

JUST LIKE ME

by

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Tommie Swanson was exuberant. The dazzling white snowflake spears darting towards the windshield as she sped along in her new four-wheel-drive mini truck added enchantment to the night. Here and there along the country road the twinkling colored lights of a decorated farmhouse lent their holiday air to her exhilaration at the new snowfall. It would be a white Christmas this year, for sure.

The spell persisted as Tommie entered the city. Beautifully decorated homes lined the boulevard that led to Memorial Hospital. She waited for the last stoplight to turn green, and wheeled the pick-up deftly into the alley behind the hospital. She drove past the steaming boiler room dominated by a massive smoke stack and found a convenient spot in the parking lot across from the employee entrance.

Most of the nurses would have dreaded driving to work in such a storm, but to Tommie's free spirit it was genuine fun. Deep down, she hoped the heavy snowfall would escalate the challenge of getting home tomorrow.

As she climbed out of the truck, Tommie glanced towards the top of the big smoke stack that stretched out of sight in the blowing snow. It reminded her of the one she had climbed at school during recess in third grade. It had been easy since some workmen had left a ladder in place that reached up to the lowest built in iron rung on the side of the stack. From there, each succeeding blackened iron rung invited her easily up another foot towards the top. She had almost conquered the huge brick structure when she heard the Principal demanding her immediate descent. This she demurely pretended not to notice until she had traversed the remaining few rungs and hung over the edge to satisfy her curiosity about what the inside of the stack looked like.

The impenitent girl had finally descended reluctantly to the retribution below. The discipline of the moment was soon forgotten, but the name of "Tom Boy" was permanently hers thereafter. By the time she reached High School, it had been shortened to its present form of "Tommie."

The new nurse stomped the snow off her boots at the doorway, and hurried up the elevator to the fifth floor. She arrived at the pediatric nurses' station just on time for report from Debbie Crabb.

"Hi, Tommie," Debbie's welcoming voice rang out. "Looks like you're going to have a quiet night. Most of the patients have been discharged for the holidays. Ready for report?" she asked as she grabbed up the charts without waiting for an answer. "I gotta get home before the roads get any worse."

Debbie flipped quickly through the charts of the few patients remaining on Five East. "Everyone's fairly stable. But," she said disgruntledly as she reached the last card. "Mandy's back. I put her down at the end of the hall in the private room where she can't pester us too much."

"Who's Mandy?" asked Tommie.

"A first class hospital brat," Debbie answered vindictively. "Congenital heart that's spent half her life up here. She knows more about this place than the architect that built it. 'N she knows how to play the system for all it's worth."

"Come on, Debbie, she can't be all that bad," Tommie said consolingly.

"Watch her," warned Debbie. "Last time she was in, she gave us the slip and made her way down to the boiler room. Just when we were getting a full scale search going, she pulled the main power switch and darkened the whole place. Said she just wanted to know what it was for, and couldn't get the heavy switch back on by herself."

"And a couple years ago..." Tommie had a hard time suppressing a grin as an aide took up the story. "...The little imp got to sneaking down to Newborns. She kept trying to feed the babies chocolate covered cherries from the nurses desk. The staff started seeing dark colored saliva on the sheets and thought they had an epidemic of internal bleeding. They had already reported it to Public Health when someone found Mandy hiding in the linen closet with the missing box of cherries."

Tommie felt a strange kinship with this Mandy, whoever she was. Unless she missed her guess, she promised to be a child with her own free spirit that so few people understood. Given some maturity, she'd probably be all right.

Rounds finally ended in Mandy's room. A strange, indescribable yearning stirred in Tommie's heart as she gazed on the thin, frail form of the sleeping little invalid. "How old?" she whispered awesomely to Debbie, who was already heading out the door. "Eight," came the muffled reply as Debbie disappeared through the doorway. Glancing back to the child, Tommie grinned tolerantly as she saw her squinting little eyelids flicker closed too late. The girl was only feigning sleep.

