

Anne-Marie Oomen
PO 185
Empire, MI 49630
oomenam@gmail.com
231-360-0399
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Meeting Oliver

Prologue:

What should I say of myself in the context of this trip to Guatemala? As a person, I suppose I attempt good in a general way, or at least try not to do harm, but the truth is, I live an American middle-class existence with exuberance and not always with full consciousness. If asked why I came to Guatemala, I would first tell you the superficial things: to escape the harsh Michigan winter, because my aging mother was well enough that I could get away, to be with dear friends Mimi and her husband Norm—who have wintered here for years, to explore a new place, to have an adventure. Those reasons are shallow. Truth is: I travel for the restless volcanic awakenings—an apt metaphor for Guatemala. And even though I am a writer, I have often been prone to illusions, mostly the illusion that I can remain untouched, that I can keep distance, that I will not change even as I am poised for change. I have sometimes crashed into truth with a volcanic force. In some ways, that is the metaphor for what happened to me through Safe Passage.

We've been in Antigua, the old capitol, when the day arrives for our trip to Safe Passage. My friend Mimi and I hire a driver, Jorge, to take us from Antigua into Guatemala City, the capitol,

an hour's drive if the traffic is with us. (Hiring a driver is common practice because the streets and parking of Guatemala City challenge even the most experienced urban driver.) We travel to Safe Passage, the NGO which she and Norm have supported for years. We will spend a day touring the nonprofit's facilities and meeting the children we sponsor in the Safe Passage program.

Safe Passage's mission: *Empowering people and advancing progress in a place of great poverty.* The word *poverty* worries me, dust in my eyes. It is a peculiar kind of American privilege to worry about poverty and not do much about it, not get in touch, not even attempt to understand. Mimi will meet Jasmine, the girl she and Norm have sponsored. I will meet Oliver, the boy that David (my husband) and I have sponsored. When I first saw Oliver's picture almost two years ago, I felt that jolt, points on a map shifting, beginnings of dislocation. Of course, I want to meet him, but my reasons remain unexamined. I am not expecting disruptions of the heart; I just want to meet him.

1. First Truth: Miasma

To understand the work of Sage Passage, you must know something of the city. Safe Passage is an NGO committed to help the children and families of Zona 3 and 7 of Guatemala City. The city has 24 zones. Zones three and seven are located near the edge of the city's dump, the gorge that is a miles long geological fissure filled with garbage. Garbage. Everyone's garbage from all the other zones. This is where the families work; this is where people make their livings, if living is the right word. This is where Safe Passage tries to help the children of those parents. And this is where Camino Seguro (the Spanish title) will provide a safe place for those children while

their parents work in the dump.

What you will notice first: A pervasive stink—as though you lived under your sink after your garbage has been sitting for so many days that its decay has taken on a dark intelligence. Your trash has grown a fetid personality, and in the deep decaying mess, organic and inorganic matters have combusted, spewing sour tendrils. It rises from the bowels of something unjust. And it is not under your sink. It is in this gorge so large you can see it on satellite maps. It hovers in the air around you, over this region of the city, an invisible cloud surrounding the place called the *basurero*. That methane-laced air is merely the first wrong: filth, vermin, life threatening injuries, skin diseases, lung disorders, high cancer rates, just a few wrongs that come along with the smell. I'm not talking under-the-sink wrong anymore; it's simple under the sink. I can fix that.

But let's say that this bag of garbage from under your sink gets tied off, carried to a specific place, to that volcanic gorge hundreds of yards deep, millennia old. A place that can never be filled because it is a monster of insatiable greed. As our van slowly enters Zona 3 of the city, we pick up startling human clues about that monster: people hanging on the rear doors of semis brimming with trash, people carrying on their backs enormous trash bags filled with plastic fragments, people resting on top of high stacked cardboard that fills open-aired tin shacks. All of these people are breathing the garbage dump of Guatemala City.

2. Second Truth: The View

I see the dump first from the Guatemala City cemetery. The Guatemalans do not bury their dead under the earth—earth is too volatile, wet or dry, and volcanic, especially in the city. So they bury their dead in sprawling above ground storage units with drawers like those of a

morgue, where the bodies slide into chambers, coffin-sized slots for the dead. We have passed acres of these structures to enter an older part of the cemetery where decaying mausoleums and raised plots are ornamented with fading artificial bouquets. This cemetery is not chosen for the drama of a Central American way of death but because close up pictures of the dump are discouraged by the authorities. From the cemetery, from this high view, we can see the entire dump. From here we can take pictures. From here we can see the monster.

