

2015 Grand Prize Winner (Non-Fiction)

It Will Be More Beautiful  
By David Borden

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I can see the back of Savannah's wheelchair as I emerge from the dark hallway that connects the garage to the inner rooms of our home. The window blinds are drawn against the scorching Texas sun, which sprays bright striations across the floor. I'm already cold with sweat against the air conditioning. Savannah sits in the play room watching a movie with her nurse and younger sister. I lay my hand upon hers and greet her, "Hey, Savannah, Daddy's home."

The nurse looks over the top of her reading glasses and waves from her desk. Ruby sprawls on the sofa next to the fan. Savannah wrenches her eyes from the screen and searches for me.

I ask, "How was your day today?"

Her eyes roll this way and that, trying to focus.

"Did you go for a walk? Did you have music therapy?"

She is still looking for me, her chin hovering above the towel that vainly attempts to keep her face dry from the drool.

"Savannah," the nurse calls out, "show your dad your fingers and toes."

I pick up one soft hand. The fingers are tightly fisted in a ball. I ease under her palm and bring the fingers out. She relaxes. She lets me open her hand in spite of the cerebral palsy. She doesn't let everyone do this. She trusts me.

She finally catches my face in her peripheral vision, which is her only means of seeing due to her cortical visual impairment. She tracks back and forth with a sideways nod.

Her nails are painted purple with faint glitter.

"Oh, don't you look pretty?" I exclaim upon examination. "And your toes, too. Wow!" And like any other teenaged girl just praised for her fashion sense, she breaks into a killer smile.

“I’m happy to see you, too.” I say. I hold her hand and stroke her brown hair, her mother’s hair, for a moment.

I walk through the play room. Ruby barely moves. In her pre-teen nonchalance, she says, “Hey, Dad.”

“Hey, Rubes.”

“What’s for dinner?” she says, without taking her eyes off the TV.

“Rhino horns and bat wings,” I say.

“Dad,” she scoffs, half exasperated at a joke she outgrew last year.

I continue into the kitchen. Tamara stands at the stove, aproned, spatula poised over her stir fry. She’s beaten me home from work by thirty minutes.

“Hi,” we say.

“I’ve got a story to tell you,” she says.

“Well, I’ve got one for you, too,” I say. “Let me just get changed.”

She kisses me.

I caress her back. It’s rippled with tension.

“It’s good to be home,” I say.

Tamara and I make dinner and swap work stories. The nurse’s shift ends. “See you tomorrow, Savannah’s family,” she calls from the play room. I hear her stowing her stuff.

“Thank you,” Tamara calls back.

“See you tomorrow, Pretty Girl,” the nurse says to Savannah. The front door opens and closes.

Tamara turns off the TV and rolls Savannah to the dinner table. I trail closely with the feeding pole that is tethered to Savannah’s abdomen. The white formula flows with a mechanical hum and slush from the pump. We eat and talk as a family. Savannah smiles at our conversation

from the head of the table. Though she can't speak, she communicates much by flashing her eyes or laughing at the right moments.

"It's nice to be together," I say.

"We're not all together," Ruby says. "Fluffy's not here."

"Yes, he is. He's lying right next to me," Tamara says. She nudges the cat's belly with her toe. He meows.

After we deposit the dinner plates in the dishwasher and I help Ruby with her homework, it's time for Savannah's shower. I remove her bib, "Time for a Daddy Bath?"

She smiles so big that her jaws seem to stretch out of place.

I remove her chair restraints and toss her Mic-key button extender on to her gurney.

"Are you ready?" I ask. My face is next to hers as I stoop over.

Savannah squints. She is trying to process it all. Transitions are hard.

"Here we go," I say, half to warn her, half to brace myself for the lift.

I slip one hand around her back and grab under the arm, the other goes under her thighs. I have learned to squat and lift to preserve my back. She weighs more than eighty pounds now.

"Up we go, Savannah." I lift and grunt, "You are such a big girl."

I adjust my grip and feel that she has wet through her diaper. I cradle her as best I can. She's a thirteen-year-old quadriplegic. Her limp torso tries to slide away. Her limbs dangle. Her face is close. I can feel her percussive breath as she giggles.