Only after Tommie had passed her midnight medicines did she allow herself to tiptoe back for another look at Mandy. There sat the little patient, squatted on her feet in the center of her bed in the typical hunched over "Tetralogy" stance of children with severe cardiac disease.

"You came. I knew you would," said Mandy matter-of-factly between slightly labored breaths. "You're different. I can tell. You knew I was awake, but you didn't care."

"I'm Tommie," replied the nurse, trying to match Mandy's nonchalance. "They call me that 'cause I used to be such a tom boy. I guess I did a lot of crazy things when I was a kid. Can't you sleep, Honey?"

"Too hard to breathe lying down," replied the child. "Besides, I wanted to watch the snow storm. I love it! And," she continued shyly, "I wanted you to come and talk to me." Her winsome smile completely overcame all Tommie's reserve.

Turning on the light, Tommie noted a dusky blueness to Mandy's lips. Instinctively her hand went to the child's wrist to take her pulse. "Ninety-six when I'm resting and about One Twenty-four when I'm angry," said the child with a grin. "And my pressure is about ninety over fifty with a four-inch cuff and eighty over forty with an adult cuff." Mandy volunteered.

"Pretty close on the pulse," laughed Tommie dropping her hand after fifteen seconds. "What size blood pressure cuff does your doctor use on you?"

"Usually a four inch one 'cause my arm's getting so skinny," Mandy answered.

"Then that's what I'll use," replied Tommie, hurrying out to get the cuff. Returning a moment later, she found the blood pressure right at the figure the child had estimated.

"Don't look so worried," the child admonished. I've been like this ever since I can remember. Sometimes a little better, sometimes lots worse. I heard the doctor tell my case worker that they might do some more surgery on my heart again. They sent me out while they talked, but I just went around to the outside window and heard every word. He said it could make me a lot better, but it might kill me. I wish they'd hurry up and do it so I could do all the things I'd like to do."

Uneasy with the turn of the conversation, Tommie moved to the window. As she gazed into the storm without she felt Mandy's thin arm creeping around her waist. Together their kindred spirits enjoyed the natural beauty of the blowing snow that transformed the dirty buildings and streets below into an idyllic paradise of cottony white.

"I love it," Mandy broke their reverie. "The wind sounds like a pack of wolves out there."

"I love it too," Tommie countered, "But I've got to get back to work."

"Feeling little fingers tugging longingly at her sleeve, Tommie bent towards the little girl. "I love you, too," the child whispered. "You're...You're...just like me. I'm not lonely when you are here."

Completely won over, Tommie gathered the pathetic little figure in her arms. "I think you're right," she said, hugging her close. "We're just alike inside." Unfolding herself gently from the clinging child, she stated firmly, "I've got to get some work done now, but I'll come back when I get caught up." "I promise," she added as the child relaxed contentedly.

True to Debbie's prediction, Tommie had a quiet, easy shift that night. She got back to spend some time with the enigmatic little girl several more times before morning. Each time the child was squatting there in the middle of her bed in wide eyed anticipation of her new friend's return. The strange bond between them required little conversation as they appreciated the storm outside together. But in Tommie's heart Mandy's words reverberated. "You're just like me. I'm not lonely when you are here."

The child finally drifted off to sleep about four A.M., allowing Tommie to finish her work in good time. She gave her report efficiently to the oncoming day shift, and slipped back for a last glance at the sleeping child before heading out for home.

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Tommie found the parking lot covered with about eight inches of snow. Getting home might be a delightful challenge this morning. She trudged enthusiastically out to her truck and cleaned the snow from the windows.

As she started the four-by-four, Tommie could almost see Mandy in the seat beside her, anticipating the challenge just as much as she did. What a pity a child with such a spirit didn't have a healthy body to go with it! The truck moved forward easily in four wheel drive--for about three feet. Suddenly there was a

jolting stop, and the back of the pick-up lurched precariously towards the car parked beside her. Tommie got out to find her front wheels wedged against a concrete parking stanchion completely buried in the snow. The back bumper was sitting almost against the other vehicle.

Tommie was still contemplating her awkward situation when an unfamiliar young man walked by. Seeing her predicament, he stopped with a concerned smile. "Can I help?" he asked sincerely.

