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Winter 2021

To the many who have cared,

**Note:** The Giovany who is the subject of this letter differs from the Giovany who was the subject of the previous (fall) letter.

Giovany asked if he might speak with me in private. I sensed immediately that it was a matter of concern. Although it was a Sunday night after dinner, I suggested we talk in the living room. To my surprise we found the room empty. We entered unnoticed and I closed the door behind us.

Giovany's mother had been ill. She had begun to experience a consistent pain in her breast and her family feared it might be cancer. When we spoke that night in mid-August, Giovany's father and a sister had already spent several weeks assisting his mother as she traveled from one public health facility to another, meeting with different doctors and medical technicians who performed an endless variety of tests in search of a diagnosis. Extensive travel was required, including two trips to a Guatemala City hospital specializing in cancer treatment, INCAN. Still, a diagnosis remained elusive.

Giovany and his family are from Nebaj, located in the Quiche region of Guatemala. If all goes well, one can expect a journey to the city to take 8 to 9 hours. Giovany's family was disheartened and exhausted by a process that had left them running in circles, uncertain as how to move it forward. This is often the case when trying to navigate the public healthcare system in present day Guatemala.

Giovany asked to take a temporary leave from Only A Child, so that he might assist his family in their effort to obtain a diagnosis for his mother. He felt that his years of study at university level might prove effective in managing a healthcare system that can often be disorganized and confusing. I agreed and Giovany returned to his family shortly after.

Giovany's involvement proved to be effective almost immediately, as their efforts became more focused and productive. A diagnosis was finally forthcoming and an operation for a single mastectomy was scheduled for the first week in September.

As is standard procedure, on the eve of her operation, Giovany's mother was tested for the coronavirus. The results came back positive. In the early hours of the following morning, Giovany, his mother and his sister returned to Nebaj to begin 15 days of quarantine. Giovany's father, who had been away, went to stay with his brother's family. Giovany and his sister were tested the following day and Giovany also responded positive. His sister did not. Nevertheless, the three of them settled into the family home, Giovany's sister to care for her mother and brother as needed in the days to come. Both Giovany and his mother had previously received the first dose of the *Moderna* vaccine and consequently, neither of them would ultimately experience severe virus-related symptoms.

Upon completing the required quarantine, Giovany and his mother were retested and the results came back negative. But the tests, administered in Nebaj, were of the less reliable LFT variety and, after returning to the city, Giovany's mother was once again given the PCR test at INCAN on the eve of her rescheduled surgery. The result was positive (soon after, a PCR test would declare Giovany to be negative). Fifteen days of additional quarantine in Nebaj were required and, at the end of that time, Giovany's mother was finally cleared for surgery.

Shortly before the operation which had been scheduled for early-September, Giovany confided in me that his mother had no adequate place to rest and recover post-surgery. The long and demanding journey to Nebaj, much of it through mountainous terrain, was not an option immediately following so invasive an operation. Another of his sisters shares a room with a cousin in Guatemala City, but it is modest and would not afford his mother the privacy and solitude needed to properly rest and heal.

I often considered the situation after speaking with Giovany. One morning, alone in my apartment, immersed in prayer and the reading of daily devotions, it occurred to me that our shelter's logistics at that time allowed us to offer Giovany the chance to return to his former room and share it with his mother. At once I felt I had been given a solution from a reliable if not infallible Source.

Later that day I shared my thoughts with our shelter's house parents, Rigoberto and Sandra. I had already spoken with them of Giovany's dilemma. Amazed, they told me they had discussed the situation the night before and reached the same conclusion. I then spoke with our psychologist, Luis Alfredo, who also concurred that it seemed a wonderful solution to the problem.

A single mastectomy was performed on Friday, October 8<sup>th</sup>. On Sunday, October 10<sup>th</sup>, Giovany and his mother came to stay at our home. The room they occupied is large and bright, and offers separate access to our home's second floor bathroom. The main access from a common hallway was locked from the inside, affording Giovany and his mother a bathroom of their own. All of our home's other residents would share the one other bathroom on the first floor and manage the resulting inconvenience, so as to not unnecessarily disturb Giovany's mother.

Giovany's mother would ultimately stay with us for 2 weeks. We saw little of her throughout that time, which she mostly spent quietly resting in her room. Meals which were specially prepared by Sandra and Giovany, were taken in private. Several days into her recovery, Giovany's mother began to take walks in the surrounding neighborhood with her son. I made it a point to daily check in with our guest and briefly speak with her, to see how she was managing. Ever grateful, there was never a hint or a suggestion that anything was amiss. Whenever able, Giovany's mother would stand to greet me out of respect despite the discomfort it caused her. I was deeply moved.

Toward the end of his mother's stay, Giovany informed me that he planned to permanently leave the program at the time of his mother's departure. It seems likely his mother would need further treatment in the months to come. Giovany would like to be involved in the process, as he understands there is no guarantee his mother will survive the cancer. He had been a resident of our program for nearly 6 years, and during that time, has seen little of his family. Giovany is very close to his mother and concluded that, should the cancer ultimately prove to be fatal, he wishes to spend whatever

remaining time she may have in her company. Thus far, he has completed 3 years towards the acquisition of an undergraduate degree. He plans to continue with his education and one day earn that degree in his chosen field of study, accounting. Virtual classes will allow him to follow through on his plan, at last in the near future.

I have previously stated that it is my faith which not only compelled me to begin this ministry more than a quarter century ago, but also motivates me to continue with its work to this day. I am not, by nature, comfortable preaching to others, not verbally. But that is not to say that I do not feel called to share my faith. I much prefer to spread the gospel through the living of my life, by emulating as best I can, the life of Jesus as recounted in the Bible. It is, for me, the more natural fit.

Giovany's mother's illness challenged all of us at Only A Child to put our faith into action in an out-of-the-ordinary way. Those of us living within this ministry remain much blessed. We were given an opportunity to pass some of those blessings on to another in need of them. I was determined that we would not squander the opportunity to do so.

There is any number of lessons to be learned from witnessing while contributing to such an encounter. No doubt, everyone in our home resonated more to some of the lessons and less to others. Upon reaching the decision to welcome Giovany's mother into our home, I was well aware that by doing so, I would provide our young men with a fine example of Christian charity. I firmly believe that, long after our residents move on from Only A Child, they will not only recall the kindness we showed our recent guest, they will also learn from and emulate it when facing situations in which another turns to them for assistance in ways they can provide.

Another Christmas season is at hand. For many, myself included, the present-day season lacks the purity of bygone years, tainted by an insatiable appetite to profit from what remains, at heart, a Holy day of the highest order. 'Black Friday' has given way to 'Black November', at least it has in Guatemala. How long before late-October will similarly be tainted 'black'?

Fortunately, the finer aspects of the season are still on display: the kindness, the generosity of spirit, the goodwill towards men. This year, Only A Child was called on to embrace these qualities ahead of schedule, while at the same time, displaying pre-holiday Christmas spirit. As is the case any time of year, through such actions, we are reminded of what matters most in this life.

Thank you for seeing us through another year, our 27<sup>th</sup>! In the midst of continuing uncertainty and hardship, you have resisted the temptation to succumb to fear. You have continued to reach out to this ministry, to care about the well-being of others, despite facing many concerns of your own.

Merry Christmas. Happy Hanukkah. May God bless.

*George*

George