**Kiss The Face of God**

 **Hannah’s Story**

At forty-five years old, divorced, and with three grown-up sons, I did not plan to raise another family but things don’t always go as planned. I had married a Vietnamese woman a after a couple of years of being single. My new wife had a four-year old daughter from a previous marriage and I had always wanted a daughter, so I figured she was a bargain in the deal. Then my wife’s only sibling, a sister named Tuyet, came down with cancer — she had two daughters, ages 10 and 4. I thought surely someone else in the family would be tapped to raise the girls but slowly it began to dawn on me that my wife and I were looked to for the role as parents of the soon to be orphan girls.

I had known Tuyet for a three years and traveled with her to several countries and I’d spent a lot of time with her. She could only speak but a few words in English, so my wife always had to be on hand to translate. The last time I saw her alive was in January 2005 when my wife told me that Tuyet wanted to talk to me privately. I was slightly perplexed, knowing that she could not speak English and I could not speak Vietnamese but I suspected that we were about to have a very serious chat — one that I dreaded.￼

 I walked into her bedroom and she was sitting on the edge of the bed. She motioned me to close the door. I was apprehensive, knowing she could not speak English — I thought this was going to be painfully awkward. As I seated myself beside her, she shocked me by suddenly speaking perfect English. I could not believe my ears. My first thought was to go find a witness — this was like my “burning bush” moment and I wanted someone else to confirm it was really happening! But, she carried on with her soliloquy and I dared not interrupt the impassioned flow of her words — she was confessing that she knew she was dying and formally requesting me to raise her children as though they were my own. It was then I realized that this poor woman must have been rehearsing this speech for weeks, practicing for hours to get it perfect and my heart was deeply moved. Then she went off script, “Why are you looking at me like that with your mouth hanging open.”

Now, I was even more confused as she launched into further improvisational English — perfectly, without any hesitancy. My rehearsed-into-a-tape-recorder-theory was blown apart. Still, searching desperately for a rational explanation, I landed on the notion that she had been able to speak English all along — she’d been faking NOT being able to speak English in front of me for years! The absurdity of that notion quickly deflated and I was left staring at her as she waited for me to answer her, “Will you promise me to take care of my children and raise them for me when I die?”￼

My mouth was dry, my pulse was pounding, my mind was swimming — with a lump in my throat, I said, “Yes.” Suddenly, I was daddy to three young Vietnamese girls.

My youngest daughter is named Hannah, and I want to tell you about a particularly memorable event that occurred between her and I. Something wonderful happened on the way to her mom's second burial.

I attached photos of her then and now so you can visualize her as you read.￼

I became Hannah's daddy when she was four years old after her single mom tragically died of cancer in Hanoi, Vietnam and this story happened about three years later.

In parts of SE Asia and Southern China, there is a cultural tradition of second burial, where the bodies of deceased family members are exhumed after a couple of years, the bones cleaned, dressed, and placed in an ossuary and reinterred in a family burial plot. My wife does not usually prepare me well for surprises and this was no exception; she informed me the day of the ceremony that she would need my support as they would be handling both her father and sister at the same time since they had died only a month apart. Of course, I immediately agreed to do whatever she needed me to do. Then I found out that this deed must be done after sunset and the bones must be reburied before midnight, so we would be spending the night in a graveyard!

At dusk, I found myself loitering about the cemetery while a dozen or so relatives huddled in small groups talking somberly in a language I could not understand. Soon I was assigned to oversee the digging up of my wife’s sister Tuyet’s grave. The surrealism of it all was accentuated by my inability to banish Randy Travis’ country western hit song, “Diggin’ up Bones” from my mind.

As the grave diggers plucked Tuyet’s bones from the soggy earth by lantern light, the nervous chatter in my mind picked up as it occurred to me that I’d never before actually seen the bones of someone that I had known in life. I was thinking that seeing someone's bones was like seeing them naked — even more awkward. She looked much better with skin, I mused, as they lifted her skull up to the light. Suddenly, my seven year old daughter Hannah’s voice broke through my peculiar internal monologue, “Daddy, are those mommy’s bones?” I suddenly felt panic, wondering if she should be seeing any of this — shouldn’t she be with the other relatives? I wondered if this was some kind of child abuse — where is my wife? Help! But there was nothing I could do — Hannah was already standing there, looking at the bones, asking me about her mother’s remains. “Yes, I think so,” I stammered, quickly shepherding her back to the group of relatives — away from the disturbing bones.

When I returned, the attendants were already cleaning the bones with stiff brushes and water jets, ridding them of any clinging bits of hair and remnants of decayed flesh. Then they dried the bones and reverentially placed then in their proper relative positions in the ossuary, swaddling them in a red silk robe with gold trim, and adorning the skull with a matching silk cap. The attendant knew he was handling the bones of a young woman and he paused running his fingers over the cancer scarred pelvic bone, sadly shaking his head. It was all done with the utmost care and respect (even so, I think Tuyet would have slapped him for touching her there if she could).

