



HELLO, I LOVE YOU

TED KLUCK



ADVENTURES IN  
ADOPTIVE FATHERHOOD

**MOODY PUBLISHERS**

CHICAGO

© 2010 BY  
TED A. KLUCK

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*®, niv®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked esv are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Copyright © 2000, 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates, Inc.

Edited by Elizabeth Cody Newenhuyse  
Cover design and Image: Studio Gearbox  
Interior design: Smartt Guys Design

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kluck, Ted.

Hello, I love you : adventures in adoptive fatherhood / Ted Kluck.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8024-5835-3

1. Adoption. 2. Fatherhood. 3. Kluck, Ted. I. Title.

HV875.K593 2010

362.734--dc22

2010002317

This book is printed on acid free recycled paper containing 30% PCW (Post Consumer Waste) and manufactured in the United States of America by Bethany Press.



We hope you enjoy this book from Moody Publishers. Our goal is to provide high-quality, thought-provoking books and products that connect truth to your real needs and challenges. For more information on other books and products written and produced from a biblical perspective, go to [www.moodypublishers.com](http://www.moodypublishers.com) or write to:

Moody Publishers  
820 N. LaSalle Boulevard  
Chicago, IL 60610

1 3 5 7 9 1 0 8 6 4 2

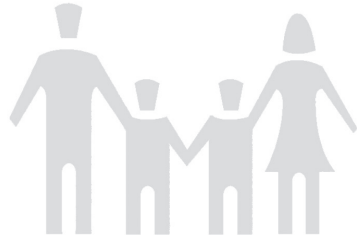
Printed in the United States of America

# CONTENTS

Introduction	9
<b>PART 1—TRISTAN</b>	
1. The Price of Love	15
2. Leaving, on a Jet Plane, Not Knowing When We'll Be Back Again	33
3. Living on a Prayer	67
4. When I See You Smile	83
<b>PART 2—DIMA</b>	
1. Hit with a Few Shells, but We Don't Walk with a Limp: Infertility	95
2. Needle in the Hay: A False Alarm, a Fistfight, and a Church Meeting	109
3. Is There Life on Mars? (Traveling, Again)	117
4. Please, Give Me a Second Grace: Dima	129
5. My Own Personal El Guapo: On Complaining and Numbers 11	137
6. Exile on Zhilian'ska Street	151
7. I Was Made for Loving You Baby, You Were Made for Loving Me	165
Epilogue	177
Acknowledgments	181

PART 1

Tristan





My heart was going boom boom boom;

Son, he said, grab your things, I've come to take you home.

— Peter Gabriel, *Solsbury Hill*

# CHAPTER 1: THE PRICE OF LOVE

## **December 2003. Simferopol, Ukraine**

I knew from the knock on the door that this wasn't an old babushka dropping by to trade borscht recipes. It wasn't a knock, really, but more of a pound. I looked out the peephole and found three large, angry Ukrainian men in full riot gear, with their guns trained on my forehead.

My options weren't great. Pretend I'm not here (bad, they'll come in anyway and probably break Milla and Sascha's door down in the process), or open the door and begin pleading in my six-word Russian vocabulary for them to please spare the lives of a cute, young American girl and her idiot husband who couldn't manage to properly program the old-fashioned security system that protects this flat which is in a building with about five hundred flats exactly like it.

Before Milla (a kind, gracious grandmotherly type who speaks

about six words of English but kisses me on the cheek a lot) left for the orphanage where she is a physician, she explained how to program the system that would protect us and our suitcases full of cash and American snacks. The explanation involved a lot of numbers and a sequence that included locking and unlocking the deadbolt. I asked a few follow-up questions. I thought I knew what I was doing. I nodded and smiled a lot, and then swallowed hard before entering the numbers on the keypad. And this isn't the type of space-age keypad you see in movies or even American security-system commercials where well-dressed middle-aged white women punch in numbers before feeling secure at night. This is an old-school keypad.

