

## **“BLANKETS” from War Dances by Sherman Alexie**

Characters:

Narrator 1

Narrator 2

Narrator 3

Dad

Son

Nurse

Native man

Old man

Narrator 1: After the surgeon 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 guessed it made it easier for the nurses to monitor the postsurgical 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.

Son: Are you okay, Dad?

Narrator 2: It was a stupid question. Who could be okay after such a thing? Yesterday, my father had *walked* into the hospital. Okay, he’d shuffled while balanced on two canes, but that was still called walking. A few hours ago, my father still had both of his feet. Yes, his feet and toes had been black with rot and disease but they’d still been, technically speaking, feet and toes. And, most important, those feet and toes had belonged to my father. But now they were gone, sliced off. Where were they?

Son: Dad, it’s me.

Dad: I know who you are. You’re my son.

Narrator 2: But considering the blankness in my father’s eyes, I assumed he was just guessing at my identity.

Son: Dad, you’re in the hospital. You just had surgery.

Dad: I know where I am. I’m cold.

Narrator 3: I walked down the hallway – the recovery hallway – to the nurses’ station. There were three women nurses, two white and one black. Being Native American-Spokane and Coeur d’Alene Indian, I hoped my darker pigment would give me an edge with the black nurse, so I addressed her directly.

Son: My father is cold. Can I get another blanket?

Narrator 3: The black nurse glanced up from her paperwork and regarded me. Her expression was neither compassionate nor callous.

Nurse: How can I help you?

Son: I'd like another blanket for my father. He's cold.

Nurse: I'll be with you in a moment, sir.

Narrator 3: She looked back down at her paperwork. She made a few notes. Not knowing what else to do, I stood there and waited.

Nurse (irritated): Sir, I'll be with you in a moment.

Narrator 1: She was irritated. I understood. After all, how many thousands of times had she been asked for an extra blanket? She was a nurse, not a damn housekeeper. And it was never really about an extra blanket, was it? No, when people asked for an extra blanket, they were asking for a time machine. And, yes, she knew she was a health care provider, and she knew she was supposed to be compassionate, but my father, an alcoholic, diabetic Indian with terminally damaged kidneys, had just endured an incredibly expensive surgery for what? So he could ride his motorized wheelchair to the bar and win bets by showing off his disfigured foot? I know she didn't want to be cruel, but she believed there was a point where doctors should stop rescuing people from their own self-destructive impulses. And I couldn't disagree with her but I could ask for the most basic of comforts, couldn't I?

Son: My father. An extra blanket, please.

Nurse: Fine.

Narrator 2: The nurse stood and walked back to a linen closet, grabbed a white blanket, and handed it to me. With the blanket in hand, I walked back to my father. 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 a large beach towel. Hell, it wasn't even good enough for that. It was more like the world's largest coffee filter.

Sherman: Dad, I'm back. It's me.

Dad: I'm cold.

Son: I have a blanket.

Narrator 3: As I draped it over my father and tucked it around his body, I felt the first sting of grief.

Dad: I can't get warm. I'm freezing.

Son: I brought you a blanket, Dad. I put it on you.

Dad: Get me another one. Please. I'm so cold. I need another blanket.

Narrator 1: I knew that ten more of these cheap blankets wouldn't be enough. My father needed a real blanket, a good blanket.

Narrator 2: I walked out of the recovery hallway and made my way through various doorways and other hallways, peering into the rooms, looking at the patients and their families, looking for a particular kind of patient and family. And then I saw him, another Native man, leaning against a wall near a gift shop.

Son: Hey.

Native man: Hey.

Son: You Indian?

Native man: Yeah.

Son: What tribe?

Native man: Lummi.

Son: I'm Spokane.

Native man: My first wife was Spokane. I hated her.

Son: My first wife was Lummi. She hated me.

Narrator 3: We laughed at the new jokes that instantly sounded old.

Son: Why are you in here?

Native man: My sister's having a baby. I don't even want to be here. But my dad started, like this new Indian tradition. He says it's a thousand years old. But that's bullshit. He just made it up to impress himself. And the whole family just goes along, even when we know it's bullshit. He's in the delivery room waving eagle fathers around. Jesus.

Son: What's the tradition?

Native man: Oh, he does a naming ceremony right in the hospital. Like, it's supposed to protect the baby from all the technology and shit... Well, I better get back. Otherwise, my dad might wave an eagle feather and change my name.

Son: Hey wait. Can I ask you a favor?

Native man: What?

Son: My dad, he's in the recovery room. Well, it's more like a hallway, and he's freezing, and they've only got these shitty 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.

Native man: So you want to borrow a blanket from us?

Son: Yeah.

Native man: Because you thought some Indians would just happen to have some extra blankets lying around?

Son: Yeah.

Native man: That's effing ridiculous.

Son: I know.

Native man: And it's racist.

Son: I know.

Native man: You're stereotyping your own damn people.

Son: I know.

Native man: But damn if we don't have a room full of Pendleton blankets. New ones. Jeez, you'd think my sister was having, like a dozen babies.

Narrator 3: Five minutes later, carrying a Pendleton Star Blanket, the Indian man walked out of his sister's hospital room, accompanied by his father.

Old man (solemnly): We want to give your father this blanket. It was meant for my grandson, but I think it will be good for your father too.

Son: Thank you.

Old man (gravely): Let me bless it. I will sing a healing song for the blanket. And for your father.

Narrator 3: I flinched. This guy wanted to sing a song? That was dangerous. This song could take two minutes or two hours. It was impossible to know.

Son: My dad... I really need to get back to him. He's really sick.

Old man (winking): Don't worry. I'll sing one of my short ones.

Narrator 1: The son, perhaps not the unbeliever he'd pretended to be, sang backup as his father launched into his radio-friendly honor song, just three-and-a-half minutes. But here's the funny thing: the old man couldn't sing very well. If you were going to have the balls to sing healing songs in hospital hallways, then you should logically have a great voice, right? But no, this guy couldn't keep the tune.

Old man (earnestly): That is your father's song. I give it to him. I will never sing it again. It belongs to your father now.

Narrator 3: Behind his back, the old man's son rolled his eyes and walked back into his sister's room.

Son: Okay, thank you.

Narrator 2: I felt like an ass, accepting the blanket and the old man's good wishes, but silently mocking them at the same time. But maybe the old man did have some power, some real medicine, because he peeked into my brain.

Old man: It doesn't matter if you believe in the healing song. It only matters that the blanket heard.

Narrator 3: When I returned to his room, my father asked...

Dad: Where have you been? I'm cold.

Son: I know, I know. I found you a blanket. A good one. It will keep you warm.

Narrator 1: 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.

Narrator 2: I knew 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.

Narrator 2: 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 healthy stopped to listen. The nurses, even the remote black one, unconsciously took a few steps toward us. The black nurse sighed and smiled. I smiled back. I knew what she was thinking.

Nurse: Sometimes, even after all of these years, I can still be surprised by this work. I can still marvel at the infinite, beautiful, and ridiculous faith of other people.