**The Little Church on the Hill**

Following a hunch, I drove to the churchyard late Sunday night. My heart fluttered wildly in my chest. Kelly just had to be there. Where else could he possibly have gone? His cell phone advised the caller that his voicemail was full. Kat, his fiancée, reached out to all his friends that he might have visited. He was nowhere to be found. His older brother drove to some of his favorite places, Pizza Party, Game World, Practice Putting- but he wasn’t there either. The sky darkened as night approached. I knew Kell had been very close to his dad. I agonized over how his father’s death might impact him. Worry consumed me.

When I suddenly got pregnant with Kelly at the geriatric age of thirty nine, I decided he had to be baptized. My husband, Keith, and I found this little Episcopal Church nestled in the side of the hill. The chapel’s exterior was constructed of large grey stones. Double wooden mahogany doors affixed with large black iron straps formed the entrance. A bell tower at the top rang every hour announcing the time. Large stain glass windows ran up both sides of the building. My baby was baptized there.

My son had recently become engaged in his academics, attained straight A’s in his community college classes and applied to Temple for his junior year. But when his father was hospitalized, he dropped his courses to spend time with his dad. His light greyish brown colored hair always pulled back in a ponytail. His jeans slung low on his hips. The hem scraped the ground as he walked. The baggy t-shirt or sweat shirt hastily pulled over his chest was sometimes worn inside out. He watched over his dad’s unconscious body inserted with various tubes and needles. Machines hummed and churned in the background.

 No one knows if a patient on a ventilator has any awareness of his surroundings. The medical staff encouraged us to talk to Keith- just in case he could hear and understand us. Kelly downloaded his father’s favorite songs, placed his iPhone on the pillow by his ear and played music for him. He reminisced about all the football games they attended, the hunting trip they enjoyed, the little league baseball and soccer games that his Dad had coached. The rotating physicians called my son by name now. He learned all the medical terms and meaning of his dad’s numbers beyond the typical vital measurements.

One morning Keith’s eyes fluttered open. Kelly grabbed his hand and squeezed it. “Dad? Dad?”

His head turned slightly on his pillow. His dark brown eyes looked up at his son’s face. His mouth forced wide open from the wide coiled ventilator tube but unable to speak.

“Dad, your lungs are destroyed by the flu. You’re only shot is to get a double lung transplant. That’s the only way you’ll survive.”

His father stared up toward the ceiling. A tear ran down his cheek. Kelly wiped it off. Then his eyes closed.

When told about this, I inquired, “Did you ask him if he wanted a lung transplant?”

“No, Mom, I didn’t think to ask him that.” The tone of his voice somber.

I hugged him. “No worries. I just wanted to confirm that this is what he’d want. We never discussed it.”

Keith passed all the organ transplant candidate assessment tests - except one. He was still infected with influenza. A new, innovative drug appeared promising. The team told us not to give up hope. Kelly walked down the hall to call his uncle, Keith’s brother. I headed toward the restrooms. Then a flurry of footsteps could be heard directly behind me.

“Mrs. Northern! Mrs. Northern!”

A group of doctors ran down the hallway. Their white coats flapped in the breeze. The apparent leader, a heavy set woman with dark wavy hair and a thick foreign accent, opened a door from the hallway and directed me to step inside. My son ran down the corridor to join me. The bleached jackets quickly entered and sat in the chairs lined up against the wall across from us.

The woman with the heavy accent addressed me. “We have just finished our meeting. We reviewed all the candidates on the list waiting for transplants.”

I interjected. “My husband passed all the tests. We just have to knock out the flu…the infectious disease team is…”

She cut me off. “We have removed your husband from the list.”

“What?” My heart pounded in my chest.

“He’s no longer a candidate for a lung transplant.” I swear I actually saw the words appear as letters rolling off her tongue, bouncing and twirling in the air, then disappearing. “No longer” drifted up high and away. “Lung” developed soft cloud like lobes then pulsated and dissipated. “Transplant” jumped up and down twice like an animated word in a PowerPoint presentation.

After a long pregnant pause I asked, “Then what happens next?”

“We’ll give him medication so that he is not in any pain when we remove him from the ECMO machine. He’s dependent on the machine to breathe. As soon as we disconnect it, he’ll die.”

I watched while “die” floated up toward the ceiling, dipped and circled around in the air, changed from light grey to black and then the letters slowly dissolved.

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Sunday night I suddenly thought or guessed that Kell wanted to be somewhere closer to God. He must have gone to the little church on the hill. When my son was little, he thought God lived there. We had just held his dad’s funeral service in the stone building.

My car carefully navigated the windy gravel driveway up the hill toward the chapel bouncing in and out of a few deep grooves in the lane. As the hill crested, I viewed two cars parked in the lot. One of them was my Kelly’s black Jeep patriot with a big Temple sticker on the back window. During this past week, the university notified him of acceptance for his junior year. He emailed the letter to me and his dad with the subject line: “Mom and Dad, I got in!” I burst into tears when I saw he wrote to both of us. An email his father would never see nor read.

