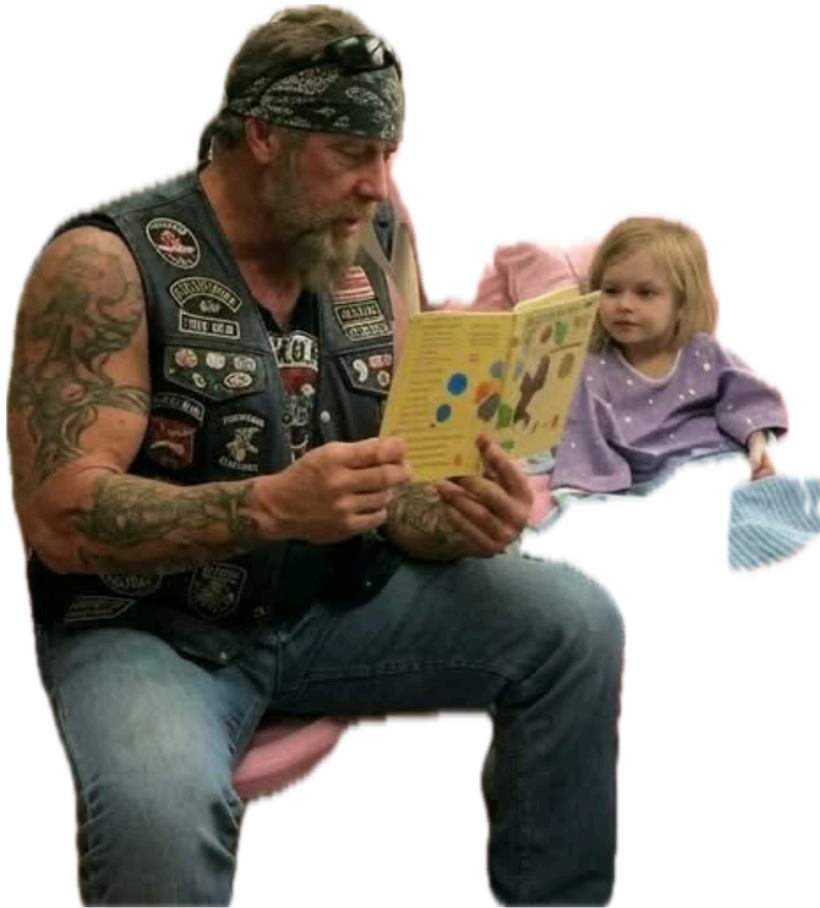


## A REAL TEAR – JERKER!

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The following story, from a Minister I know and respect greatly, will touch your heart. It made me cry buckets. It made me pray heaps to be more like this rough, unpolished diamond of a man, for in him I see Jesus. You will too, I promise ...



**I'm a 60-year-old biker named Mike.** I've got tattoos covering both arms, a beard down to my chest, and I ride with the Defenders Motorcycle Club.

I volunteer at Children's Hospital every Thursday reading books to sick kids.

It's something our club started doing fifteen years ago after one of our brother's granddaughters spent months in pediatric oncology.

Most kids are scared of me at first. I get it. I'm big and loud and look like I should be in a motorcycle gang movie, not a children's hospital. But once I start reading, they forget about how I look. They just hear the story. That's what I thought would happen with Amara.

I walked into room 432 on a Thursday afternoon in March. The nurse had warned me this was a new patient ... seven years old. Stage four neuroblastoma. No family visits in the three weeks since she'd been admitted. "No family at all?" I'd asked.

The nurse's face had gone tight. "Her mother abandoned her here. Dropped her off for treatment and never came back. We've been trying to reach her for weeks. CPS (Child Protection Services) is involved now but Amara doesn't have any other family. She's going into foster care once she's stable enough to leave."

"And if she's not stable enough?"

The nurse looked away. "Then she'll die here. Alone."

I stood outside room 432 for a full minute before I could make myself go in. I've read to dying kids before. It never gets easier. But a kid dying completely alone? That was a new kind of hell.

I knocked softly and pushed open the door. "Hey there, I'm Mike. I'm here to read you a story if you'd like." The little girl in the bed turned to look at me. She had the biggest brown eyes I'd ever seen. Her hair was gone from chemo. Her skin had that grayish tone that means the body is struggling. But she smiled when she saw me.

"You're really big," she said. Her voice was small and raspy.

"Yeah, I get that a lot." I held up the book I'd brought. "I've got a story about a giraffe who learns to dance. Want to hear it?" She nodded. I sat next to her bed and started reading.

I was halfway through the book when she interrupted me. "Mr. Mike?"

"Yeah, sweetheart?"

"Do you have any kids?"

The question hit me hard. "I had a daughter. She passed away when she was sixteen. Car accident. That was twenty years ago." Amara was quiet for a moment. Then she asked, "Do you miss being a daddy?"

My throat tightened. "Every single day, honey."

