

## 2 Jordan

It was freezing in our bedroom. That's how the Swiss liked it. The thick down comforter was up over my nose. I shifted my leg towards the spot formally occupied by my wife. Still warm. Suri hadn't been up long. Maybe she was coming back? Logs crackled. The oven door creaked shut. A heavy skillet clanked onto the stove. A spatula clank-chopped through eggs. Coffee smell drifted into the bedroom.

Guess not.

I fingered a strand of Suri's hair left on her pillow and smelled her homemade perfume, a close approximation of her hair blooms in Javan. It was getting harder not to run downstairs and wrap my arms around her. Her cooking wasn't helping either. Scrambled eggs, thick bacon, and melted cheese made my stomach growl. But I wasn't going to break the routine. We had a little tradition going. It was only a few months old. Today of all days it became even more important I keep it. Any minute now she would be coming through that door. I double checked to see it was still ajar. She had trouble with the latch yesterday.

After an unusual amount of time passed, I did a quick pop up from the covers to recon the room. Maybe she was hiding. Frigid air assaulted my nose. Frost etched the upper window panes of the rippled glass windows above the bed, blurring the snow-capped Alps flanking our little valley. Sunbeams filtered through dust angels, washing the white plaster wall and highlighting the painting I'd done of Suri's village and the giant tree. I had to remember to pack that.

The old chapel bell tolled seven times. In the five years we lived here sleeping in was rarely an option with Suri. She'd made every minute count. She seemed especially determined to maintain the routine today. The kitchen noises ceased, leaving the wood stove to crackle. Suri spoke softly from the bottom of the stairs.

“Geh doch jetzt Schätzchli.”

I quietly withdrew under the comforter and feigned sleep. A minute later, the bedroom door creaked open. Little feet padded across the worn plank floor. I lifted the cover a hair to track her progress. Our three year old daughter Athena scuffled towards me in her flannel nightgown. Her deer eyes met mine. She froze, finger in mouth. The stuffed doll Suri made her for Christmas was tucked securely under the same arm.

“Did mommy send you upstairs to wake me up?” I said.

Her cherub lips were plugged by her pointer finger. She nodded.

“Well I don’t know. I’m *really* sleepy.” I yawned for effect. “I probably won’t wake up today.”

She toddled to the side of the high bed, her chin even with the mattress. She slowly extracted her tiny finger and dropped the doll on its head. Like mother like daughter. She pointed her glistening finger at my ear.

“Oh n-no. What are you doing?”

She hesitated, like a fawn about to shy back into the woods. I turned my head and presented the requisite target to assure her I was just kidding. Her little finger barely touched my ear. I yelped in pretend surprise and was rewarded with a giggle. I fished her doll off the floor and gently hoisted her up beside me. She cuddled happily, doll wedged between us. I pulled the thick downy cover over us, bent my knees, and made a tent.

“You know what happens when I get surprised with a wet willie, don’t you?”

Memories of my other daughter Sophie flooded the moment. Under the dark of the covers, I remembered Sophie’s reaction. She would squeal and launch a preemptive attack, desperately trying to tickle me while I hoisted her upside down and raspberried her belly button.

Covers and pillows flew as she squirmed free. I always made sure she tumbled safely into bedding and not over the side. Then I chased her across the floor, threw her over my shoulder like a sack of grain and carried her down the stairs to kiss Lisa good morning.

But Athena wasn't Sophie. She had eyes like Suri and the peaceful spirit of a meadow at dawn's first light.

"I get hugs," she whispered.

Time and space stopped, as if the universe had paused to celebrate another chance for me to hold my daughter. My life had spiraled into a new beginning, paralleling my past, and healing the hole between.

The creak of our bedroom door startled me awake. Athena was sacked out on my chest as limp as her doll. The chapel tolled the half hour. Suri slipped under the covers beside us and nestled her head next to my shoulder. She stroked the side of my face and closed her eyes.

"Sorry about breakfast," I whispered.

"It can wait," she said. "This can't."

My phone alarm vibrated me awake. Suri's eyes were already open, staring at the ceiling. She turned to meet my gaze. Athena gently snored on my chest. Our family bliss had lasted three short hours.

"Ready?" I whispered.

She blinked back tears.