The heavy wooden door creaked then groaned as its weight swung into the vestibule. Upon entering, I heard a person sobbing.

In a middle pew sat my son. His hands held his head as he wept. I quietly walked up the aisle, knelt down by his row and gently pulled his hands off his face. Tears streamed down his cheeks. The interior of the chapel with its high pointed ceiling, exposed wooden beams, and large chandeliers with shimmering lights created a sense of peace. Light reflected off the jewel toned glass windows. Black wrought iron outlined artistic depictions of Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

I gently squeezed his hands. “I love you very much.”

His head hung down. “I can’t believe he’s gone, Mom. Dad is dead.”

Tear droplets puddled on the floor. I wished I could take away his pain. I thought of the scene in the Exorcist. The priest yells to the demon –“Take me!” And it does – the evil spirit leaves the little girl’s body, enters his and then the priest throws himself out the window. I would gladly take my son’s pain…but I could not.

 “Dad was always there for me. He had my back. I felt safe in the world when Dad was here. Now he’s gone. Dad is dead.” His head bent backwards and sagged behind his neck. A horrible howl escaped from his open mouth.

The sound of pain and agony from my child. A sound I will never forget. I tried to put my arms around his broad shoulders. “I love you. The pain you feel will diminish over time. We’ll go on – without him. We have to.”

His red rimmed, vein streaked swollen eyes looked into mine. “He’ll never see me graduate from college.”

My head shook in acknowledgement.

“He’ll never see me and Kat get married.”

“I know.” I took both of his hands in mine again. “But I will.”

“He’ll never know my children. My kids will never know him. He’ll never be a granddad.” His rib cage racked with sobs. He hunched over and leaned his head against my shoulder.

His body trembled. My fingers touched his soft hair. It was short now. The pony tail cut off. His hair professionally cut and styled for his dad’s funeral. His personal choice. A way to show respect for his father.

Kelly sat up. “I’m not going to get to work with him. He was going to teach me the turnaround business.” His eyes searched mine. “Who will teach me now?”

“If that’s what you want to do, I’m sure one of his colleagues would hire you and teach you the ropes.”

“It won’t be the same. Dad and I were going to be partners. He was gonna’ teach me the business. In a few years I’d take over and run his company. He’d be a consultant. We had plans, Mom. Dad and I had dreams.”

“Oh, darling, you’ll find another path. It’ll just be different than the one you planned.”

He hiccupped. “I don’t want to live in a world without Dad.” His sobbing resumed.

“I know. I don’t want to either – but I will. I have to – we have to pick up the pieces and move on with our lives.”

“I’ve been emailing Dad. Texting him…. he never answers...” His voice trailed off into a whisper. “Why, Mom? Why did God take my dad? Why not somebody else’s? All my friends have their dads…but I am dadless. My dad is dead.”

Tears welled up inside me now. “Kell, people die at different times. Death is random. Some people lose their dads when they are much younger than you. And some not until they are much older than you.”

“It isn’t fair.”

I smiled weakly and gently stroked his arm. “No. Life isn’t fair.”

His head hung. His hands covered his face.

“We have to play the cards we’re dealt in life, son. We have to learn to cope.”

“I’ll never be the same, Mom.” His shoulders crumbled forward.

“You mean…young and carefree?”

He laughed. “Yeah…I’ll never be that again.”

“Kelly, you’ll be changed in some ways –but you’ll still be you – handsome, bright, friendly, engaging, charismatic…”

“I feel empty inside, Mom…like there is a big hole and nothing to fill it.”

We sat still together just holding hands.

“Let’s go get something to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“When’s the last time you ate?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Ok. Let’s get a pizza. Once you take a bite, you’ll realize you’re actually hungry. Let’s call Kat and ask her meet us at the house. You can both sleep over.”

“Ok, Mom, whatever you think….” His voice was barely audible.

“Let’s leave your Jeep here. We’ll pick it up tomorrow.”

The big wooden door creaked open then. The caretaker entered. “I’m locking up for the night.”

“No problem. We’re leaving.” I stood up. ” We’d like to leave the Jeep here overnight if that’s okay.”

“Sure.”

Kelly held my hand as we slowly walked outside. The air was chillier now.

My son peered at my face in the darkness. “How did you know I was here?”

“I remembered you said God had spoken to you at this church when you were little. You thought he lived here. I thought maybe you wanted to be close to him …to talk to him.”

“I did, Mom.” His breath appeared as small clouds in the cold air.

“Did he say anything?”

“No…not words. But I felt his presence.”

His hand squeezed mine.

I maneuvered the car out of the dark churchyard, down the winding gravel driveway and headed west toward the lights illuminating the town below.