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To the many who have cared,

Giovaný came to Only A Child during the second or third year of our maintaining a home. Although only in his mid-teens at the time of his arrival, he had already become a seasoned and savvy product of the street. Giovaný had left his parents' home several years prior, to escape an alcoholic father, who never missed an opportunity to belittle his oldest child. Giovaný was prone to be combative, especially with someone in a position of authority. But he was also outgoing and chatty, and given to analytical thought, especially when we spoke in private.

Giovaný possessed the ability to set and then meet specific goals. He completed 3 years of traditional studies during his tenure at OAC and, in addition, graduated from a yearlong culinary program at a local vocational school. Giovaný found some semblance of peace while working with food.

Shortly after completing the culinary program, Giovaný found work at a downtown restaurant and moved on from our program. We remained in touch. Giovaný also continued to visit his family on occasion, as he had renewed contact with them while living at OAC. He was close with his younger brother and sister, and especially with his mother, but his relationship with his father remained strained, something that came to haunt him. Giovaný became increasingly discouraged and eventually returned to the street, succumbing to his old ways, consuming large amounts of alcohol.

Communication with Giovaný was sporadic. Months passed without word from him and then he'd phone me every few weeks. A year elapsed without contact. I all but gave up hope. Then one morning he came to see me, unannounced. Giovaný looked as if he had been assaulted. The heavy, sour smell of stale alcohol preceded him. He had been on a binge and had been crying.

The previous day, Giovaný had run into a neighbor of his parents on a public bus. She had informed him that his sister had been kidnapped and murdered the month before. It had been a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Giovaný's family had searched for him, but it can be difficult to locate a resident of the street. Giovaný's grief for the death of his sister was compounded by the understanding that he had been unavailable to be with his family at their time of tragic loss.

We spent the morning walking the streets of my neighborhood. Giovaný would grieve then reflect on his life, then grieve and reflect some more. By midday he had calmed and I offered to buy him lunch, as he had not eaten anything since learning of his sister's death. Giovaný asked if he might take his lunch with him, as he wanted to return home to be with his parents and younger brother.

We spoke several times in the coming weeks. Giovaný asserted that he wanted to leave the street once and for all, but I doubted his ability to do so. Giovaný vanished, seeming to confirm my doubts. I became concerned. Finally, he called to say there was someone he wanted me to meet. Shortly

after, Giovany returned to my home, accompanied by a poised and pretty young woman. Her name was Flor, the Spanish word for flower. It's an appropriate name, I thought. It suits her perfectly.

Giovany and Flor had been together for several months and planned to speak with her parents, to ask permission for Giovany to stay at their home. Flor's influence on Giovany was unmistakable. The nervous agitation and quick temper he had often displayed were undetectable. I wished them well. Another long stretch of silence followed before Giovany phoned to say that he was well and living with Flor and her parents. He and Flor had a baby girl named Angie. Giovany had also assumed responsibility for raising Flor's 7-year-old daughter, Wendy. He considered himself Wendy's father and she thought of him as her dad. The following Sunday we met, so that Giovany could introduce me to his family. Giovany had made me proud as never before. He had become a man.

Giovany and Flor had other children and raised their family in an apartment not far from Flor's parents. Flor's sister Lydia, a widowed mother of 6 children, also lived nearby. Giovany and Flor came to see me from time to time, often bringing one or two of their children and, on occasion, all of them. They were, by most standards and appearances, a happy family. Then without warning, an unrelenting series of heartbreaks and tragedies changed Giovany's life.

After a battle with chronic illness, Giovany's mother passed away. Throughout Giovany's years of struggle, she had never given up on him. Giovany and I met on the afternoon of the wake. He came to me devastated and in search of consolation. Sadly, Giovany would return distraught the following day. His father had turned on him at the funeral, accusing Giovany of causing his mother's death, for the worry he had caused her. I comforted Giovany as best I could. I asserted that his father's accusation was a misguided attempt to lay blame, while deflecting his own guilt for the grief that his continued battle with addiction had caused his recently deceased wife. Giovany had overcome such struggles. His father had not. Early in the evening, Giovany left my company, somewhat at peace.

Not a year later, Giovany's sister-in-law Lydia was diagnosed with Lupus Disease. Attempts to control the spread of the illness proved ineffective and Lydia's doctor recommended surgery to alleviate her suffering. But for reasons which were never made clear, the operation did not proceed as planned and Lydia passed away in hospital, leaving behind 6 orphaned children.

A decision was made to unite the family under one roof. Giovany and Flor returned to live with Flor's then widowed mother. Together they would raise their and Lydia's children. Their family totaled 14. Despite the daunting challenge faced, they managed to adjust remarkably well and, in the face of great adversity, found some measure of happiness. Giovany and I remained in touch.

Therefore, when Giovany called one morning, I had no reason to assume anything was amiss. I was mistaken. His daughter Wendy had been kidnapped and was being held for ransom. The situation had its beginnings 12 months prior, when neighborhood extortionists had targeted Giovany and his family. They had relocated, far enough away to escape danger. On the day she was kidnapped, Wendy had participated in a church run excursion. The destination, another church, was located in the neighborhood they had fled the year before. Wendy had left the church to make a purchase at a nearby store. While in route, Wendy was recognized by members of the ring and abducted.

