



Fall 2024

To the many who have cared,

"Hello," I said simply, answering the phone. "George, this is Giovany." I knew from the tone of his voice that something was amiss, but I had been forewarned by the hour. People do not generally make phone calls at 4:55 in the morning, barring the need to discuss an urgent matter. Bracing myself for disturbing news, I asked the inevitable question, "Tell me, Giovany. What's the matter?"

Struggling to maintain his composure, Giovany responded, "Maria Louisa is in the hospital. She's in intensive care. She can't breathe without support. She's on oxygen." The word COVID immediately came to mind and I asked, "What does she have?" "She has dengue fever, but it's hemorrhagic." Giovany's response did not catch me by surprise. A new, virulent strain of dengue fever had been plaguing Guatemala for several months, resistant to what little treatment was available to combat the illness. It can be life threatening should it advance to the hemorrhagic stage, especially with the elderly and children under 15 years of age.

Maria Louisa is Giovany's 8 year old niece. He had adopted her and her older sister Lucy. Their mother Lydia, Giovany's sister-in-law, had died from lupus disease related complications, leaving them and their four siblings orphaned. Not long before their mother's passing, their father had also died, having been murdered on a public bus. Despite having several children of their own, Giovany, his wife Flor, along with Giovany's mother-in-law, the children's grandmother, had been raising Maria Louisa, Lucy and their siblings.

Maria Louisa was in need of a specific medication to help keep the disease at bay. Giovany lacked the resources to purchase it and asked for my assistance. I agreed to meet him mid-morning. Giovany had arrived before me and was pacing back and forth in an agitated manner. He saw me as I approached and hastened to meet me. Once again, I found myself asking the inevitable question, "How are you?" "Not well," he responded and with that he began to sob, great heaving sobs which left him gasping for breath. Caught off guard I froze and waited to see how the situation would progress. At last Giovany paused for a moment to speak, "I can't take any more. I couldn't bear it if she should die. I can't take anymore death. I'm worn out by death. No more."

Giovany and his family have suffered from unrelenting tragedy. Roughly a year after Giovany, his wife Flor, and her mother had united to care for Maria Louisa, Lucy and their siblings, Flor was hit by a speeding car that jumped the curb where she had been walking. Several days later, she succumbed to her injuries.

Giovany and his mother-in law continued to make a go of it after Flor's death, raising the 11 children together, but eventually parted ways. Maria Louisa, Lucy and their siblings left to live with their grandmother, in her home, which had been unoccupied for some time. The home was located in a red zone, a barrio, or slum, and overrun with gangs. Maria Louisa and Lucy's oldest sister and brother became involved with one of the gangs, extorting money

from neighborhood businesses. They apparently decided to siphon money from what they had collected, a badly misjudged decision. The situation went horribly amiss one night. Representatives of the gang entered their home and executed not only the brother and sister, but also the grandmother, leaving the four surviving siblings, who had witnessed the murders, orphaned once again. I was at this time that Giovany adopted Maria Louisa. Her brothers and sisters were placed in state run orphanages.

Before I could speak, Giovany resumed sobbing. I remained by his side, quiet and still, until he spoke again. "I don't understand. What more could God want from me? I go to church with my family. I'm involved and assist with church activities. I put money in the collection basket even though I am poor. What more can I do? Why has God abandoned me? Why has he abandoned my family? Haven't we suffered enough?"

Giovany looked at me expectantly, in search of an answer. I felt unprepared to console him but needed to say something. "I don't disagree with you Giovany. You and your family have suffered greatly. I've asked myself 'why' on countless occasions, but I have no answer. I cannot profess to know the mind and the heart of God. But I do know that your faith is strong and has served you well. You'll need it now more than ever to stand by you as you face yet another trial. Pray to God to protect your faith, to strengthen it in your time of need. I will pray the same for you." Giovany nodded in agreement, but remained troubled. We parted soon after. Giovany was anxious to purchase the needed medication and get it to the doctors overseeing Maria Louisa's care.

The following day, a Wednesday, I covered for our house parents on their day off, as I usually do. I waited all day for word from Giovany. He called at last, at 5:35. I anxiously took the call. Giovany seemed calm and I imagined the news would be good, but I was mistaken. "Maria Louisa has died," he said evenly. "She passed away 5 minutes ago." "Good Lord," I cried out before pausing to collect myself. Giovany continued, rescuing me as I too stunned to speak. "She worsened through the day. The doctors said she had inherited the lupus gene from her mother. They said the dengue triggered the lupus (causing it to go from dormant to active), and the poor little thing didn't have the strength to fight against the lupus and the dengue at the same time." "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," was all that I could say, and it seemed hopelessly inadequate.

Giovany and I spoke briefly before setting a time to meet the next day. We arrived at the designated location at exactly the same moment. I marveled at the timing. Giovany came to me as I stepped from my car. "Do you want a hug?" I asked. He nodded in response. Giovany cried in my arms without restraint. Concerned that he might be shamed by so strong a display of grief, I encouraged him, "Go ahead and cry. Take as much time as you need. I'm in no hurry. I'm here." Giovany cried for several minutes, then stopped and looked up at me. "Ya," he said evenly, letting me know that he was now ready to discuss what had happened.

I've found that driving aimlessly, without the need to arrive at a predetermined location at a specific time provides a calming environment. In our case, it also offered privacy. I suggested we take a ride and talk in the car. Giovany liked the idea. I began the conversation, "How are you?" "Not bad, I suppose," Giovany responded, and it seemed to be true. A rundown of what transpired at the hospital after Maria Louisa's passing followed. Giovany had not returned home until after midnight, then had not slept, leaving him exhausted. I had awoken in the early hours of the morning and used the time to consider what I might say to him. The time had been productive and, unlike the previous day, I felt prepared to offer consolation.

