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“Out of a woman’s tragedy, a shared vision

The two women had never met before. They came in out of the cold Friday afternoon into the offices of Westminster Presbyterian Church at 13th and N streets. They shook hands and looked into each other’s eyes, an appraisal.

“I’m nervous,” said Marie Gutierrez, smiling shyly, her cheeks flush from the cold. Gutierrez lost her 5-year-old son last spring in a backyard tragedy.

“I figured it was time,” said Kerry Van Dyke. “The painting is done. It felt important that you see it.” Van Dyke is an artist who said she had a vision regarding the Gutierrez family’s great loss.

“I have prayed all week,” said Gutierrez. “Every day since Monday, I have said, ‘Oh God, if you do not want me to come here to this meeting, give me a sign.’ But all this time I have a feeling inside. There has to be some purpose.”

The two women walked through the empty chapel and into the vestibule, where a collection of Van Dyke’s art is being shown. Most of the pictures depict churches, altars - scenes of religious significance. By far the dominant painting depicts a large pair of hands, framed in ethereal blue, gently cupped, cradling a colorful aura.

“In my vision,” Van Dyke said, “that is the essence of Armando. He was very happy. There was no grief.”

“That is the same thing I saw,” said Marie Gutierrez, touching her fingers to her face, “except that I saw my son kneeling in the hands. There was a very bright light. But it is the same hands, the very same hands, and they were just like that.”

At that moment, tears came to Gutierrez. Her Armando had gotten through a fence gate and fallen into a murky pool in a neighboring backyard on a Saturday last April. And now she stood with Van Dyke, who said she not only had a dream about Armando’s death, but a vision in which the child was happy and all right.

The women sat facing the painting. The mother spoke.

“Saturday night when he was missing I went to bed before the news. I woke up every 45 minutes to an hour, thinking that I was hearing him scream. Each time I prayed the same thing, ‘Please, God, bring him back.’

“At 4 a.m. I woke up and I didn’t hear the scream. It was a whole different feeling. I knew. I prayed, ‘If you have to take him, please don’t let him be tortured.’ I thought in that moment, ‘Armando, if you’re not alive anymore, look for the light. Go to the light.’ Just instantly I felt calmness. I could see these two huge hands, these same hands. It was so bright. He wasn’t wearing what he died in. He had on his favorite green sweater.”

Said Van Dyke, “My dream was Friday night before Armando disappeared. There was a child in an enclosed back yard, all cement, face down in a pool of very filthy water, like a cesspool. I saw the news on Saturday and heard about Armando being missing. It occurred to me then that this could be the boy in my dream.”

Van Dyke said she ‘communicated’ with Armando the Monday after police discovered his body on Sunday. He was being cradled by the hands. He was happy, and he said to tell his mother that he missed his favorite hard yellow candy, Lemon Heads.

In a sympathy note to the Gutierrez family, complete strangers, Van Dyke wrote of her vision of the two hands. Marie Gutierrez wrote back in a thank you note that is posted in the church, “Your vision of Armando was the exact vision I received. . . .”

Gutierrez was unsure how she felt when she got a second card from Van Dyke last week telling her of the painting. “I thought, what could she want of me? I don’t have anything to give her. I have no money. Is she trying to do something to me? Then there is nothing she could do. I am too secure in my faith.

“I called her. When she started telling me about seeing Armando, I thought, yeah, yeah, sure. But then she told me about the Lemon Head candies. No one knew that but me and Armando’s 9-year-old sister. He had to have them. Albertson’s was the only place I could get them. I would go there just for his candy. When she said Lemon Head candies, I thought, ‘Armando is really trying to give us a sign.’

“Since talking to Kerry, I think when the loneliness comes, when I have my tears for my son, I feel he is right there. ‘It’s OK, Mom,’ Each crying episode that comes, I can deal with it faster. We both get the same feeling that we are destined to do something to help someone else.”

Gutierrez is a pleasant, thoughtful woman who is a community liaison at William Land School. She and her husband, Umberto, have three daughters at home. Van Dyke has two daughters, and, in addition to her own art, she teaches art classes at Phoebe Hearst School.

“It gives me peace of mind,” said Gutierrez. “I was destined to see this picture. Maybe part of it is what I wanted to see. But part of it is what he wanted me to see.”

Said Van Dyke, "I felt compelled. I followed my intuition. There will be some people who are skeptical, and yes, some who doubt my motives. Too bad."

Gutierrez said, "Somebody will hear of this and believe. Some others will say it is all a crock. What I believe is Armando is somebody's angel."

In the painting, Armando is star dust in the hands of God.

The two women hugged an walked out into the cold."