When he parks, Jorge does a quick inspection of the area for “bad people,” people who would see our travel bags, the van in good condition, and would ignore the Safe Passage tee shirts and logo that indicate humanitarian work. Then he motions first for Vickie and Alma, our Safe Passage guides and translators, and then for Mimi and me to follow him through the maze of these above-ground mausoleums.

There is a part I cannot say here; I will tell you at the end.

Vicky turns to us, “We can stay only a few minutes.” A warning.

Vicky and Alma work with Safe Passage, and their responsibilities include bringing sponsors and their sponsored children together to create a personal connection. This organization is unique in encouraging sponsors to form a relationship with the children, and beyond the monthly donation, it supports communication between sponsored children and adults through translated letters, cards, and small appropriate gifts, though the recent closure of the Guatemalan postal service inhibits this last part. Vicky and Alma are gracious and informative, compassionate and matter-of-fact, and despite the daunting enormity of the cause, dedicated to the work.

We scramble out, weave through the monuments to the brink of the gorge. From here, a

stone perch showcases a wide-angle view across the gorge to the opposite edge, the dumping point. The slope drops off sharply. A vulture floats in, shudders onto the branch of a scrub tree, hunches and broods. We cluster on the step, stare through the tainted air. Once the dump is in plain sight, we still lack the imagination to comprehend its spreading, fierce demeanor.

At first, it's like a Jackson Pollock painting, crushed grays dolloped by other dull colors, bulging layers invaded by yellow... bugs? Other creatures. A mass, barely discernable, milling. Perspective comes with scale as you study it. The bugs transform to trucks, large yellow garbage trucks shifting like toys over the slopes. The mill of smaller creatures evolves into masses scrambling herd-like toward the trucks. Finally, clarity: the distant, almost invisible bodies of human beings scrambling over trash. The living, living in, living off the garbage. Overhead, more vultures swirl, black stars against the dust-bright sky, like scars riding the wind, riding the thermals that carry that miasma. I hold the edge of my scarf over my mouth, as much to filter my shock as to filter the scent.

“How many people?” I ask.

“About sixty thousand,” Vicky says.

The boy, Oliver, lives here.

3. Why Here Truth?

Why, in one of the most beautiful and lively countries in central America, does the dump still exist? In a country that, despite ongoing problems, has managed to lure an ever-growing tourist trade and build a reputation for archeological exploration to match the cradles of civilization on the other continents? In a country where sugar and coffee production, textiles, furniture, flowers,

agricultural products, and chemicals compete in world trade, and where the woven arts are some of the most sophisticated and stunning on the planet, why is the monster still allowed to exist?

It is a question of economy. Guatemala has been susceptible to the fissures of injustice at every level. I cannot know the subtleties of the thousand piece puzzle of greed and dust and history and injustice but I have read about the loss of jobs in an unstable market; the presence of *maquila* factories with poor labor practices (most owned by Asian companies); loss of the tenant farming industry when the sugar plantations consolidated and automated; the after effects of a long and terrible war—the same war that the U.S. supported for decades; businesses that propagate corruption, street gangs, drug cartels, and a culture of fear. I don't know how to put all the pieces together but I know they are there, in part because I see the dump. At the dump, the loaded trucks, the people running, the running spurred by the economy of desperation, human desperation: I see that. The dump exists because a day in the dump means supper. This job will provide, albeit barely, day to day money. For today. So, in that way, the monster saves them; if it can be called salvation once you know the truths.

Here's the part you won't like. In Guatemala, one does not throw dirty toilet paper into the toilet bowl. The septic systems are not designed to process it. One drops one's tissue into the ubiquitous waste baskets, complete with plastic liners and topped with a flip lids, right next to the toilet where you sit. Every household disposes of their soiled tissue in this manner. These bags of soiled tissue are often mixed with other garbage, kitchen and household trash, then tossed onto trucks from the 24 zones of the city, and hauled to the dump. If you live in the dump, you sort through that mass looking for other refuse: plastic, metal, aluminum, glass, paper, cardboard, fabric, a lost spoon, a coil of wire, a shoe, more plastic, anything that can be recycled

and sold. Yes, recycled—at the lowest possible return and the highest possible cost to the people who gather it. While you do this work, you might not be wearing gloves or a mouth mask or goggles or a helmet or boots. You might not be wearing protective clothing, or only what little you can afford. You will barge into the human herd surrounding the truck and reach for the bags with your bare hands and you will claim it. You will grab, sort, and search as if your life depended on it. Because your life and often the lives of your children do depend on it. You will keep the re-sellable waste in your home, a shanty you do not own, in the warren of shacks that surround the dump until you find the buyer. *Guajeros* is the name you claim.