"How old was Maria Louisa when you brought her home?" I asked. "She was five." "And she was 8 when she passed away?" "She was 8 1/2." "By all earthly standards, she died too young, Giovany. But God is not overly concerned with the longevity of a life. God is not restricted by time. It is irrelevant to Him." Giovany nodded, encouraging me to go on. "We ultimately have little or no say in terms of how much time we or anyone else will walk this earth. God called on you and entrusted you to watch over Maria Louisa during the final 3 1/2 years of her life. You gave her a good home with her older sister and her cousins. You gave her a family. She was loved. She was happy. You acted nobly. You were her hero. You rescued Maria Louisa from a life of growing up as an orphan in a state run home. God must be so very proud of you." "Do you really think so?" Giovany looked at me earnestly. "I do," I responded sincerely.

We drove for a while in silence. Giovany spoke next, telling me a story. Maria Louisa's mother Lydia had died when she was very young, leaving Maria Louisa with almost no memories of her. Giovany had photos and a brief video of Lydia. Maria Louisa regularly looked at the photos and watched the video, explaining that she did not want to forget her mother. Maria Louisa had been admitted to the hospital on the previous Saturday and soon moved to *Intensive Care*. Giovany was with her and, overcome with worry, had begun to cry. Seeing this, Maria Louisa asked, "Why are you crying uncle? Are you afraid I'm going to die?" Giovany responded, "No sweetheart, I'm just sad that you are so sick." Maria Louisa continued, "well don't worry uncle, I'm not afraid to die. I miss my mommy. I miss her so much. I want to see her. I want to be with my mommy again."

Again we drove in silence, each of us lost in our thoughts. It was my turn to break the silence. "I hesitate to say this for fear of offending you, but it occurred to me that perhaps God heard and granted Maria Louisa's wish." Uneasy, I waited for Giovany's response. It came, a moment later. "It does seem that way, doesn't it?" Another brief pause followed before Giovany spoke again. "She is with her mother again." "I'd like to think so," I said. "Well then," concluded Giovany, "she should be happy." Shortly after, I drove Giovany to a nearby bus stop. He needed to begin the process of making plans for Maria Louisa's wake and funeral.

The day of the funeral, Giovany asked if he might speak to me of another matter. Lucy (and Maria Louisa) had another sister, Genesis. Genesis, who is 14, had been living in an orphanage outside the city. Giovany had brought Genesis home for the wake and funeral. Giovany had been raising 6 children alone, without a wife and family. He had thought of adopting Genesis as well, but feared a 7th child would overwhelm him. With Maria Louisa's passing, he now considered bringing Genesis home permanently. He wanted my opinion on the matter.

I'd been sponsoring Maria Louisa since the time of her adoption, helping Giovany with her living expenses. I believed he was uncertain if I would continue with the sponsorship on Genesis' behalf. I eased his doubts on that matter but had some questions. "Have you spoken with your children?" "Yes of course," he responded. "And what do they say?" I continued. "They like the idea very much," said Giovany. I had one last question. "And Genesis, what does she say?" "She's excited. She says she wants to be with her family." And with that, Giovany eased my concerns. "Well then," I concluded, "I'd consider it for couple of days, and if you have no doubts after that, I'd make arrangements to adopt her." That weekend, with the assistance of a member of his church in possession of a pickup truck, Giovany and Genesis returned to the orphanage, arranged the adoption, packed her things, then headed home.

According to Giovany, Genesis is a sweet, good-natured child. She has adapted easily to her new home and bonded quickly with her family. She's also doing well at her new school, having already made several friends. As for Giovany and his family, they still struggle with Maria Louisa's death at times, but give every appearance of carrying on with their lives remarkably well. I asked Giovany if he felt the arrival of Genesis had facilitated his family's healing. He had no doubt it had. He felt it had helped to fill the void left by Maria Louisa's passing, easing their suffering in the process.

I agreed and tentatively added, "It seems as if Maria Louisa's time in this life had run its course. She returned to her mother as she wished at the appointed time, creating a place for Genesis in your home. The time had come for each of them to move on to the next stage in their lives. The new chapters, which they had begun in tandem, were now unfolding." Giovany looked at me and smiled ruefully and consented, "it does seem that way, doesn't it?"

Giovany and his family have suffered numerous other tragedies. Giovany's sister was kidnapped and murdered many years prior, the victim of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. His brother and only other sibling succumbed to COVID during the first year of the pandemic. His mother, with whom he was very close, died in her late-fifties of diabetes-related complications. His father followed not long after. His oldest daughter, Wendy, was also murdered, after responding to a fraudulent opportunity for employment posted on Facebook. It was not long after Wendy's death that Giovany adopted Maria Louisa's older sister Lucy.

Unchecked violence remains a serious concern in Guatemala. Sadly, Giovany and his family's story provide considerable insight into the devastating consequences it often causes, affecting both individuals and the society as a whole.

Giovany came to stay in Only A Child's home in 2001, one year after it opened. He had been living in the street, having run away from an alcoholic, abusive father. He had depended on drugs while in the street. Giovany was with us for several years, then moved on with his life. He has consistently been in touch with me ever since and thinks of me as a father.

In July, I completed 30 years living in Guatemala. I arrived thoroughly unprepared to begin this work, but possessed an unrelenting desire to better the lives of children and young adults living in hardship and despair, with little hope for betterment. Many years later, my 20 plus year relationship with Giovany serves not only as a reminder to me, but also as a fine example of how far this ministry's accomplishments have surpassed my initial expectations.

Thank for your continued belief in and support of Only A Child. For it allows us to not only watch over and provide for our home's current residents, but also, reach out to former residents who still come to us in need when facing difficult times.

May God bless.

George

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