The pounding at the door interrupted a morning composed of waiting for Simferopol to turn on the water (this, after several mornings of me standing naked in a cold bathroom before realizing that the city turns off the water for a while every morning), watching soccer on "Euro-Sport" (note: I hate soccer), and eating a Snickers for breakfast with a bottle of Coke, Sprite, or Fanta (the only three choices here). All of this while waiting for the best part of our day—the afternoon ride in the backseat of a tiny Moskvich, through old town and the open-air markets to the orphanage, to see Tristan, our soon-to-be son.

Just before the cops burst through the open door I encourage Kristin to stay seated in our bedroom—I don't want her to see her husband, in his pajama bottoms and Indiana University sweat-shirt, take a hollow-point in the ear hole. I grab my passport and put my hands in the air, just like in the movies. Do I feel lucky, punk? Do reformers feel lucky or just foreordained? I pray for God's protection for my wife and, honestly, for me. These cops

look mean (see: crewcuts) and maladjusted. I didn't figure that my first opportunity to see a machine gun in person would involve one being pointed at my forehead. And in Eastern Europe the cops don't come roaring up to the building in multiple police cruisers with sirens blaring, rather, they drive one little compact and pile into it, clown style.

*Struggling writer Ted Kluck, 27, dies unexpectedly in a Ukrainian apartment, holding a half-eaten candy bar and a bottle of Coke Light. He is best known for a few pieces of snarky sports-satire that ran on ESPN.com and were forgotten shortly after they were published. Kluck is survived by his lovely wife, who will soon be remarrying a man who is funnier, more spiritual, and a better writer, and who also knows how to do things like program a security system.*

After opening the front door, I gesture at the security system and eventually the cops put their guns down. Their hollering in Russian (really scary) eventually turns to muttering in Russian (less scary), as they pad through the little apartment and rifle through our suitcases a little bit. I'm convinced that what's left of our cash is a goner. These goons will be eating steak tonight on what was supposed to cover a round of medicine at the orphanage and our plane tickets home. We're in big trouble.

In this situation John McClane (the Bruce Willis character in *Die Hard*) would open up a floorboard and crawl into some duct-work where he would find a nine-millimeter and a cigarette lighter taped to the inside of the air shaft. He would then creatively whack the three goons and rifle through their backpacks where he would find enough money to fund another sibling group

adoption. Unfortunately I'm not John McClane, and this is very, very real life. I would probably burn myself with the lighter and then get stuck crawling (awkwardly) in the dirty air shaft (*struggling writer, 27, dies in air shaft*). I settle on the John Piper approach and just pray like there's no tomorrow, which there may actually not be.

*Dear Tristan,*

*I almost became a 50 Cent lyric this afternoon—"Wear a vest without a gat, you's a target, Jack."*

*The Ukrainian cops will tell this story down at the precinct later this afternoon, or whatever they call the precinct here. The story will be peppered with witty one-liners, just like in cop shows. Radios will crackle. Backup will be called for.*

*Love,*

*Dad*

We show them our adoption papers and finally, after some additional muttering, they leave our money alone and take their huge clunky boots, Kevlar vests, and assault rifles out of the flat. Pretty soon it's quiet again in the apartment and the only sound we hear is our own breathing and the sound of kids playing soccer on the dirt patch in front of the building. These are the kids who don't need an Astroturf field in a "Sports Complex" to be good at soccer, and their "soccer moms" are sitting in kiosks selling cigarettes or brooms to make ends meet. We thank God for our lives, the fact that the water is running and warm in the bathroom, and that we will get to see Tristan later in the afternoon.

When I walk out of the building to meet our driver for the trip to the orphanage, I put my hands behind my head like a felon. Sasha (different Sasha) thinks this is hilarious. This Sasha is about fifty years old but huge, with fists the size of hams. He looks like a former Russian shot-putter who could take a man apart in a fistfight in about thirty seconds. Ha ha. Gold teeth. He laughs out loud.

I always knock 'em dead here. Thank you, and good night. You've been a great audience.



