

BLANKETS

Excerpted from "War Dances" Sherman Alexie

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After the surgeon had cut off my father's right foot—no, half of my father's right foot—and three toes from the left, I sat with him in the recovery room. It was more like a recovery hallway. There was no privacy, not even a thin curtain. I supposed this made it easier for the nurses to monitor the post-surgical patients, but, still, my father was exposed—his decades of poor health and worse decisions were illuminated—on white sheets in a white hallway under white lights.

"Are you O.K.?" I asked. It was a stupid question. Who could be O.K. after such a thing?

"Doctor, I'm cold," my father said.

"Dad, it's me," I said.

"I know who you are. You're my son." But, given the blankness in my father's eyes, I assumed he was just guessing.

"Dad, you're in the hospital. You just had surgery."

"I know where I am. I'm cold."

"Do you want another blanket?" Stupid question. Of course, he wanted another blanket. He probably wanted me to build a campfire or drag in one of those giant heat blasters that N.F.L. football teams use on the sidelines.

I walked down the hallway—the recovery hallway—to the nurses' station.

"My father is cold," I said. "Can I get another blanket?"

"Sir," the nurse said. "I'll be with you in a moment."

"My father," I said. "An extra blanket, please."

"Fine," she said. She got up and walked back to a linen closet, grabbed a white blanket, and handed it to me.

It was a thin blanket, laundered and sterilized a hundred times. In fact, it was too thin. It wasn't really a blanket. ... It was more like the world's biggest coffee filter. Jesus, had health care finally come to this? Everybody was uninsured and unblanketed.

"Dad, I'm back."

He looked so small and pale lying in that hospital bed. How had this happened? For the first sixty-seven years of his life, my father had been a large and dark man. Now he was just another pale, sick drone in a hallway of pale, sick drones. A hive, I thought. This place is like a beehive with colony-collapse disorder.

“Dad, it’s me.”

“I’m cold.”

“I have a blanket.”

As I draped it over my father and tucked it around his body, I felt the first sting of grief. I’d read the hospital literature about this moment. There would come a time when roles would reverse and the adult child would become the caretaker of the ill parent. The circle of life. Such poetic bullshit.

“Get me another one. Please. I’m so cold. I need another blanket.”

I knew that ten more of these cheap blankets wouldn’t be enough. My father needed a real blanket, a good blanket.

I walked out of the recovery hallway and made my way through various doorways and other hallways, peering into rooms, looking at the patients and their families, searching for a particular kind of patient and family.

And then I saw him, another Native man, leaning against a wall near the gift shop. Well, maybe he was Asian—lots of those in Seattle.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” the other man said.

“You Indian?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“What tribe?”

“Lummi.”

“I’m Spokane.”

“Can I ask you a favor?”

“What?”

"My dad, he's in the recovery room," I said. "Well, it's more like a hallway, and he's freezing, and they've only got these --- little blankets, and I came looking for Indians in the hospital because I figured—well, I guessed if I found any Indians they might have some good blankets."

"So you want to borrow a blanket from us?" the man asked.

"Yeah."

"Because you thought Indians would just happen to have some extra blankets lying around?"

"Yeah."

"That's f***ing ridiculous."

"I know."

"And it's racist."

"I know."

"You're stereotyping your own damn people."

"I know."

"But damn if we don't have a room full of Pendleton blankets. New ones. I'm here because my sister had a son and, Jesus, you'd think she was having, like, a dozen babies."

Five minutes later, carrying a Pendleton Star blanket, the Indian man walked out of his sister's hospital room, accompanied by his father, who wore Levi's, a black T-shirt, and eagle feathers in his gray braids.

"We want to give your father this blanket," the old man said. "It was meant for my grandson, but I think it will be good for your father, too."

"Thank you."

"Let me bless it. I will sing a healing song for the blanket. And for your father."

I flinched. This old man wanted to sing a song? That was dangerous. The song could take two minutes or two hours. It was impossible to know. Hell, considering how desperate the old man was to be seen as holy, he might sing for a week. I couldn't let him begin his song without issuing a caveat.

"My dad," I said. "I really need to get back to him. He's really sick."

"Don't worry," the old man said, winking. "I'll sing one of my short ones."

Jesus, who'd ever heard of a self-aware fundamentalist? ... But here's the funny thing: the old man couldn't sing very well. If you had the balls to sing healing songs in hospital hallways, then you should have a great voice, right? But, no, this guy couldn't keep the tune; his voice cracked and wavered. Does a holy song lose its power if the singer is untalented?

"That is your father's song," the old man said when he finished. "I give it to him. I will never sing it again. It belongs to your father now."

“It doesn’t matter if you believe in the healing song,” he said. “It only matters that the blanket heard.”

“Where have you been?” my father asked when I returned. “I’m cold.”

“I know, I know,” I said. “I found you a blanket. A good one. It will keep you warm.”



I draped the Star blanket over my father. He pulled the thick wool up to his chin. And then he began to sing. It was a healing song, not the same song that I had just heard but a healing song nonetheless. My father could sing beautifully. I wondered if it was proper for a man to sing a healing song for himself. I wondered if my father needed help with the song. I hadn’t sung for many years, not like that, but I joined him. I knew that this song would not bring back my father’s feet. This song would not repair my father’s bladder, kidneys, lungs, and heart. This song would not prevent my father from drinking a bottle of vodka as soon as he could sit up in bed. This song would not defeat death. No, I thought, this song is temporary, but right now temporary is good enough. And it was a good song. Our voices filled the recovery hallway. The sick and the healthy stopped to listen. [A nurse] ... unconsciously took a few steps toward us. She sighed and smiled. I smiled back. I knew what she was thinking. Sometimes, even after all these years, she could still be surprised by her work. She still marveled at the infinite and ridiculous faith of other people.