regarded me with deep-set inquisitive, azure eyes that sparkled. "Do they hate me? Am I ugly?"

I flinched, like I'd been punched in the gut. "You're the prettiest girl I know." I cleared my throat. "People don't always accept what they can't understand—they don't know how to react. When someone looks different it's something to wonder about—they're curious, that's all." I flashed a winning smile in the rearview mirror. Despite her debilitating condition, Suzy's mind remained keen.

"I want to be like other kids my age and walk, run and play! I didn't ask to be different." Suzy frowned, defeated.

Her mother changed the subject. "There's a big difference between staring at someone and looking. Do you follow?"

"I think so." Suzy nodded. "When you look at me I feel safe, but when other people stare, I feel vulnerable, like an ant under a magnifying glass." Suzy shook her head. "It's not fair—I just want to fit in. I only have a few friends and I think they just feel sorry for me." She lowered her eyes and stared at her rag doll legs.

"Cheer up, Suzy. We adore you. You're unique—no one can take that away—and you've got a lot to offer, like your magnificent voice—you sing like an angel. I tingle all over whenever I hear it. Daddy does, too." Katherine reached out and patted Suzy's arm. "That's something to be proud of. Cherish it—we do."

I smiled at Suzy in the rearview mirror sitting in back of the van and watched her eyes light up, full of recognition.

Suzy grinned. "People always pay attention when I sing; it helps me feel free and forget about my wheelchair for a while." She looked up, eager for encouragement.

"What else makes me special, Mommy?"

My wife spun around in the captain's chair and spoke to Suzy face to face: "You're the smartest girl I know, creative, too with a wonderful sense of humor. People fear what they don't understand. They don't mean to hurt your feelings; they feel intimidated, so they say cruel things that make them feel superior." Katherine gave Suzy's arm a little squeeze. "Savor those magical moments when you're a big, bright shining star—conjure them up whenever you feel sad—they will see you through."

Suzy nodded. "I'll do my best." With a mischievous look in her eye, she said, "Jealousy is *dangerous*, it makes people do *bad* things."

"Who told you that, sweetie?" I asked with a hint of concern in my voice.

"No one—I figured it out by myself. I see it whenever you take me out. I'm an invisible bystander. I see the way people argue and complain about the dumbest things." Wearing a goofy grin, she shook her head from side to side. "There are a lot of unhappy people in the world..."

Puzzled, Katherine scratched her head and looked at Suzy. "What do they fight about?"

"Lots of things. It's free entertainment." She stared out the window, yearning for the comforting darkness beyond.

"Like what?" Katherine frowned.

Suzy rolled her eyes, growing tired of these trivial games but still willing to play along. "Did you see that couple sitting in front of us at the movies?"

I nodded. "What about them?"

"They really did a number on each other. The man pointed out the woman's flaws and the woman listed his bad habits. Things started to get ugly—I thought they were going to start hitting each other, but then the movie started so they had to stop." Suzy giggled. "I wonder who won..."

* * *

I lifted Suzy out of the wheelchair gently. She winced when I set her down on the bed and injected a carefully measured dose of Morphine into her limp arm, adding to the endless patchwork of bruises.

"Daddy, can the doctors make me better some day? I hate the painful prick of needles—I get jabbed so often I feel like a human pincushion." Suzy sank back into a sea of soft pillows and stared at the soothing cotton candy walls, bathed in a soft glow from her bedside lamp. "I've always wondered what it feels like to eat ice cream without the pain getting in the way. Do you think I'll ever find out?"

I pulled the covers up to her chin and tucked her in, so she felt safe. "I know how much it would mean to you, to be comfortable for a change." I bent down and kissed her forehead tenderly.

She sighed. "Can they fix me and take the hurt away?"

"It's complicated—the doctors are doing the best they can, Suzy." I bit my lip. "I'd love to say modern medicine has the cure, but I'm afraid there aren't any easy answers."

Suzy looked at me and said, "Can *you* help me? You make problems disappear, like magic."

"There's a way, but I doubt your mother would approve." I sighed.

"Don't tell her—it will be our secret." She frowned. "Does Mommy know what it feels like to be stuck in that chair everyday? Does she have any idea how *small* it makes me feel?"

"I'm sure she has no idea." I shook my head. "I'll see what I can do."

"Please make it good." Suzy nodded. "Good night, Daddy. I love you."

"I love you more. Good night, Suzy. Sleep tight. Don't let the bed bugs bite." I turned off the light and shut the door behind me.

* * *

I joined Katherine in the kitchen for some coffee. "I just tucked Suzy in."

"She's been really depressed lately." My wife shuddered and wrapped her hands around her coffee cup, craving warmth. "There must be something we can do to lift her spirits."