### **ABOUT A YEAR AND A HALF BEFORE THE GUN INCIDENT**

*Dear Tristan,*

*You were conceived at a minor-league hockey game. Not exactly, but you know what I mean.*

*It was a year and a half ago about this time and your mother and I—man, that sounds so adult—went to Port Huron, Michigan, for a weekend to “sort some things out,” because that’s what college-educated people who have been married for several years call making life decisions. We sort things out.*

*More accurately, though, the idea for you was conceived about five years ago on a cold night in Lithuania. We visited an orphanage there that was a lot like yours. The kids were beautiful and wanted so badly to be loved. We loved them, for a night, and then we got into a van and cried. It hurt like crazy. We wanted to help but didn't know how.*

*So naturally, when I didn't know what to do about kids and growing our family, I took Mom to a minor-league*

*hockey game—complete with the Zamboni, violence, and organ music. Your old man is a hopeless romantic.*

*The Port Huron Beacons were playing the Missouri River Otters, and Wayne Gretzky's kid brother Brent was playing out the end of his career with the Beacons. I'll tell you more about Gretzky later, when you get a little bit older. The arena was an ugly old concrete bunker in downtown Port Huron—it's the kind of place that gets the moniker "war memorial arena" or something like that. Stadiums always make me think of my dad. That night I was thinking of being a dad.*

*When you're thinking about being a father you start noticing things. You notice little kids at ballparks with their dads and—whereas before you didn't notice or care—now it almost brings you to tears for some reason.*

*After the game we went to our little hotel room and prayed. We prayed for you and about you, and then, finally, we decided to come get you.*

*Love, Dad*

We've risked life and limb, trekking through the Michigan-in-February snow/sleet and the Detroit suburbs to get here. A word about the Detroit suburbs. They're horrible. In Chicago they at least dapple the outsides of the buildings in places like Oak Brook, Plainfield, and Wheaton with faux brick, faux awnings, and faux shingles. In Detroit it's just miles and miles of concrete, traffic, and neon.

But there's only so much you can get from a brochure and an informational mailing, so we skid the little Toyota Echo (which

seems to weigh about twenty-six pounds, without us in it) in front of a low-slung brick building in Madison Heights. As I mentioned before, it's winter in Michigan so it got dark at about 4:58 p.m., creating an almost Scandinavian level of sun-deprivation. In the Northeast they call it SAD—Seasonal Affective Disorder. In the upper Midwest they call it “people getting really cranky.” I've already cussed out a number of metro-Detroiters on the highway, which does little to calm my wife down. She and I deal with stress differently. She gets quiet and contemplative, while I invoke my inner dockworker and say things I regret later.

The inside of the building does little to put us at ease. There is the usual lonely, sad, “we had to get these for the meeting” plate of untouched cookies and sweaty cheese blocks. We enter a white-walled room to find lots of other awkward couples just like us. They are pretending to look through materials, waiting for the meeting to start. Normally, my wife and I would be nervous-talk-at this point, but the place is stone silent.

Finally a woman representing Bethany Christian Services approaches. As this is a Christian meeting I expect a little bit of get-to-know-you banter. Perhaps an icebreaker à la church camp (“*My name is Ted and something you may not know about me is that I broke my collarbone playing semipro football with ex-convicts*”). There is none. Soon she is talking us through a document laying out the costs and wait times associated with adopting from different countries. The numbers are big. Real big. And the wait times are long. She is humorless, and I soon realize this is one of those “weed out the pretenders” meetings. The one where you go home feeling overwhelmed, and if you mail back the response card in a couple of days they'll know you are really serious.

We're in the somewhat unique position of choosing to adopt our first child because we felt called (read: wanted) to adopt, as opposed to being infertile (more on this little hubristic flourish later—it would come back to bite us). These are the kinds of decisions a couple makes when they are young, idealistic, and don't have a drop of analytical sense between them (we both majored in communications and neither of us can balance a checkbook).