There were two available options. Pay the ransom or go to the police. Each response was wrought with complications. Kidnappers, by nature, are not to be trusted and often times renege on their original terms. Subsequent demands for payment are made and even then, the outcome is often tragic. Involving the police is nearly as uncertain, as it is widely suspected that corrupt members of the department are complicit with no end of unsavory types.

After endless consideration, the decision was made to pay the ransom one time, then contact the police should additional demands be forthcoming. Payment was made at 2 pm on the day following the abduction. At 2:08 pm, I received a call from Giovany, to learn that Wendy had been released, shaken but not harmed. With time and the assistance of a caring and skilled psychiatrist, Wendy recovered from her ordeal, admirably so. The abductors were never brought to justice.

Giovany's father's health deteriorated and he passed away. The loss left Giovany conflicted, but he did not grieve. His attendance at the funeral was a gesture of support for his younger brother Josué, who was still living at home, and greatly suffered the loss of both parents in so short a span of time.

Several months later, death returned. Flor left her home late-morning to run an errand. Her 8-year-old son Gabriel accompanied her. Returning home, they were struck by a car speeding recklessly through their neighborhood. The car's driver, who was fleeing a crime he had committed not far away, lost control of the vehicle and jumped the curb precisely where Flor and Gabriel had been walking. Flor managed to shield Gabriel at the last second, likely saving his life. He escaped with a broken arm, despite the fact that he and his mother were hit with great force, and catapulted several yards through the air. Flor succumbed to her many injuries several days later.

Giovany came to see me shortly after Flor's passing. He was inconsolable. There have been few times in my life when I have felt so utterly unable to respond to another's need. I sat with him, mostly silent, and allowed him to grieve as I had seldom previously seen anyone grieve. Even so, an hour later he left to return to his family, feeling he was somewhat able to manage the planning of the wake and funeral, as well as care for his children in their time of unimaginable loss and grief.

Giovany and his mother-in-law remained united in their efforts to raise the 11 children under their care. Giovany had always spoken well of her and continued to do so. His mother-in-law had run a small business with Flor, preparing and selling simple meals from their home. The business had been successful and the mother-in-law continued to run it with the help of Giovany's daughter Wendy, who was then 16 and her cousin, Lydia's oldest daughter Stephanie, then 17.

Once again, the family showed a remarkable ability to adapt in the wake of hardship. Then one day, Giovany's mother-in-law unexpectedly announced that she would be moving out with Lydia's children. A nearby police station had provided a significant number of customers to the family business. Giovany's mother-in-law had become involved with one of the officers and planned to return to her former home to live with him and Lydia's children - in the same neighborhood where Wendy had been kidnapped. Learning of the decision from Giovany, I shook my head and commented, "this will not end well." Unfortunately, my words would prove to be prophetic.

The officer quickly moved out and moved on. Stephanie and her 14-year-old brother became involved with a neighborhood gang, as extortionists. They apparently decided to siphon money from what they collected, a badly misguided decision. Late one night, representatives of the gang entered their home while the family slept, and assassinated Stephanie, her brother and, Giovany's mother-in-law, as well. It's likely she had some understanding of what had been going on. It appears that, given the family's financial struggles, she could not resist the lure of easy money. Lydia's surviving children were placed in a government run orphanage. Giovany continues to see them when he can.

Shortly after, the corona virus changed the world. Several months into the pandemic, Giovany's brother Josué became infected. Not two weeks later he succumbed to the disease, leaving Giovany without family, apart from his children. Josué was only 30 years old.

In the months following Flor's death, Gabriel had struggled with nightmares but they eventually ceased. In late July, Giovany confided that Gabriel had begun saying that he missed his mother and had lost his desire to live. I offered the services of our psychologist, Luis Alfredo. Giovany and his family were set to leave for a several day retreat with their church. At the retreat's end, Gabriel seemed to improve and no longer spoke of not wanting to live. Nevertheless, I continued to offer Luis Alfredo's services, should Giovany deem them necessary.

Giovany and his family occupy a small apartment in a multi-unit building. Tenants come and go with some frequency. Such was the case recently when a neighboring family moved out, disturbing a nest of cockroaches. The cockroaches scattered, some as far as Giovany's apartment. In an attempt to prevent infestation, Giovany purchased a pesticide in crystal form, then disbursed it as instructed. Given its toxic nature, Giovany warned his children of its dangers. Late that night, Gabriel ingested some of the crystals and began to convulse. Qualified representatives of the nearby police station were summoned and quickly responded, once again likely saving Gabriel's life.

Giovany and I met two days later, after it had become clear that Gabriel would survive and recover from the event. He was distraught for not having recognized the danger the crystals posed to Gabriel. I acknowledged the mistake but also encouraged Giovany to not continue to berate himself, for he lives in a constant state of exhaustion resulting from his never-ending efforts to watch over his children as best he can, with little support. Gabriel has been seeing a psychologist appointed by the hospital that treated him at the time of his emergency and, thus far, has responded well.

Throughout nearly two decades of struggle, Giovany repeatedly turned to me in time of need. Years after departing our program, he sought me out when he felt he had no one else to turn to. He came to me to grieve, to seek counsel, in need of compassion, needing to know that someone cared. Thanks to your continued support of this ministry's work, I have never had to turn him away.

May God bless.

*George*

George