"I guess I need help," Tommie admitted reluctantly. "I can't go forward because of that parking stanchion, and I can't go backward without damaging that car."

"Yeh," he agreed. "The way that invisible thing stopped you, it'll be too tightly anchored to the pavement to be moved. I think if you'd spin the rear wheels forward, I could push the sliding rear end sideways away from the car so you can back up. Wanna try it?"

"Sounds good if you think you can do it," Tommie replied.

"Your trucks is probably light enough in the back that it won't be too hard," he speculated. The whole procedure went just as the man had suspected. Within twenty seconds or so, Tommie's truck was lined up parallel with the other vehicle and ready to go."

"Thanks a bunch," Tommie said genuinely, reaching out to shake his hand. "You really got me out of an embarrassing predicament."

"Glad I could help," replied the man sincerely. My name is Dave Holman. I'm substituting for the hospital chaplain this month, so you'll probably be seeing more of me."

"I'm Arlene Swanson, from Pediatrics," she volunteered. "Everyone calls me Tommie."

"Just looking at you, I think I know why," he almost said out loud. "Anyone I should visit in Peds?" he asked more audibly.

"Yeh, try Mandy, all the way at the end of the hall. She's a great little girl with a nasty heart and a free spirit," replied Tommie. "Thanks again," she added as she backed out of her parking space to meet the challenge of the country roads.

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Tommie's sleep was somewhat fitful that day. She still wasn't completely acclimated to sleeping days and working nights. Her grotesque dreams kept strangely confusing Mandy with herself as they rehashed some of her childhood escapades. She couldn't get the child out of her mind. And somehow her handsome new acquaintance, Dave Holman, kept showing up just in time to avert disaster.

Rising just in time for supper, Tommie ate a good meal with her parents that evening. "How'd the truck do in the snow?" Dad asked inquisitively.

"Fine, Dad. I'd feel secure in it in any weather."

"You be careful, Arlene," said Mom. You wouldn't recognize danger if it came in a fluorescent wrapper with a return address. You never were afraid of anything."

"Now Mom," remonstrated Dad. "Tommie's never gotten herself killed yet. We wanted her to get the truck so we wouldn't have to worry about her driving back and forth to work, remember? And you gotta admit it beats a motorcycle"

"But," Dad added, turning to Tommie. "Don't try to come home if the roads aren't plowed. Even four-wheel-drives can't negotiate everything."

Tommie really enjoyed the trip in to work that night. The wind was starting to blow, and a few reasonably deep drifts gave her ample opportunity to put the four-by-four through its paces. She was delighted with the little truck's performance. It was everything she had hoped it would be.

Evening report was about the same as last night. "Unless you get an emergency admission, you should have it easy," Debbie told Tommie. Mandy seems a little better, but watch her! She's up to something. She slept most of the day, and she never does that."

"She didn't sleep much last night," Tommie replied in Mandy's defense.

"You watch!" Debbie retorted spitefully. "She's up to no good!"

Mandy was up gazing out the window when Tommie got free to spend some time with her about an hour later. "See the 'naivety' scene they put up today?" the child exclaimed as Tommie came up beside her. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"Yeh," Tommie answered, smirking good humoredly at the child's "Naivety." "Tell me what's so wonderful about it."

"Do you know Dave Holman?" asked the child seriously.

"Yes, I've met him, " replied Tommie feeling a slight blush creeping up from her neck.

"He told me how God's Son came down to earth and became just like us so we could understand how much God loves us," said the child. "But He was so good people didn't want to understand Him. When He grew up, they hated Him, and nailed Him to a cross to kill Him."

"See the Manger?" the child continued. "They said they were waiting for Christ to come, but when He came they wouldn't even make room for Him in the motel, so He had to sleep in a manger. What's a manger, Tommie?"

"It's a box they put hay in to feed the animals," replied the amused nurse. "See, they've got a doll for baby Jesus lying in the hay in the manger down there by all the animals."