We visited an orphanage back in the late 1990s, when we were serving a one-year missions stint in Lithuania. These are the kinds of short-term missions “experiences” that young Christians often have postcollege. It's a “find yourself” type of deal. A nice, experienced missions family takes you under their wing while you struggle with theology and free will versus God's sovereignty (and graduate school versus dad's company versus mission work), and say things like “I'm not sure what God wants me to do with my life” and they say things like “I know what you mean . . . let's take a taxi to the McDonald's in Vilnius and eat six Big Macs, and then go home and watch American DVDs.” You write a monthly prayer letter about all that you're learning and all the cool cathedrals, old-world European cities, and historic landmarks you're seeing which, I'm sure, is really annoying to all of the good, hardworking people who are supporting you but who have never been to Europe.

There was one thing, though, that really blew my mind about Vilnius: the orphanages full of beautiful, needy kids. When a country's economy is in the toilet, and joblessness and hopelessness are rampant (see: Michigan, currently), people don't necessarily stop having kids. Hence these orphanages were seemingly on every street corner and were all varying degrees of horrible. We piled in a van one night and went to one of these places to play

American games, sing American songs, and bring American food to the kids. I was nervous beforehand. I didn't want to feel sad, but I knew I would. It's sort of like trying to get into the mood to watch *Schindler's List*—you know it's going to be good for you, but you just don't want to.

The kids there were so open, so sweet, and so eager for our attention. It was as if this one little evening out of our entire long, affluent lives was the greatest thing anyone had ever done for them. There were children there of all ages—little babies in cribs, toddlers, grade school-age kids, and even teenagers. There were two in particular—a girl around fourteen or fifteen, and a baby who captured our hearts. But there was nothing we could do, really. The girl begged us in her broken English to adopt her. We gave her our hats, bracelets, and necklaces and vowed to call and visit again.

We went home to our chilly Vilnius flat that night—exhausted and high from the excitement of spending an evening playing and being surrounded by an eager group of adoring children—and bawled our eyes out. We had no idea on earth what to do when confronted with needs on such a large scale. We were young (early twenties), naïve, and idealistic, and wanted to save each and every one of those children but were acutely aware that we had just abandoned them again.

So we prayed, and vowed—like people in their early twenties always vow—that we would Do Something about the hundreds, thousands, of children in Eastern European orphanages. We had no idea what we would do, but the idea was there. And, for the record, we never made it back to the orphanage.



By the summer of 2002 we had been married for six years and needed an answer to the “when are you going to have kids” question that was increasing in both frequency and intensity. It’s amazing that people who may be afraid to discuss religion or politics are perfectly comfortable asking you about your reproductive plans and habits.

We had been thinking about kids a lot. Among our biggest concerns about parenthood was our ability to be good parents—you know, unselfish, responsible, financially sound and all of the other nebulous qualities we always associated with mature older people. Whenever we thought about kids we thought about adoption. It just made so much sense on a practical level, a spiritual level, and an emotional level.

As we talked and prayed about it more and more, we fell in love with the idea and felt total peace about it. We felt that if we could only have a child one way—birth or adoption—that we would be missing out on something if we chose not to adopt. And that summer—while we were “up North” swimming and praying and watching hockey, our future son was born on August 4 in Simferopol, Ukraine.

## HOME STUDY

We live in an old house (1930s) in a ramshackle, blue-collar neighborhood in Lansing—proper. The neighborhood is run down in that while one house might feature a nicely manicured garden in which a kind elderly woman putters each afternoon, the next house might have a ’79 Cadillac up on blocks in the front yard and several guys who look like they just stepped out of a Snoop Dogg video standing around drinking Boone’s Farm out of paper bags.

For the record, it seems to have more of the latter. And our house is neither of these.

We bought the place when we were in our “incarnational-living/reach-out-to-the-inner-city” phase, a phase which lasted roughly a night until I realized I really liked the quiet. I missed the neighborhood I grew up in, where you left the doors unlocked fifty-one weeks of the year and only locked up when the County Fair and its “carnies” came to town. I feel like most young, white evangelicals go through this phase with varying degrees of success and sincerity. Call it white guilt or whatever. For us, it didn’t take. It should also be noted that this house was all we could afford at the time and turned out to be, in spite of its shortcomings, something of a miracle. We bought it from some church acquaintances, and used the profit from our old place to finance the first half of the adoption.