Tamara undresses her on her bed while I prepare the bathroom. I adjust the bath chair, which is really a bath recliner. I lay out a wash cloth, arrange the soap and shampoo. While I work, Tamara is talking to Savannah. I hear the plastic rip of diaper tape being pulled back. I turn on the hot water. Steam swirls in the stall from the shower handle, which hangs an inch off the floor. I adjust it to the flow she likes: a weak spray, warm to the point that her skin turns pink.

When I enter her room, her teenaged nakedness always shocks me. She looks so vulnerable. Though her skin has her mother's olive tint, her chronic lack of sun exposure has rendered it pale and delicate, almost translucent, like the wrapping around a spring roll. Her hips rest in the wrong position due to dislocation, so she appears to have fallen out of a third story window and landed this way on the bed. Her legs literally curve, especially the right, so her feet don't point in correct alignment. A tuft of pubic fur that proclaims her precocious puberty adds a touch of taboo, making her bath time preparation look like a sordid crime scene. Her face points over her left shoulder. Her left arm scoots straight out into the towels while her left arm cocks at the elbow, as if preparing to unleash an arrow. It is called the archer position and commonly occurs when children with traumatic brain injury, such as Savannah, lie on their backs.

In her early years, therapists instructed us to "break the tone," meaning, intervene to forcibly pull her body out of this rigor mortis-like state. But regardless of anyone's efforts, she has continued to play Artemis her entire life. We have decided to ignore the experts on this one; not all symptoms have to be treated. When the archer's spell is broken, she rolls her eyes in disorientation, she scrunches her lips into her mouth and her right hip, the dislocated one, trembles into spasms. The archer is a comfort position, like my favorite sleeping position, early in the morning, when the covers are soft and warm and I scrunch them under my chin and lie, curled, half-fetal, listening to the rhythm of the ceiling fan rotors. I think, "If a therapist came into my room right now and 'broke' me out of this position, I swear to God I would rip her arm off and beat her to death with it." If that is my opinion, why would Savannah's be any different?

I scoot my arms under her body and lean in. Again my face is near hers. She takes a sideways glance. I whisper, "Ok, it's time for your Daddy bath. Let's go." I step back like a power lifter, cleaning an eighty pound, flaccid barbell into the rack position across my clavicle. "Up we go!" I

grunt. I carry her to the bathroom and put her on the plastic mesh of the shower recliner. It takes her a few seconds to orient. Her hand strikes the tile as she resumes the archer position.

I narrate my entire process, so she isn't surprised, "I'm going to wash your hair. Doesn't the warm water feel good?" She looks for the shower handle as I wet her hair. I lather it well. It smells like a fruity milkshake. She coos. I gather her hair in rich clumps of fine, soft silk and aromatic foam. I massage her undersized cranium with my fingers. She grins and vocalizes some more.

I rinse her hair.

I soak the wash cloth in the hot water, wring it out and wipe her eyes. I move slowly to make sure she sees the cloth coming and has time to close her eyes. I start in the inner corner, in that shadow spot next to the bridge of her nose. Down I wipe, removing sebum, stray eyelashes, and the crusty clumps around her tear ducts. She grimaces but does not complain. I wash the rest of her face and place the cloth across her chest for warmth. I hose her down like a small car. I am careful to keep any of the spray off her face. Using a gel-like body wash, I start at her feet, making sure to get in between her tight, curled toes. Up the legs to the waist, I wash. When I train new caretakers, I always implore them to scrub her groin area, for there is often residual fecal matter caught in the hair. It is easy for new people to feel uncomfortable here. But if there is something a severely disabled child teaches you, it's not to be squeamish about touching the body. She has to stay clean; her health depends on it, so I have long dispensed with the quaint moral customs of normal people.

I rinse. Steam billows around us.

Next, I shift the washcloth blanket down to her groin and scrub her torso. I gently restrain her right arm, which she continuously brings up to her face. I lather the arm and hold it until it is fully rinsed, so she cannot inadvertently press soap into her eyes. When I reach the base of the arm, I work her clenched hands until they open and I can clean her palms. Only moments earlier, her palms reeked of dried saliva and sweat because they're always clenched, always darting into her

mouth. Now they smell sweet, as if she has been picking lavender. I ease her torso forward, careful of her head that can easily fall into a painful or startling place because she can't support its weight. I scrub her back, down the scar along the spine that looks like a topographical map of a fault line. Underneath, steel rods run to her hips and lock with steel bolts under the skin.