"Oh," Mandy responded pensively. "You mean they made Him be born in a barn?" she continued as new understanding lit up her eyes. "And He still became a little baby just like us? I'd have gone back home if I were Him!" After a pause she added, "I love that story. I wish they hadn't killed Him."

Tommie got back to Mandy even more that night than the one before. Every time she came, the child snuggled up to her contentedly, taking their strange relationship more or less for granted. But the child's chatter continually returned to the manger scene below, and the fact that God's Son had become like we are.

As the night wore on, Tommie wearied of her little patient's fascination with the manger scene. She actually felt relieved when a stout wind began to whip up the snow enough to blur it out. Both of them enjoyed the increasing furor of the intensifying storm, but the child's preoccupation with the Christ child did not diminish all the night long. When Tommie finally tucked the dozing invalid into her bed she was murmuring drowsily about how much God must have loved us to become like we are.

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Tommie's Dad called early in the morning. He insisted that she should not try to come home in the continuing blizzard. "They may have the city streets cleared," he said, "But the drifting is so bad out this way that they haven't even been able to get a snow plow through. You stay at the hospital! I'll call you if they get the roads clear, but the wind is still blowing so hard that they may not make it today. We're snowed in and you're snowed out."

Tommie finished her work and left Mandy peacefully sleeping in the care of the day shift. After a light breakfast at the staff cafeteria, she found her way to the call rooms and quickly fell into a deep sleep on the bed provided. She awoke a little after noon and dialed a call for home. The dead phone lines confirmed her intuition that there was no point in trying to get there yet.

On an impulse, Tommie decided to go out and get a present for Mandy. She scurried down to the parking lot, cleaned the truck windows of snow, and started out in four-wheel-drive. She was amazed at how many drifts were forming even on the continually cleared city streets. Arriving at the shopping center, she was impressed with how few cars were in the parking lot on this last day before Christmas. She picked out an exceptionally nice doll for Mandy.

Tommie hurried back to Mandy's room. The child was delighted to see her. She kept up a constant stream of conversation as she snuggled up in the nurse's lap, and only after she had chattered away for several minutes did she even bother to open the present. But when she saw the doll she squealed with delight. "Thank you, Tommie. I've never had such a nice one," she kept on saying. She mothered her new baby with an intense tenderness that stirred many a pleasant childhood memory in Tommie as she whiled away the afternoon with the invalid child.

Dave Holman's mouth dropped in admiring appreciation as he walked into the room that afternoon. There sat Tommie dozing in the chair with her little patient, still cuddling her doll, fast asleep in her arms. "What a nurse!" he thought as he turned quietly to leave. But the movement aroused Tommie, and her startled jerk awoke the child.

"Dave!" Mandy called out gleefully while Tommie struggled to regain her composure. "I'm so glad you came again. I love what you told me about Jesus becoming just like us."

"Hi there, Mandy. Hello Miss Swanson, May I come in?" He had obviously addressed the question more to Tommie, but Mandy answered a hearty "Yes" before the confused nurse could collect her wits. Jumping down, she grabbed the young man's hand and dragged him to the window.

Their backs toward her, Tommie stood and quickly smoothed the wrinkles from her clothes. Retaking her seat, she felt an unnatural warmth in her face and a slight pounding in her chest. No man had ever affected her quite this way before. Never! She would have liked to have retreated from the room for reconnaissance, but there was no gracious way to do so.

Mandy was disappointed that the snow had hidden so much of her "Naivety" scene. "He must have loved us a lot to come down from heaven and be born in a barn," she told Dave as they stared out the window. "I'm so glad He became just like me."

"Wait a minute, Mandy. He didn't become just exactly like you," Dave interrupted.

The child screwed up her face in disappointment, and then broke out in a smile. "No, He didn't have a bad heart like I do, did He?" She looked up hopefully into Dave's face for confirmation.

"That's it all right," Dave replied earnestly. "But everyone has a bad heart, Mandy. We all do bad things and think bad thoughts that God calls sin. He saw how bad we were, so He sent his Son down to pay the penalty for our sins. When Jesus died on the cross, it was so we wouldn't have to die for our own sins. If we receive Him into our hearts as our Savior, God saves us. But if we refuse God's salvation, there's nothing left except for us to die for our own sins."

