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To the many who have cared,

It had been awhile since Manuel showed up at our door, hungry, and in want of something to eat. So much time had passed in fact, that I wondered if something had happened to him. Then without warning, there he was, ringing our doorbell, alarmingly thin, asking to speak in private.

I expected that Manuel had come seeking another chance, in search of shelter and purpose. Technically we were full, but could manage to find room for Manuel by squeezing him into our largest bedroom. Even so, I hesitated in my decision. Manuel had already squandered several opportunities with us, ultimately unable to resist the urge to return to the streets and the readily available drugs they offered.

Manuel had never been difficult. To the contrary, his presence and his company were almost always enjoyable. In that regard, I felt inclined to welcome him back, reasoning as I usually do in such situations, *God never turns us away when we come to Him, repentant for the mistakes we have made, looking to undo them.* The primary concern was logistical. There wasn't sufficient work in our carpentry shop to justify bringing in another pair of hands. Falling back on a tried and true practice, I turned to the Source of all wisdom and asked for a sign to guide me.

A response is usually forthcoming, but nothing returned to me, leaving me to believe that the absence of a response was the sign I had been awaiting. I concluded that Manuel had exhausted his last chance, at least in regard to Only A Child. I had asked him to let me consider his request for a couple of days. He had respected my wishes and waited patiently before contacting me on a Sunday afternoon. I gave him my decision at that time, but not without reservation. Manuel seemed not only disappointed, but also somewhat surprised.

From time to time, I find the need to take a breather from modern technology. Such was the case in early-September, when I decided to give myself an Internet free weekend. My break coincided with the couple of days I took to consider Manuel's request. Sunday evening before dinner, I felt a sudden urge to return to my e-mail to see if anything required my attention. I have since concluded that the urge most likely had been planted by a source not my own.

In late August, I had received an unexpected call from a supporter of our work. George had come to Guatemala with a team of surgeons many years before, to donate their skills to impoverished people in need of medical care. He had visited our carpentry shop while here. George planned to return to Guatemala in late September and wanted to visit with us once again. Unfortunately, I was scheduled to be in Boston at that time, leaving George stranded across town, lacking the means to safely travel to our shop. George decided to forego his visit.

Not to be deterred, George reached out to me once more soon after, via the Internet. He desired to help us by selling our cedar boxes to the other surgeons accompanying him to Guatemala. Pleased, I responded to his email, while also sending him photos of our most popular styles. I then turned my attention to the seemingly never ending list of things requiring my attention.

A week later, on the Sunday night when I returned to my email, I found a message from George containing a generous order for our boxes. George's email was ultimately the sign I had been waiting for and came to me at nearly the same time I had spoken with Manuel and denied his request. I had jumped the gun. I had been mistaken. There was now sufficient work to justify Manuel's return. Monday morning I met with him in the street, to personally tell him of my change of heart. Later that day, Manuel moved in.

My Saturday morning routine is one shared by many others, wandering the aisles of a local supermarket in search of needed groceries. On a Saturday morning in early October I dropped off my purchases just before eleven, per usual, then ran another quick errand. Upon returning home, I found a woman kneeling before our front door, wailing in prayer. "What is going on?" I wondered. "Who can she possibly be?"

I exited my car and cautiously approached her. Upon seeing me, she leapt to her feet while crying out, "Mr. George, Mr. George." I did not recognize her. "I'm Manuel's mother. Manuel, I'm his mother. I came to visit him before." And she had, several years earlier. I remembered her visit, but not her face. She had aged. Manuel's mother rushed to my side, her hands still clasped, as if in prayer. "They said that someone has killed Manuel. I've been looking for him for 5 weeks, but haven't found him. I'm afraid he's dead. Do you know where he is? Have you seen him?"

"Yes," I assured her. "He's living with us. I've just come from our carpentry shop. He's there now, working." Manuel's mother struggled to shake the feeling of dread that had tormented her for more than a month. Disoriented, she pleaded with me to give her the news she had braced herself to receive, "Is he dead, is he dead?" I took her by the arms and stared into her eyes, "He's alive. I spoke with him 10 minutes ago. No one has killed him." "Oh thank God, thank God. I thought he was dead. I feared he was dead."

I called Manuel so that his mother could hear his voice and cease to doubt he was alive. I instructed him to return home, then invited his mother to come inside and await his arrival. She had not eaten, and I asked our cook Betty to prepare her breakfast. At my urging, Manuel's mother made herself comfortable at our dining room table. I took a seat by her side. She had nearly finished her meal when the doorbell rang. I smiled at her cautiously and said, "That's likely Manuel." Manuel's mother froze and, to my surprise, did not follow me to the door.

Manuel said nothing upon entering the dining room. His mother stared at him briefly, motionless. Then in a shot, she was up and out of the chair and clear across our substantial dining room. A tiny woman, Manuel's mother wrapped her arms around her son, repeatedly calling out his name before telling him of her anguish, sobbing all the while. I entered the

kitchen to give them privacy. Moments later, overcome with emotion, Manuel's mother collapsed in her sons arms. It would take us several minutes to revive her.

Manuel and his mother retired to the living room where she rested until lunch. Most of Manuel's companions had returned home and joined us at the table. We lingered after the meal, listening to Manuel's mother tell us of her ordeal in greater detail. I've found it difficult to forget her story.

It was a neighbor who had told her that Manuel had been killed in a shootout at a nearby gas station. The neighbor thought he had recognized Manuel as being one of the four victims. It can be difficult to locate a resident of the street. Manuel's mother had searched all of his known hang outs for word of him, but learned nothing. She had even visited the Guatemala City morgue and looked at, as she put it, far too many corpses. I was horrified to think how wrenching it must have been for her to suffer through the revealing of one dead body after another, each time dreading it would be her son.

In the midst of her search for her son, Manuel's mother had sought the counsel and solace of her parish priest. She had requested also, that he and the church's congregation pray for Manuel, specifically that someone had taken him in and removed him from the many dangers of life in the street. She had asked, in essence, for prayers that he was alive and well. The prayers went out in early-September, when Manuel had shown up at our door; when I had considered his fate; when George had taken the trouble to show photos of our boxes to his fellow surgeons. I asked Manuel's mother to tell her priest that his prayers and the prayers of his congregation had not been in vain. God had heard them and responded. Only A Child was the agent through which He responded. God had compelled me to welcome Manuel back.

Two months have passed since Manuel came to us, hoping to rebuild his life. It is not sufficient time to confidently state that his stay with Only A Child will be a lengthy and successful one. His history is a liability. But I can comfortably affirm that he has returned a more capable person. His good nature is still intact, but has been complimented with a level of maturity that is new for him. He takes life, both in the personal and general sense, more seriously. His vision for the future is measured in years rather than months. Perhaps he has come to understand that both opportunity and time may be running out for him.

Thank you for seeing us through another year, our 23<sup>rd</sup>. Ralph Waldo Emerson once observed, "Souls are not saved in bundles." My experience confirms that this is true. It also tells me that some souls take longer than others to be rescued. They ask of us that we show them greater patience and compassion. Jesus declared on many an occasion that He walked this earth to seek and heal the lost, the suffering, the forgotten souls of His time. It is His example we seek to follow not only in December, but all throughout the year

Merry Christmas. Happy Hanukkah. May God bless.



George