The last time we travelled by plane, Ruby said, "It's a good thing Savannah didn't come, she'd set off the metal detector. How would they let her through?"

I rinse her.

"The water feels good, doesn't it?"

I call to Tamara that we are done. She comes in and prepares Savannah's toothbrush. She gives it to me and I give her the shower handle. Tamara continues to shower Savannah with hot, steamy water to keep her warm while I scrub her teeth.

"Open up. I'm going to brush your teeth now."

She tries, but can't help her own reflexes. I bring her head forward so she doesn't choke. I start with the front surfaces. She relaxes a bit and I wedge the brush between the clenched teeth. I move to the molars and get them as best I can. Her mouth is overflowing with foam. This process always triggers a small seizure and her mouth continues to fill. Her eyes fix into a glassy stare.

"Savannah!" I say to her sharply. "Savannah, come on back. It's time to spit." I wave my hand close to her eyes and she returns from wherever she goes during one of her spells. Dazed, she spins back into the moment. The frothing bubbles in her mouth surprise her.

"Come on, stick out your tongue." I wipe away the toothpaste with the wash cloth. She coughs.

"One more time, your tongue, stick it out. Good girl. We're done."

Tamara goes to Savannah's room to receive her. I hear Tamara instructing the cat to get out of the hall between the bathroom and bedroom. By his meow, I know that he has chosen defiance instead of compliance.

I pat Savannah with an enormous beach towel. I cover her face and we have a short game of peek-a-boo. She beams. She loves this game, and loves me for playing it with her. It's these moments, these short ones between the chores that catch me off guard. Just when I think that this routine has become nothing more than another mechanical, time consuming, fatiguing job—nothing but sheer maintenance, she reminds me that there is a person trapped inside of her, a person who doesn't view these routines as chores. Much of her world consists of these interactions. To her, this routine is not maintenance.

This routine *is* quality time with her Daddy.

To feel my touch, smell my aftershave, laugh at my jokes, and play peek-a-boo, these are the things we share. But it is so hard to remember, day to day, and there have been times, I must admit, I forgot, and treated her poorly. I yelled at her spasms or scrubbed her too roughly from anger and exhaustion. I am not proud of those times, but sometime this work of caretaking the severely disabled overwhelmed me, day after day, year after year. The relentless work, the bad news, the stress, the hospitals, and the loss of control crushed my soul and ground my love into oblivion.

I cradle her wet, slick body in the towel and carry her down the hall. I shuffle my feet because the cat had sprawled in my path. I deposit her on her bed. She smiles and vocalizes when she sees her room. Tamara dries her, diapers her, and caresses lotion into her skin. I can hear Tamara talking as I go back to the bathroom to clean it up; Savannah giggles. Tamara laughs with her. Tamara's voice is affectionate and warm. Savannah breaks into guffaws. After attending to the bathroom, I cut the gauze that insulates her Mic-key button, the plastic connector that allows us siphon formula directly into her stomach. When I return, Savannah is in her pajamas, her hair

brushed; I clean around the button with a Q-tip, dipped in hydrogen peroxide. I affix the gauze around the button and insert the extender for her night feeding. Together, we wedge her into position on her left side with her stuffed animals. We make sure to establish clear egress for night time vomit. Tamara turns on the Christmas lights that frame Savannah's window. They sparkle in her tired eyes.

This winter, I will finally muster enough energy to hang Christmas lights on the house with Ruby. We'll string mismatched sets on the oak tree. We'll stand in the street at dusk and marvel at our handiwork. She'll dance about with excitement, a hand in mine, and sing a snippet of "silver and gold." She'll hug me and thank me for finally giving in to her requests. I have been too tired to feel joy. I say, "Next year will be even better. We'll have more lights and it will be more beautiful."

Tamara places Savannah's stuffed black cat toy on her pillow. Savannah catches it in her field of vision and regards it fondly.

"Goodnight, Savannah," Tamara brushes Savannah's hair away from her eyes.

Savannah yawns, as if on cue.

"Oh, so tired," Tamara says.

I whisper, "Good night, Savannah." I kiss her on the cheek. She looks for me out of the corner of her eye. I see her searching the confusing world with those big brown eyes.

"She loves her Daddy," Tamara says.

"Yes, she does," I say, "And I love her, too."