"My daddy left before I was born," she said matter-of-factly. "And my mama brought me here and never came back. The nurses say she's not coming back ever."

I didn't know what to say to that. What do you say to a seven-year-old who's been abandoned while dying?

Amara kept talking. "The lady said I'm going to go live with a foster family when I get better. But I heard the doctors talking. They don't think I'm getting better."

"Sweetheart —"

"It's okay," she said. Her voice was so calm. Too calm for a seven-year-old. "I know I'm dying. Everyone thinks I don't understand but I do. I heard them say the cancer is everywhere now. They said maybe six months. Maybe less."

I set the book down. "Amara, I'm so sorry." She looked at me with those huge eyes.

"Mr. Mike, can I ask you something?"

"Anything, honey."

"Will you be my daddy... until I die?"

The room went still. Even the monitors seemed to hush. I felt every one of my fifty-eight years settle on my shoulders like lead. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out at first. All I could see was my own daughter's face at sixteen, laughing in the rear-view mirror the last time I ever saw her alive. All I could feel was the hole that had lived in my chest ever since.

Amara didn't blink. She just waited, small and brave and impossibly calm. I wanted to say yes. God help me, I wanted to say yes so badly my bones ached. But I was just a rough old biker who showed up once a week with picture books. I rode loud, drank hard, and still woke up some nights yelling my dead daughter's name into an empty house. What did I know about being anyone's father again, even for a little while? I swallowed the rock in my throat.

"Honey... I'd be honored. But I gotta be honest with you — I'm not very good at this daddy thing anymore. I might mess it up." Her whole face lit up like the sunrise. "That's okay. You can practice on me."

And just like that, I had a daughter again.

The nurses cried when I told them. The social worker cried harder when I said I wanted temporary custody, medical guardianship, whatever paperwork existed that would let me take her home if she ever got strong enough, or stay by her side every single day if she didn't.

The bikers' club showed up in force — twenty-five Harleys rumbling into the hospital parking lot, scaring the security guards half to death until they saw the stuffed animals strapped to every bike.

We turned room 432 into something that didn't look like a hospital room anymore. One of the guys brought a pink bedsheet set his old lady had bought by mistake. Another brought a tiny leather vest with "Daddy's Girl" stitched on the back. Somebody hung fairy lights. Somebody else smuggled in a puppy that definitely wasn't allowed (just for ten minutes, but Amara laughed so hard she had to go back on oxygen).

Every Thursday became every day. I read her the giraffe book until we both had it memorized, then we moved on to Charlotte's Web, then Harry Potter.

When her hands got too weak to hold the book, I held it for both of us. When the pain got bad, I climbed onto that little bed and let her fall asleep on my chest while I hummed old Johnny Cash songs my own daughter used to love ...

The doctors kept shaking their heads, saying they couldn't explain it. Her scans weren't getting better, exactly - but they weren't getting worse as fast as they should have. Six months became nine. Nine became a year.

On the morning of her eighth birthday, Amara woke up and said, clear as day, "Daddy, I dreamed I was running. My legs worked and everything." I kissed the top of her fuzzy head. "Then we're gonna make that happen, baby girl."

Two weeks later the oncologist called me into his office, eyes wide, holding films up to the light like he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "The tumors in her spine... they're shrinking. I've never — ". He stopped, cleared his throat. "We're seeing significant regression. I don't know how to explain ...

"I've never—". He stopped, cleared his throat. "We're seeing significant regression. I don't know how to explain it."

I knew how. It was love. Plain, stubborn, loud, tattooed love.

Eighteen months after the day she asked a scary biker to be her daddy "until she died," Amara walked out of that hospital on her own two legs, holding my hand, wearing her tiny leather vest and a grin bigger than the sky.

The club threw her a welcome-home party that shook the neighborhood.

There were ponies. There was a bouncy castle. There was cake the size of a Harley wheel. And when the sun went down and the firepit was roaring, Amara climbed onto my lap, looked up at the stars, and whispered, "Daddy?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"I don't think I'm gonna die for a long time now."

I held her tight enough to feel both our hearts beating. "Good," I said, voice cracking like an old man's should. "Because I'm just getting started being a dad."

She's fifteen now. Still cancer-free. Still calls me Daddy every single day. Still sleeps in those same pink bedsheets we took from room 432. And every Thursday, rain or shine, we ride back to Children's Hospital together — me on the Harley, her on the back holding on like she's been doing it her whole life — and we read stories to the new kids who are scared and hurting.

Because some things are worth more than the years you get.

Some things are forever.

Mindful of the apostle's exhortation to ... **consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds**, my prayer to the One whose **great mercy is higher than the heavens**, is that this story will stir us, each one, to go and do something likewise to every lonely and hurting soul we may chance upon (**Ps 108:4; Heb 10:24**).

I dedicate this little story to the God of us all who sent His own beloved Son to **bring us back to God** our Father in heaven ... and to Mike and Amara through whom we have just now touched our Father's compassionate heart (**I Peter 3:18**)!