"I doubt it. She's tired of relying on us for everything. Suzy isn't a baby anymore—stop coddling her. She needs her independence to feel whole. It may not seem like much, but it's all she's got." I took a long drink from my mug, roused by a jolt of caffeine. "She asked me if the doctors could stop the pain. You knew she would seek solutions someday. The moment has arrived." I stared at my wife. "I gave her some choices to consider."

"What kind of choices? Do you think this is a game? It pains me greatly to see our daughter so sad. I've come to terms with Suzy's plight." Katherine shifted in her seat.

I shook my head. "I told her the doctors were trying their best to make her comfortable, but her condition is difficult to treat. Is that so terrible? It's true."

Katherine bit her lip. "Suzy is *extremely* impressionable. You shouldn't encourage her, filling her head with flights of fancy—trust me, that can only end badly."

She finished her coffee and poured herself another steaming cup from the half-empty pot on the counter. Katherine frowned.

I gave my wife a sidelong glance. "I want to help her realize her full potential, now that the time is right."

Katherine slammed her hand down on the table. "What potential?!"

I finished my coffee and pushed the empty mug aside. "She wants the pain to vanish, once and for all. It's a gruesome notion, I know, but it's the solution Suzy has been seeking all along. I promised to help her..."

"Help her? You're incorrigible!" My wife glared at me, startled by the implication.

I looked at her with a straight face and said, "It's time to end the pain."

"That's unconscionable! You're talking about ending your own daughter's life like it's a father's duty!" Katherine's face turned bright red.

"Calm down and lower your voice, or you'll wake her. She looked peaceful for a change."

I stood with my back to Katherine, leaning on the counter; three small, glass vials of food coloring scattered among various baking supplies in a sapphire blue mixing bowl caught my eye. One azure, another sunshine yellow, and a third, cotton-candy-pink. I shoved them in my pants pocket.

"Don't think of it as murder. Consider it a mercy killing and it takes on the guise of humanity." I looked my wife in the eye. "Suzy is in constant agony. What kind of life is that for a little girl? I thought you'd want to do what's best for our daughter."

My wife clasped her hands together for courage. "I do, but she's got her whole life ahead of her. I'm not ready to let her go."

"How can you be so selfish? Suzy can't run or jump or play. She's never known childish whimsy, confined to that chair while her body betrays her. Where's the joy in that?" I started to pace. "If you love Suzy, set her free. Try, for me."

Katherine frowned. "I don't think I can." I felt my wife condemning me with her cold, gray eyes. "How do you know Suzy wants to die?"

"Because she told me." I balled my large hands into fists.

* * *

The sun shone brightly as I wheeled Suzy out to my maroon van parked in the backyard on Christmas Eve morning with a bright red hose tucked under my arm. Tiny glass vials—a trio of beautiful bells jingled in my pants pocket. The backyard looked serene swathed in a glistening shroud of freshly fallen snow. The brisk air did little to quell my adrenaline rush despite the pristine scene. I struggled to remain calm, for Suzy's sake.

Katherine followed us outside to the edge of the driveway, frantically waving a pale pink scarf—her boots trampling soft snow underfoot—and touched Suzy's arm lightly. "Wait a second, Peter. It's awfully cold out here. Suzy should bundle up—I wouldn't want to her to catch her death..." Tears streamed down her cheeks.

I nodded slowly. "Good idea. I'm glad you're willing to do what's best for our daughter."

"I want Suzy to be happy, no matter how sad it makes me." My wife rubbed her arms to ward off the winter chill.

Suzy admired the radiant beauty that surrounded her, mesmerized by the snowy spectacle. "Isn't the snow beautiful? It makes everything look so new." She inhaled slowly; crisp cold air tickled her nose, making her sneeze.

"Snow makes Christmas perfect." Katherine buried her hands in her pockets. "It's a winter wonderland."

Inspired by my wife's astute observation, I reached up and grazed a nearby Pine branch.

Suzy laughed as fragile flakes drifted down on her face. "I wish it snowed every day—so everything would always be clean and beautiful."

"Sometimes wishes *do* come true." I winked. "Life is full of wonderful surprises."

I watched my wife bend down to gingerly place a pale pink hat on Suzy's head, covering her tiny ears and wrap a matching scarf around her slender neck.

She squeezed our daughter's hand. "Will you sing for me, Suzy and warm my heart on this bitter-cold morning? It would mean the world to me." Katherine stood suddenly, startled by the realization that her daughter was about to deliver the performance of a lifetime.

