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The Only Gifts I Need

by Michael Butler

(English 1101)

There is life after death in the hearts of some men. Does it come from God, or was a different life there all along? I did not see her because of the blindfold of pain that covered my eyes, leaving me alone in the hell that I dared not let her enter. I thank God it all seems like a bad dream.

As we sit in my apartment waiting for the photographer to set up his makeshift studio as a child builds an erector set, I ponder how much has happened to bring us to this day. We haven't had many moments where we could capture our love in a picture like most fathers and daughters have. The choices I've made always took such precious moments away. The selfishness, guilt, and fear that comes with my disease seems to rob those who suffer with an addiction. Drugs and alcohol were the puppeteers. I was the helpless puppet. My daughter watched as the innocent victim.

As if awakened by a horrible dream, I feel utter relief knowing this day is different from those of the past. While sitting on my unmade bed, I ask my daughter if I can comb her hair before the photographer arrives. I notice that her golden brown hair is just as shiny and flowing as the shampoo models you see on the commercials. She asks me to be careful because this is new for me. Mommy has already proven herself in such tasks, but it is now my moment to prove myself. Such simple tasks seem paramount to a little girl. She looks at me with her innocent brown eyes with relief as I finish gently stroking her hair with her little pink brush. I've always known her eyes were brown, but today I see something more. Her shade of brown can only be matched by my own. As simple as it seems, I feel a tremendous pride in this commonality.

She asks me if we can wear the same color shirt for our picture. I never thought such a simple question could make me feel so proud. We choose black, a color she's accustomed to seeing me in most of her life. She tells me she loves me in black. At this very moment I realize that even though I've been blinded by my disease, she's always been able to see me. Even in the darkest of our days, she loved the way I looked. This is a love only a daughter could have for her daddy. This love is unconditional and forever.

The photographer asks us to sit on a small black stool which has hardly enough room for me, much less my daughter. He's a tall, thin, and well groomed man with the typical artsy look that comes with most photographers. He asks us to come together and look straight into the camera. My daughter begins to giggle at the prospect that she is now a model, and it's time for her to turn it on. Pose after pose, shot after shot, I begin feel like a piece of clay in the hands of a sculptor. I can feel her hands on my back, and then on my shoulders. Though we are only posing for a picture, her hands feel closer than ever before. My skin can feel the very tips of her fingernails through the thin fabric of my black satin shirt. I don't think I've ever felt her fingertips before. I love this moment. The photographer tells us that this is the one. She is smiling brightly just over my right shoulder while I stare deeply into the camera's eye. I know this is the picture I've wanted for a lifetime.

I look at this picture each day to remind me of the gifts that God has given me. Freedom from the pain of my addiction has given me peace, but my daughter Mikayla is my most precious gift. The man in the picture no longer wears a blindfold of pain, and is no longer a puppet to his disease. Daddy and daughter are finally as God wants us to be, and that is together.