Among the sixty-thousand Guajero, how many children?

4. The Children's Truth

After the cemetery, the van pulls into the preschool, and we walk into a grassy courtyard surrounded by classrooms. They appear full force, these most vulnerable ones. They appear in pairs, in groups, running and skipping, or standing alone, busy with sunlight and shadow. They are happy, clearly, and reach for me, hugging my knees. Then, on my hands and knees under a table (how did I get down here?), I discover a tiny girl, solemn recluse tearing a magazine. We stare at each other. I hold out my hand. After a while she hands me a tattered card from a magazine. I think: a perfume sample? On which she has been chewing? What does it mean for this tiny being to taste that luxury: *Cashmere? Black Opium? Obsession?* And what does that mean when outside of this room, the scent of garbage-laced methane permeates her air? Her tiny teeth imprint the card, a Braille of resilience and survival.

The tour moves on. Another building. *Creamos*. The creators. The adult programs are here. We alight, pass an exterior wall with a pretty owl mural. *Wisdom?* Then, as though the mural was intended to distract, to reassure, we round the building's corner. The vista opens. One quadrant of the dump runs right up against the plateau where the school exists. Right next door except there is no door. Wide open and close up. Workers running to trucks. Their faces. I see their faces. As the dusty haze from the dump blows toward me, I resist lifting my scarf to cover my mouth. I breathe the air they breathe. I try to comprehend. Awareness comes like an eruption.

Another room, softly lit, displays women's handmade jewelry. Among the practical things they make in the sewing workshop—curtains, pillow slips, aprons—they also create these glowing things, this glowing. The women make beads from recycled paper. I've seen paper beadwork before but never have I seen such artistic arrangements, such elegant amulets, such coordinated palettes. I am smitten by their class and sophistication. But what should I have expected? These women are *creators!* They want beauty in their lives, and they can visualize it, know it: why should I be surprised? Of course these women find and make beauty, overcome the dump by creative means. Bead work equals, practically speaking, a better living, a beaded hope for the mothers who roll tiny shards of expensive ads of glossy, high-fashion magazines into beauty.

5. Meeting Oliver's Truth.

Then it is time.

Imagine that you have been sponsoring a boy named Oliver. For you, sponsoring means

a direct withdrawal from your checking account every month. Each month you note it. Each month his photo drifts into consciousness. It is not too hard, what you gave up to do this, a couple of meals out per month, a quarterly trip to Macy's. Then you begin to write to Oliver, and the clearest question that always came back from Oliver in the letters from the Safe Passage translators is: *will you come?* At first you simply smile. How sweet. Then you consider going, but can't: your work, your mother's ailing health, your writing, your.... But over time, you understand that you must go. You want to go.

You have no idea.

You are about to meet him.

We disembark from the van onto a crowded side street. They are there. Two half-grown children, Oliver and Jasmine, stand at the top of the short flight of stairs to the main offices. Jasmine, the girl Mimi sponsors, is pretty in a strong way, just budding toward womanhood, with long dark hair and a lovely low voice and glasses. Oliver is handsome and shy, with dark serious eyes, dark hair freshly cut and pomaded, a sturdy body standing straight, stalwart. They are both dressed in clean shirts and jeans. Suddenly I who had been determined not to overwhelm him with my big American emotional responses, am hugging him whether he likes it or not, and stupidly, my first words are simply to ask, "How are you?" and the translators, Vicki and Alma, say the words, and he says he's "good" in Spanish, but looks at them, not me, with a kind of helplessness—*what do I do?* I find myself embarrassed, let go, step back, gather my wits, then manage to look at him squarely and say, "I know we do not have the same language, but I will try to speak with my heart." And I mean it, hoping that he will be ok, and that I will be ok in his eyes, and he will not

be saddened or embarrassed. And he, this newly 13-year old boy, seems to understand, gives a grave nod, glances quickly at me, and does not make eye contact again until we are in the van, then only furtive glances sideways.

We take the children to the Guatemala City zoo. Vicky has told us this is a good way to “break the ice,” to dilute their nervousness. Not to mention ours. On the way to the zoo, he gives me a pen, and I am so astonished I almost tear up. Does he know I am a writer? But after gratitude, I turn to questions in order to keep up the conversation. As the van lumbers the pocked streets, it is hard going.