Suzy nodded. "I'd love to! Daddy, move closer to Mommy, so I can admire my audience." She waited for me to stand beside Katherine; I happily complied. When she began to sing as her breath rose like steam—glorious and triumphant:

*Hark! the herald angels sing,
 "Glory to the newborn king!"
 peace on earth, and mercy mild
 God and sinners reconciled
 joyful all ye nations rise
 join the triumph of the skies
 with th'angelic host proclaim
 "Christ is born in Bethlehem."
 Hark! the herald angels sing,
 Glory to the newborn king!"*

*Christ, by highest heav'n adored
 Christ the everlasting Lord
 late in time behold him come
 offspring of the favored one
 veiled in flesh, the godhead see
 hail th'incarnate deity
 pleased, as man with men to dwell
 Jesus, our immanuel!
 Hark! The herald angels sing,
 "Glory to the newborn king!"*

*Hail! the heav'n born prince of peace!
 hail! The son of righteousness!
 light and life to all he brings
 ris'n with healing in his wings!*

*Mild he lays his glory by
 born that man no more may die
 born to raise the sons of earth
 born to give them second birth
 Hark! The herald angels sing
 "Glory to the newborn king!"*

"That was the best Christmas present ever. Thank you, Suzy." Katherine kissed iour daughter softly on the cheek. "Remember, Mommy loves you very much. You'll always be my little angel."

Suzy returned the gesture. "I know, Mommy. I love you, too, but sometimes you love me *too* much. I'm not going to break." She frowned. "Let me be *me*—that's all I want for Christmas."

"I'm ready to let you go explore the world—in spite of my reservations—I've kept you from it long enough." Katherine's lips began to quiver. "That's my gift to you." She shot me a dirty look.

I stared back defiantly.

"I'll do my best." Suzy blushed as her lips curved upwards.

"Your gratitude is all I need." My wife took a deep breath and turned to go.

My daughter and I watched Katherine walk to the house without looking back, eager to continue.

"Where are you taking me, Daddy?" Suzy asked. Her eyes brightened when she saw me reach for my keys—a glimpse of something safe.

"We're going on a spectacular Daddy/Daughter adventure—just you and me—Mommy would ruin our fun." I laughed, trying to make light of the situation. "You've been so patient, suffering silently all these years. I admire your fortitude—I don't think I would have held up as well as you did. What's your secret?"

"It's no secret... You're so good at showing me what being a kid is supposed to be like. I can imagine anything and forget about the pain."

I gave her shoulder a little squeeze. "You inspire me to treasure every moment."

My breath magically morphed into white plumes that resembled billowy clouds. I formed a big O with my mouth and blew wobbly smoke rings to Suzy.

Delighted, she giggled, captivated by the illusion, blissfully unaware of what would follow.

I wanted prolong these precious, parting moments with my daughter, but I sensed her eagerness to move on and felt compelled to comply.

"Where are you taking me? How long will it take to get there?" Her words where white wisps that vanished instantly.

"I'm bringing you to a wonderful place without grief or pain where sweet, little girls like you can make lots of friends. You'll be there in no time. It's your time to shine!"

I gripped the handles of her wheelchair tightly—almost as anxious to be rid of it as my daughter—and found the strength to push on. The snow clung stubbornly to the wheels—weighing them down—making the chair difficult to maneuver on treacherous terrain. I moved slowly, for fear the chair would topple over and Suzy would get hurt. She'd been through enough, so I did everything in my power to prevent an unnecessary mishap. If it meant her departure would be delayed slightly, so be it.

"Daddy, will you do something for me?" Suzy smiled expectantly.

"Sure, just name it." I brushed her soft, rosy cheek with the back of my hand and she blushed.

"Tell me where snow angels come from." Her deep, blue eyes scanned the immense, blank expanse, searching for answers.

I placed my hand on my chest. "They come from the heart. Here, let me show you."

I walked over to the last pure patch of snow and fell gently onto a veritable canvas with outstretched arms. The wet, white blanket embraced me, awkwardly at first then yielded gracefully to my touch.

My daughter scrutinized my every move with jubilant anticipation.

I lay flat so my boots pointed towards my van, like a beacon, and took a deep breath. Deliberately, I brushed my hands between my head and waist with a steady sweeping motion. The powdery snow dissolved immediately, burning and numbing me simultaneously. I fought these strange sensations, akin to pain, hidden behind a saccharine smile as I worked furiously to finish the task at hand. I moved my legs as far apart as they would comfortably go and then brought them together again—a series of pseudo jumping jacks. That done, I hoisted myself up to a sitting position and rolled away before standing, so as not to damage my delicate creation.

I studied my hands, red and raw when I finished, but the look of sheer satisfaction on Suzy's face made it all worthwhile.

"Where's my snow angel, Daddy? I don't see her." Suzy looked around, puzzled.

"She's fast asleep, but she'll be awake real soon." I chuckled. "Close your eyes. No peeking."

"Okay. Tell me when it's safe to look. I know I'll like what I see—you never disappoint me."