"I guess I'm pretty bad sometimes, Dave," the little girl said slowly. "The harder I try to be good, the more I see how bad I am. Jesus wasn't like that, was He?"

"No, He wasn't like us in our sins, Mandy. He was perfectly holy. He couldn't sin because He was God. But He took all our sins on Himself, and bore the punishment for them just as if they were His own sins."

"I wish I had never done anything He had to suffer for," Mandy interrupted remorsefully.

"When Jesus comes into our hearts, He gives us a new life that can be better," Dave told her. "Would you like to invite Him into your heart?"

"Yes," said Mandy. "If I didn't let Him come into my heart it would be just like making Him be born in the manger all over again, wouldn't it?"

Tommie listened in amazed reverence as Dave led the sick little girl in a simple prayer of acceptance of Christ. The child's face beamed as she said, "Amen." "Tommie," she said, climbing up into her lap, "Jesus is really in my heart now. I can tell."

Tears welled up in Tommie's eyes as Dave proceeded to teach Mandy to sing, "Oh, come to my heart, Lord Jesus! There is room in my heart for Thee." She joined softly in the chorus as she became familiar with the tune. Never in her life had Tommie meant anything more.

The magic of the moment was broken when the day nurse entered the room. "Time to go to X-ray now, Mandy. Hurry and get your robe on. Your doctor wants this right now."

Tommie was deeply engrossed in her own thoughts as she followed Mandy blindly out the door. She went straight to her room to think this out. She had to admit she'd never given it a serious thought before.

After washing up a bit, Tommie headed for the parking lot to go out for something to eat. But when she opened the door and saw how violently the wind was blowing, she thought better of it, and went to the hospital cafeteria instead. She had just settled down with her tray when Dave came by with his dinner.

"Mind if I sit here?" he asked, drawing out the chair across from Tommie.

"Have a seat, Dave," she replied, a swallow sticking in her throat.

"I couldn't get my car out of the parking lot," he volunteered. "Guess I'll have to spend the night in the chaplain's office."

"Dave," Tommie began hesitantly after a few moments of silent eating. "Thanks for your interest in Mandy. Somehow she means a lot to me. She's got such a free spirit in her."

"Exactly!" he replied. "The little rascal's so spunky that I couldn't help but tell her some of my own childhood experiences. She loved it when I told her how we used to walk out on the railroad bridge across the Mississippi River. Sometimes when a train came, we'd be so far out on the bridge that we wouldn't have time to get off before it overtook us. So we'd have to hang down under the trestle from the railroad ties by our hands and feet while the train thundered over us."

"I guess it's a wonder some kids survive," Tommie answered, picturing herself on top of the smoke stack.

"Do you know what she told me?" he said with a boyish grin. "She said I was different, just like herself and Tommie. Even though I had barely met you, I knew just what she meant the instant she said it."

When Tommie rose to return to her room, she could literally feel Dave's appreciative eyes on her all the way down the hall. And for the first time in her life, she liked the feeling. She took another snooze to get ready for a long night's work, and dreamed of no one but Dave.

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Tommie reported for the night shift on Peds right at eleven o'clock. "Merry Christmas," Debbie sang out as her replacement came in. "Things are really quiet around here tonight. Even Mandy was asleep with a new doll a few minutes ago."

But when they made rounds, Mandy's new doll was carefully tucked into her bed, but the little heart patient was nowhere to be seen.

A quick check of the other rooms on the ward was fruitless. Debbie herself went straight to the boiler room while the aide ran down to newborns. But Mandy was not to be found.

Five minutes later, Tommie and Debbie walked into Mandy's room to search for more clues on where she might have gone, and found the child squatted cold and breathless in the center of her bed.

"Where have you been?" demanded Debbie angrily. But the child was too short of breath to answer.

"Go on home, Debbie," Tommie urged. "I'll take care of everything now."