Kristin has lit scented candles and tried to make the little dwelling as appealing and responsible-looking as possible for our home-study visit. We’ve both even gone to great lengths to put on cool-but-not-too-cool outfits. Yes, we’re trying too hard. The home study is the step in the adoption process where the potential adoptive family gets a visit from the adoption agency in which the agency assesses the house and gets to know the prospective parents. Our bachelor’s degrees in communication arts have been good for very little up to this point, but we’re confident in our ability to put on a top-notch conversational performance for Jennifer. The house, however, is another story. We just hope our next-door neighbor doesn’t pick tonight to get drunk and relieve himself off the back porch, as he has been known to do on occasion.

Kristin started the information-gathering process in earnest

when we got back from our hockey/deciding-to-become-parents weekend. Meanwhile, Bethany Christian Services checked up on everything—our finances, our marriage, our childhoods, family relationships, job history, medical history, criminal record . . . it was exhaustive. We even got to take a trip down to the Office of Immigration in Detroit to be fingerprinted by the FBI in the kind of drab, depressing government building that makes even the grittiest parts of Eastern Europe look airy and inviting by comparison. We took a number and waited in plastic chairs for a while, and were shown a creepy-but-cool immigration documentary about the history of Ellis Island.

It should be added here that having the wrong caseworker can make or break a home study. Thankfully, we have the right caseworker—a young woman named Jennifer who doesn't seem to bat an eye at our ghetto neighborhood (relief). She takes a walk through the house and for the first time I see the tiny bedrooms, bright colors (when you live in a dark gray neighborhood it's important to have some color in your life), and surroundings through the eyes of another. I see the effort Kristin put into making this nondescript house in a nondescript blue-collar neighborhood a home, and it makes me proud. And I look forward to playing catch in the backyard and wrestling on the living room floor with our own child.



It strikes me that in our neighborhood people are conceiving all the time. Fathers are impregnating and leaving. Young girls are making bad choices or, sadly, may not have choices in the matter. There are just lots of babies being made, and lots of people be-

coming “parents” without much foresight or “accidentally,” so it seems odd that we should have such a rigorous application process to become parents ourselves, especially when there are so many children in need.

Which also speaks to the “why are you going halfway around the world and spending tens of thousands (more on that later) of dollars to adopt when there are a bunch of needy kids right in your neighborhood” question. It’s a question we got from our parents, who rightfully were concerned about the price tag, but also about the prospects of us having to travel internationally again. They, understandably, didn’t grow up in a generation where Christian kids all seem to have been on missions trips to Venezuela, Spring Break in Panama City, Bosnia, and South Africa all before getting their driver’s licenses. Times have changed with regard to international travel and Christians, for better or worse. Evangelical parents now seem to spend a lot of time just trading fundraising letters and \$200 contributions to their kids’ mission experiences.

I’d like to say we spent many nights in prayer about this issue but, in reality, we prayed about it a few times and (hopefully) trusted the Lord to direct our feelings on the issue. And our feelings are that though there are many needy children in the Potter Park neighborhood in Lansing, we didn’t necessarily want to be running into their biological mothers at Meijer on Saturday mornings (see: open adoptions). And we’d had friends who had been burned by the “get summoned to the hospital only to learn that after a rigorous evaluation process the seventeen-year-old birth mother has decided to keep her child” scenario, which sounds like a nightmare. Granted, some are called to this type of adoption, and we admire them. The biggest factor, though, was that we’d been to

Eastern Europe, and been told that the kids who weren't adopted usually became small-time criminals (boys) or prostitutes (girls) or both when they were released from the orphanage at age eighteen. The kids were usually deposited at the orphanages shortly after their birth but sometimes their parent would drop them off in early childhood, promising to come back and get them when they had a little bit more money, and never return.



After our first experience at the Bethany introductory meeting, we were a little worried about Jennifer. The adoption process is emotionally draining as it is, and I wasn't sure we could handle another "stern-taskmaster" type of night. Thankfully she is warm but businesslike, thorough and helpful, and we loved our sessions with her. God was so graciously evident in matching us with her.