What classes do you have? Which is your favorite?

How does your day go?

How is your Mom, your family?

Tell me about your favorite teachers?

Brief answers, but I do learn he goes to the Guatemalan public school in the morning. Sponsorship helps pay for his required school uniform and shoes, books and supplies. Without these, he cannot attend. But the public school ends at noon, and before Safe Passage came, the children would go to the dump, or to the brief, badly-roofed spaces they call home. Sponsorships pay required public school fees, plus preschool for the littlest ones, afternoon programs of enrichment, homework time, tutoring and constructive play—keeping them safe for the passage of the day.

Oliver’s answers are short. Moments of quiet feel longer than they are. I long to ask the deeper questions.

How is your heart?

How is your life?

But all is awkward—*why did I think this was a good idea*—until Lady Giraffe.

A ramp and stairway leading to a high platform that places a child dead level with Lady Giraffe's head, eye to eye, some fifteen feet in the air. If you look into the eyes of this stunning creature, and you hold out your palm, the tip of that dexterous 21-inch tongue will slip out and sweep across your lifeline.

But the keeper announces he is done feeding. I look at Oliver's face and feel a loss disproportionate to the situation. Then Vicky, who sees the whole picture, steps forward toward the keeper. A rapid exchange in Spanish ensues. She gestures toward us. The zookeeper relents and waves the children up the ramp.

Then, Lady Giraffe lifts her elegant equine head marked in the rich gold and brown patches and stares with those ridiculously lashed eyes, expressing some tenderness beyond hunger, some giraffe thought we cannot know. She leans forward, snuffling her lips. We look at the children. Jasmine is first in line, but she hesitates, and then backs away, hands behind her back. In this moment, I suspect Oliver knows he is being watched by an adult sponsor from some faraway place in the U.S. I suspect he feels nervousness now coupled with an unexpected test. He decides quickly. His face impassive, he steps forward and the zookeeper pours the pellets onto his hands, and there on that high sunny platform, he steps toward the great head, holding out both hands. And Lady Giraffe lowers that head, her soft horsey lips open and the long tongue snakes out, brushing his palm. The pellets disappear, leaving his palm wet. He turns, holding out his empty hands. His smile is... his smile. Then everyone is laughing, snapping

pictures, and Jasmine, encouraged, steps forward and puts out her hands, giggling as the longest tongue in the jungle kingdom accepts her gift of sweet pellets.

What does this small act of bravery do to my ever-restless heart?

It anchors me; it opens a way for me to see.

We stay too long, walking slowly, our boy and girl picking soft red pompom flowers from a blooming shrub. I buttonhole one to Oliver's shirt, and he looks pleased. It is a strangely intimate act, motherly in a way. I do not usually touch the young people I teach in this way. I am not a mother, but what does this sponsorship mean? I did not know this was the question.

But that was before the red flower. He fingers it, smiling a little.

As we walk, I learn that lions are his favorite of the jungle animals and he learns that the elephants are mine. He feeds koi fish and lets me take pictures. For him, I can say only that he stays with me, conscious, and that he seems to observe deeply, but with such quiet, it is nearly incomprehensible to my extroversion. I don't know his real thoughts and these simple exchanges pass with a self-consciousness that, for me, is also laden with a kind of intimacy, with highlighted meaning, as though they are code for declarations. I cannot speak for him, but he does not remove the red flower.

6. The Plastic Truth

A late lunch. Seven of us at the Formica table in the upscale but still fast-food restaurant: the two children, Vicky and Alma, Mimi and me, Jorge. Vicky and Alma stand in line to help us order grilled *pollo*. It comes, Cornish hen sized halves served in pretty plastic platters with plastic forks and plastic cups and sides in plastic baskets with paper sacks and paper napkins and

paper cups. In the midst of people-eating noise and piped-in music, under a shining mason jar chandelier, I stare. Mimi stares. This is the cycle, made visible. We enter it, breaking the tiny fowl bones and slurping the soup. Our table becomes landscaped with fast food debris, the legacy of the British fish and chips system perfected to assembly line efficiency in the United States, with no thought of the consequences. And all of it on plastic that will be disposed.

When we are finished, we will be tidy, we will gather and drop the plastics and refuse, along with bones, into the bin and when the bag is full, tied, and tossed into a truck, it will all go to the dump. To the dump. In the social worker's report to us, Oliver's mother's job is listed as "collector," meaning she collects the trash. Will she or Jasmine's mother glean these cheap plastic spoons, forks, or the knife that splintered when I cut the tiny wing away from the braised body?