"Give me a minute, sweetie. I want to wake her as gently as possible, so she doesn't get startled and fly away. Angels are such fickle creatures."

"I can wait—it comes naturally." She sighed.

"You've never seen anything this beautiful. I guarantee it." I reached into my pants pocket and conjured my little helpers. I fumbled with the tiny tops for a moment—my frigid fingers slow and clumsy—before working some magic. I got down on one knee right next to Suzy's snow angel. First I used my finger to create her azure eyes—two drops from my blue vial did the trick—and with the pink one, I put a cotton-candy smile to her face; I made her torso, arms, and legs bright pink too. I drew squiggles for Suzy's golden ringlets and opened the yellow vial to let the sun shine down. Her face I left pristine white for her radiant beauty.

I cast three empty vials aside in a snowdrift, where they jingled once more, in unison.

"You can open your eyes now." I stood beside Suzy, eager to see her reaction.

She gasped and her beautiful blue eyes got wide. "She looks just like me!"

"That's your snow angel." I pointed to the otherworldly figure that seemed to hover above a white shroud.

"My snow angel looks so peaceful. It looks like she's floating in the snow." My daughter sighed.

I nodded. "That's because she can fly."

* * *

"I can't *wait* to make new friends! I'm going to have so much fun!"

When I saw my daughter's smile, I knew I'd made the right decision.

"You'll have plenty soon enough." I winked.

Exerting considerable effort, I parked Suzy's chair in front of the van and went around back. With shaky hands, I attached one end of the hose to the exhaust pipe; I brought the other end over to the passenger side door and opened it. "It's a short trip—you'll be there before you know it doing the things you've always dreamed about all these years."

Suzy nodded enthusiastically. "Hurry up—I've got a lot of catching up to do—I don't want to miss anything!"

"I know—you've missed enough already. Hang on. We're almost there." I looked down at my daughter and told myself I was doing the right thing. "Put your arms around my neck and off you go."

"What about my chair, Daddy?" She frowned, unsure of what would follow.

"You won't need it where you're going." I smiled, reassuring her.

Her hands trembled as she struggled to open her arms. "Does that mean I can run and jump and play?! I'll be able to do whatever I want without hurting all the time!"

I nodded. "You can play hopscotch, skip rope, go swimming, ride a bicycle, or even climb a tree whenever you want to, for as long as you like."

"Hooray! I'm going to have so much fun! I don't know what to do first!" Suzy smirked, unable to contain her excitement.

"I know you're eager, sweetie. I won't keep you much longer." I brushed her cheek with the back of my hand.

I nodded and walked over to Suzy—my legs threatened to give way. I lifted her arms and wrapped them around my shoulders, savoring her tender touch.

Nestled there in the crook of my arm, my daughter felt content—I could see it in her bright blue eyes. I stood there and marveled at the moment. Her warmth gave me the courage to carry on. I made my way over to the garage, each wavering step bringing my daughter closer to freedom. I lifted her into the van and strapped her into the captain's chair where her mother always sat. With her legs dangling my daughter seemed genuinely happy and carefree, like any other girl her age.

"You can do anything you want." I leaned over so she could reach my face. "Give Daddy a kiss before you go." I shivered when Suzy's lips, soft as rose petals, brushed stubble on my cheek.

"Hold on to this." I set the hose down gently in my daughter's lap.

"Why?" Eyes wide, she stared at me and I suddenly realized how frightened and confused she must have felt.

"It will make you fly, just like your snow angel." I kissed her forehead and she nodded, looking slightly baffled and strangely relieved.

Suzy grabbed the hose and looked up at me seeking reassurance. "Aren't you coming with me, Daddy? I'm scared. I don't want to be alone"

"Grown-ups aren't allowed. Don't worry, there's nothing to be afraid of—it's perfectly safe. You won't be alone for long."

Suzy nodded slowly, drinking it all in.

I opened the driver's side door, leaned over and started the engine. The van roared to life. I closed the door and stepped back to watch. I heard a faint hiss through the passenger's side door.

Suzy mouthed two words: *Thank you*. In reply the words *you're welcome* crossed my lips.

Bathed in the morning sunlight, Suzy's soft, golden curls framed her face, like a halo. As I strained to see through the murky haze, her eyes fluttered briefly before closing. Her head drooped, like a rose deprived of water too long. My daughter's sudden surrender surprised me;

under the same circumstances I would have put a fight for as long as my strength would allow, but Suzy chose not to struggle and I loved her for it.

I waited a good half-hour, wanting to be sure she has passed on before I pulled her body out of the van. Holding my breath, I cut the engine, removed the hose clutched daughter's delicate hands and pulled the other end off the muffler. I glanced down and sighed—her straight fingers resembled strong, steady wings that would carry her high. Moving with care, I laid her down gently on the blanket of white she adored, right next to her snow angel.