Tommie watched Mandy closely, expecting her to regain her breath shortly so she could talk. But after a few minutes, it was evident that her problem was more serious than just being temporarily out of breath from exercise. Becoming concerned, the nurse called the doctor, who ordered oxygen and some appropriate medications over the phone. "Call me back if she doesn't respond favorably in an hour or so," the doctor instructed.

Thankful that everyone else was stable, Tommie picked up Mandy and hugged her to her breast. The child laid her head on her friend's shoulder, but still could not speak. Twenty minutes later Tommie called the doctor again. When he started to order more medicine, Tommie became adamant. "Doctor, the child is critical. You'd better come now," she insisted. "OK," he replied. "Transfer her to CCU. I'm coming."

As Tommie kissed the little girl one last time, Mandy was able to gasp out, "I'm sorry Tommie. I didn't mean any trouble." Then clutching her heart she gasped, "I've got the Baby in..."

"I know, Honey," Tommie consoled her as she was wheeled away to CCU. "I'm so glad you've got the Baby in your heart."

Tommie went about the rest of her work mechanically that night. Every now and then she lifted her distraught heart in prayer. "Oh Lord, be with this child," she pleaded.

Musing over what could have happened, she finally thought of the fire escape at Mandy's end of the hall. Pushing the door opened, she found one of the child's frozen slippers just outside on the slippery iron grate. She could barely see the other one about half way down to the ground. "I'll bet she went down for a look at her 'Naivety scene'," Tommie told herself as she put the puzzle together. "It's a wonder the wind didn't blow her right off these icy stairs. I'd better call and warn them that she'll probably have pneumonia on top of her heart failure."

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Christmas morning was cold and clear. Throughout the city all was mirth and festivities. The storm over, the snowplow finally had a chance to start really clearing the roads. But Tommie spent the day at Mandy's bedside. The child drifted in and out of consciousness throughout the day, but seemed less restless with Tommie's comforting hand caressing her. Dave dropped in repeatedly between his other duties, but Tommie was too emotionally and physically exhausted to detect that she was the real object his attentions.

By evening all roads were reported passable. The nursing supervisor came in and sent Tommie home. "You've worked all night and sat with this child all day," she pointed out. "I've got you a replacement for tonight, and you're going home to get some sleep before you get sick," the matronly lady insisted. Tommie bent down and kissed the unconscious child's cheek tenderly before heading out to the parking lot. Her tears flowed freely all the way home.

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A hot shower and a good night's sleep in her own bed did a lot for Tommie. She finished Mom's farm breakfast, and was just going to the phone to call on Mandy's condition when the doorbell rang. She

knew before she opened the door that it had be him. A tingle of ecstasy surged throughout her whole body as she threw it opened. "Dave, you came!" she exclaimed ecstatically. The words, "I knew you would. You're different, just like me." rang through her mind so loudly that she had to forcibly hold them back.

"How's Mandy?" she asked.

"She died right after you left," he said gently

"Oh, Dave," she sobbed, burying her head face in his comforting shoulder, "I didn't think she could live."

His sympathetic arm supported her as she sobbed out her anguish on his chest. When her tears ceased he said huskily, "I brought you two things from the hospital."

The first was the doll she had given Mandy. "You might as well keep it to remember her by," he suggested. Then producing a second wet, soggy doll, he said, "And this is the doll from the 'Naivety' scene. We found it wrapped in a towel in the drawer of Mandy's bedside stand."

"So that's what she meant when she said, 'I've got the baby in!'" Tommie exclaimed. It must have seemed so real to her that she couldn't bear to see it left out in the cold, so she sneaked down the fire escape and rescued it," she theorized.

"You know," Dave said as he placed his arm around Tommie's shoulder. Most of the city celebrated their Christmas without ever noticing that the Baby was missing, but Mandy had the Baby that became 'Just like us' in her heart."

"I do too, Dave", Tommie whispered softly. After Mandy accepted Christ, I went to my room and invited Him into my heart too.

"I knew you would," she heard him murmur as he folded her tenderly into his arms. "You're different-- just like me."