We gave her the keys to our financial history, our personal lives, and our friends, several of whom kindly wrote "the Klucks will be great parents" letters at Bethany's request. And then we waited.

## THE BANK

I feel like Henry Hill in *Goodfellas*. I wonder if I can have the cash placed in an empty briefcase, or a brown paper bag as I had seen done in so many gangster movies. I've worn dress pants and a tie because, as I was explaining to my wife that morning, people treat you better when you're wearing dress pants.

After receiving Bethany's stamp of approval on our ability to be parents (relief—thank You, Lord) we were informed that we were to withdraw \$20,000 in cash and then wait for a call from Dr. Dubrovsky—a Russian medical doctor who heads up

Bethany's Ukrainian adoption program on the overseas end. This is about \$19,950 more dollars than I have ever had in my pocket at any given time, and it will be used to fund apartments, cab rides, and meals in Ukraine, in addition to the Ukrainian government's adoption fees.

The majority of the proceeds from the sale of our first house have been spent on home study fees, and Bethany's adoption fees, so we'll have to be approved for a loan in order to walk out of the bank with twenty-large on our person. I walk to the window, nervous, and try to communicate this to a teller. She tells us to wait (again, with the waiting) and soon we are led through a labyrinth of gray cubicles (note: I'm glad I don't work in a place like this) to a woman who will (hopefully) get us closer to the cash.

We've come armed with about fifty pounds of paperwork explaining in detail each aspect of the adoption and every jot and tittle of our financial history. She clatters away on a keyboard for what seems like forever, while we sit awkwardly and try to look like the charming-but-responsible young couple.

"We can't do it," she says, suddenly. She thanks us for coming and then pauses. This is where we're supposed to get up and graciously exit the building without twenty grand in small bills. I no longer feel like Henry Hill from *Goodfellas*. I now feel like Woody Allen—small, thin, and anxious. Kristin is seething. I can see the steam coming out of her ears, and I can see her lower lip starting to quiver. She is unbelievable at keeping her cool through the day-to-day annoyances of life (traffic, long lines, family issues), whereas it is me who usually flips out several times per day. However, I'd like to think that I've learned to keep my wits about me when the big stuff goes down. I calmly ask the lady to please

double-check and try again. She goes to check with someone else and no doubt do more typing. Kristin is crying.

“Do. Not. Worry. About. Your. Future,” I tell her, invoking my best Jerry Maguire impersonation. “You and I are going to be . . . just fine.” She laughs and wipes away a tear.

*Dear Tris,*

*When your mom and I were dating we used to hang out together long into the night, and into the early hours of morning. Those wee hours—after Letterman and before the first SportsCenter. That’s no-man’s-land baby, no-man’s-land.*

*I would kiss her good-bye at her door and then walk down the middle of the street in the pitch-blackness, with the mist already beginning to settle on the grass and cars. I felt like an old gunslinger. I owned the street. I felt like the world’s greatest lover, and like I’d just won the lottery and not told anyone yet.*

*We could have used the lottery today, as getting you almost stalled at a bank in East Lansing. They mixed up some paperwork. Some ID numbers . . . some codes . . . a keystroke error . . . or whatever. You’ll learn, unfortunately, that adult life is often a series of long lines, identification numbers, and keystroke errors. Moments where you feel like an old gunslinger are few and far between—unless you’re Brett Favre (more on him later).*

*Love,  
Dad*

“I double-checked and the mistake was on our end,” explains Bank Lady, smiling, her heels *click, click, clicking* out an official beat on the office tile. “You can go up front to the window to get your money.” Kristin’s tears of fear turn to little tears of joy. She’s wrung out. What we don’t realize is that we’ll need to get used to these “near misses” as they will happen often in Europe. Only there we’ll be hungry, tired, and sick.

We sign seventy-five more sheets of paper before walking to the front to collect the bills, which end up coming to us in two small envelopes—decidedly less cinematic and cool than the briefcase or brown paper bag. But we still smile at each other on the way out. We’re going to Ukraine.