

Home of the Brave

A mom's job is never truly finished—Elise knew this instinctively when her son was born. For at least the hundredth time, she sat next to his bed in that chair mending his quilt. There was no way of knowing, the day she bought it at a flea market, that it would become her son's most valued possession.

To call it a quilt stretched the definition as it was nothing more than a thousand pieces of oddly shaped swatches stitched together, layer after layer, until the whole of it was thick enough to hold in the warmth of a small boy's body as he drifted off to sleep. The person who pieced together this labor of love must have spent countless hours shaping the useless remnants into a usable blanket. Elise felt it was her duty to repair the inevitable rips as an homage to the unknown creator and as a manifestation of her adoration for the little boy who cherished it.

"I love how cool it feels when I first get into bed," her little man observed the first night he wrapped himself in the old quilt. "But before long, it warms up, and I'm snug as a bug in a rug. Where did you get it?"

The question was one whose answer was too mundane to inflict on a wide eyed little boy, so Elise stretched the truth just a little. "It was brought over on the Mayflower by the Pilgrims," she answered to her son's delight. "It's made from pieces of fabric from all over Europe and is the first blanket used by the first Americans."

It was just a little white lie, but it was also the beginning of a cherished tradition. As stitches unraveled and as tears ripped the quilt and the little boy's heart, Elise sat by his bed and mended the heirloom. Then she would continue the "true" story of how the quilt had found its way to her son.

"During the Revolutionary War, your quilt was captured by General Cornwallis and used to keep his legs warm on the cold winter nights," Elise said, weaving a story as intricate as the blanket itself. "It wasn't until the surrender at Yorktown that it was returned."

"Yorktown?"

"Yes, Yorktown," she said smiling, "George Washington took it from Cornwallis and used it during his eight years as president."

"You mean my blanket has been to the White House?"

"Of course it has," Elise answered with a wink. "But not because of George Washington, silly. John Adams was the first president to live in the White House."

"Who then, Mom?" The little boy asked., "Who took my blanket to the White House?"

"That's a story for later," Elise replied, kissing her son on his forehead. "Now you get some sleep, and I'll continue the story next time."

Elise, unfortunately, had far too many opportunities to continue the blanket's tale as her son was given to debilitating headaches. At first, the doctors thought he was prone to systemic migraines, but the truth was much worse. Many nights, too many, the little boy would curl up in pain, his teeth clenched in a faux smile. The headaches were excruciating, only soothed by a cold wash cloth, his mother's gentle voice, and the telling of the quilt's tale as he drifted off to sleep.

There were also many a night where Elise would sit with her son as he slept, meticulously piecing back together the tears that threatened the blanket entirely, wishing there was a way she could also mend her son. The room would be completely quiet save for the sound of Elise's song. It was something she had done since she was his age. Inadvertently yet intentionally she would let the air slip through her lips, creating a tune just for him that would live for that moment, replaced the next time by one equally beautiful and equally unique.

"As it turns out, the first time the quilt made it to the White House was just after Abraham Lincoln was elected president," Elise said the next night, continuing the story from where they'd left off. The pain had become more frequent and more intense, requiring more chapters more often. The story's continuation, however, had the desired results, a distraction and a smile.

"Abraham Lincoln, he used my quilt, too?" her son asked, too young to doubt his mother.

"Of course he did," Elise responded, tickling her son just to hear him laugh. "It's a little known fact, but Mount Rushmore was actually created to show all of the presidents who used your blanket."

Elise always had a basin of cold water by her side whenever she sat with her son. Very early on she learned that the coolness of the cloth would help quiet the pain in his head. It was her greatest joy to moisten the cloth keeping it cold throughout her story. The little boy's head still throbbed, but while his mom was telling the story she would gently wipe his forehead with the cold cloth, and it was almost as if he forgot the pain for a time. If all went well, he would fall asleep listening to the tale of his blanket, as sleep was becoming his only relief from the pain.

"Did you know your blanket went to the moon?" Elise asked one day when her son seemed particularly down. "Neil Armstrong may have been the first man to set foot on the moon, but he laid out your quilt so he and Buzz Aldrin could have a picnic."

The idea of two astronauts having a picnic on the moon resulted in spontaneous laughter for both mother and son.

"Is Buzz Lightyear named after Buzz Aldrin?" he asked his mom, as both continued to laugh.

"As a matter of fact he was," Elise replied with a smile. "If you must know, Buzz Aldrin presented your quilt to Buzz Lightyear as a gift which means your blanket has been..."

"To infinity and beyond!"

"Exactly," Elise confirmed as she refreshed his cloth and placed it back on his head.

Day after day she would take her boy to doctors and then specialists and eventually to the hospital. Then, night after night, she would sit by his bed and tell the story of the quilt. Elise did everything she could to stretch out the story, and as each new adventure was passed from mother to son so too was hope, in the only way she knew how.

The night that she finished the story was, in so many ways, just like most of the other nights. Elise was home in her favorite chair next to her son's bed. Her breathing was labored and her voice unsteady. "And then I stopped by a flea market on my way home from the store and there it was, your beautiful, wonderful blanket. I knew you must have it, so I scooped it up, paid the nice woman, and brought it home to you."

Tears filled Elise's eyes as she sewed the last stitch on the old quilt. Holding it up, she remembered the first time her son covered himself with the blanket. *I love how cool it feels when I first get into bed.*

"It's finally fixed. It's perfect." Elise said out loud, tears continuing to flow. "I love how cool it feels, too."

Summoning every bit of her strength, she lay the beloved blanket on the empty bed in front of her.

Being a mom is a job that is never truly finished, at least she had hoped so. With nothing else left to do for her son, she sat back in the chair and silently sobbed.