We had an hour long bus ride to the final burial plot. Tuyet’s bones lay at my feet and Hannah sat cradled in my lap. Hannah’s voice again interrupted my thoughts, “Daddy, is mommy in Heaven now?” With Tuyet’s bones at our feet, this seemed a very poignant question and I paused to carefully consider my answer to this tiny girl who was looking up to me with total trust in her big brown eyes.

“Yes, Hannah, your mom knew about Jesus and I believe she accepted him as her savior, so she is in Heaven now,” I said thickly.

“Daddy, where is Heaven and where is Hell?” She wasn't asking for a theological explanation — she wanted to know where her mommy was! I silently prayed for wisdom from above.

“Well, Baby, Heaven and Hell are not like places we can drive or fly to, like Hanoi, or Da Nang or Ho Chi Minh City... You know what it's like when you feel safe and secure and full of joy and happiness?” She nodded. “Well, that’s what Heaven is like. And you know what it's like when you feel afraid and guilty and ashamed?” Another nod. “I think that’s what Hell is like.”

She thought about that for a moment and then added, “Daddy, sometimes mommy makes me feel like Heaven and sometimes she makes me feel like Hell!” I smiled at this unexpected and brutally honest observation, remembering her frequently quite stern mother.

I felt I needed to respond to her so, after another urgent prayer, I said, “I think that’s because mommy wanted to give you a little taste of Heaven so you would want to go there — and a little taste of Hell so you would NOT want to go there.”

That seemed to satisfy her completely to my great relief as I felt like she was asking questions out of my depth -- even though answers seemed to come to me -- I felt out on a limb. She then flashed me a toothy smile and said, “Daddy, you always make me feel like Heaven.” With that she nuzzled her face into my chest and instantly fell asleep as tears ran down my cheeks.

“Yes,” I thought to myself, that’s my job as her dad: to “make her feel like heaven,” and somehow I knew what that meant — to make her feel safe and secure, purposeful and important, loved and valued as best I could all the days I was blessed to be her dad.

I often think back on that day. I could have easily missed that amazing divine appointment; I didn’t want to go there; if I could have thought of an excuse, I probably wouldn't have gone — but, thankfully, I stayed the course — I rode it out. And there, in the midst of that strange, uncomfortable circumstance, I discovered a beautiful memory that I will keep in my heart forever. It’s like a delicate flower that never withers or dies and it never fails to bring a tear to my eye — it’s a like a bitter-sweet taste of Heaven on Earth; I cherish it, and I’m so thankful that I did not turn away or try to escape. Now, I realize that such beautiful flowers are indeed rare and are only to be found in places like that, so I try my best to keep my eyes and ears open and not turn my face away, even when life becomes difficult or my circumstances unpleasant. It seems that it’s God’s practice not to leave His choicest gems in plain sight, but to hide them where only intrepid souls can find them.

But the story is not finished yet. There is an addendum that happened about ten years later on April 21, 2017. I know the exact date because I was in the audience watching Hannah’s senior year, last performance in a high school play. She didn’t have a big part, just a few lines. Nevertheless, I felt very proud of her and my thoughts drifted back to the time she sat in my lap on the bus on the way to her mother’s second burial.

I thought about how much my love for had grown over the years. Had I kept my commitment? Did I succeed in making her feel safe and secure, purposeful and important, loved and valued, as best I could, in the ten years since that night on the bus? I think so. As I watched her prance across the stage during the curtain call, I thought to myself, “I love her so much… I love the way she moves, the way her eyes sparkle and how she flashes her smile and tosses her hair… I would do anything to protect her… I would even die for her without any hesitation should the need arise…” Such were the thoughts of a proud dad watching his beloved daughter’s last performance. As luck would have it, I captured that very moment on my camera phone:

At that moment, I thought I heard a sound like a message alert on a phone (maybe that’s what it was — I don’t know), but it seemed inside my head… a curious “ding,” followed by an inaudible voice, a voice I recognized as the voice of God: **“In the same way you love your daughter, I love you. I would do anything to make you feel safe and secure, purposeful and important, loved and valued… and I did die for you.”**  I felt enveloped in love, the air around me charged with electricity and my skin tingling.

As the curtain call ended, Hannah did not run off with her friends or her sister, or seek her drama coach or teachers. She began scanning the audience and when she saw me, her face lit up — she ran down the steps and up the aisle-way, sitting herself down in my lap — in the exact same position as she sat with me on the bus so many years ago. I was so full of emotion already, I could not hold back tears from my eyes. Hannah looked at my face and smiled, wiping my tears with her hands and she kissed both sides of my face, saying, “I love you Daddy,” and she hugged me tightly around the neck.

I have never in my life felt such love. It was tangible and it whelmed me. She demonstrated to me her genuine love of her daddy and I was in awe… no wonder God our Father desires us to express our love to him…

Suddenly, I was overcome with a desire to crawl up into the lap of Father God, to wipe the tears from His eyes and to kiss his face — I wanted to do for God what my daughter did for me — to express my love for Him without any pretense or reservation. I now know that IS what He wants and I know why He wants it. Beyond the sentiment, how does one actually do that? How do I kiss the face of God?