Then this: Jasmine eats only a small piece of her chicken, saying she has a headache. Vicky asks, "Do you want to take it with you?" Jasmine nods. When the to-go box comes, I set aside my tortillas. Vicky slips them in with the chicken. All of us become suddenly very full, gather up our leftover tortillas, and Vicky does the work. No one says what we are thinking.

I am haunted by Jasmine's silence, haunted too by the broken plastic knife, the splinter-sharp moment, how it skimmed across my knuckle, but missed its mark. What mark does that shard find in the hands of a guacharo? How does it break the skin of Oliver or Jasmine's mother or father? We are all in this; we just don't see it.

7. The Truth of the Most Beautiful...

The van drives slowly into the warren of shed-like houses, barely clearing the alley walls.

For the second time, we are warned. “You have about fifteen minutes.” Because by then the van will have been spotted, and even though it bears the Safe Passage logo, that logo may not be respected because the gringo women—Mimi and me—are like pale flags moving through the community. Oliver leads us through streets too narrow for even the smallest car to a corner house with a door of heavy canvas. Guatemalans are consummate and generous hosts; they believe deeply in the importance of hospitality, but here in Zona 3, they also bare their souls when they invite you in.

I step down into a small living space. Oliver’s mother Suny is the center, warm and soft-spoken, a little shy. She is thirty-three, short, plump, has a beautiful but tired smile, and holds the two-year old boy, Juan Carlos, in her arms. She greets us kindly, watching for cues from Vicky. Two of Oliver’s siblings, Shirlen, who is twelve, and four-year old Hannah, cluster close. Their father Carlos and the oldest son are working, and six-year old Abner remains in school today. They all live in these two rooms of tin and cinder block construction with a rough concrete floor, not quite 200 square feet, clean but worn to the bone. The walls are a once-bright, now scuffed turquoise. A gas stove top perches below the window. Across from it, a small green table shoved against a wall. Above that, a sagging tapestried wall hanging, tacked in place. Toward the back, a fabric partition, perhaps sleeping quarters. Shirlen stands close to Suny but smiles when introduced, watching closely with a quiet smile. Hannah climbs onto the chair near the door, flirts, her face creased with a shy smile, still innocent of what all this means, these strange women in her house.

Imagine you are me. After you have given them the Walmart gift card in the fancy little bag with

bright blue and yellow tissue, a card that Vicky said Suny can use for clothes and food, Oliver and Suny retreat to the corner and rustle through a container. You know something is afoot, and you think to make it easier for them, whatever they are deciding, and you turn to Hannah and smile and put out your hand and she bats her eyes.

In this dark room, a small bag with beautiful beads made of bright rolled paper.

They stand before you, holding out a string of seed beads interspersed with larger lavender tinted beads, a rare color, a favorite of yours. It is their offering.

You ask him to put it on for you, and this thirteen-year-old boy lifts his hands over your head, and you bend your head to accept the circle of beads they have chosen from their small stock of hand-made jewelry, from pieces which they could sell. It is a sacrifice for them and a benediction for you. This making of beauty may help them, but in this moment, it is a gesture of dark hope for you. Your poems about volcanoes were restless with heat, but this cascade of cool lavender around your neck, Suny's cautious smile, Shirlen's quiet eyes, and Hannah's coy hands over her small mouth, these are cool mosaics rearranging into a new pattern. Your face is wet with wonder.

Oliver turns courtly and loyal, and will not take his eyes from you. He becomes chivalrous, and insists on walking you back to the van. And before you leave, you turn to him, and grasp his shoulders and tell him you will return and see him again. You want to look into the eyes of this boy again. You know that you can never know him deeply, that you will not see him often enough to know his heart—his own mother is for that. But you have seen deeply enough because he has risked showing himself, being present to you. As Jorge drives you away, you stare out the van window. Vicky and Alma are quiet, letting you absorb. They know these

things already. You are learning things, though it will be a long time before you have words.

Epilogue: Truth of the Dead

Here's the part about the cemetery that I could not say earlier. Vicky and Alma told us: sometimes, when families of the dead can't pay the annual rental fee for the spaces in the public mausoleums, the cemetery officials will remove the bodies of these "unpaid" dead from those slots in the walls, and they will toss the bodies into the gorge of the dump. The dump workers know this and watch the vultures for cues that indicate the bodies have been disposed. Then they cross the gorge and raid the bodies for whatever remains—clothes, jewelry, prosthetics, dental fillings, even the bones.

At last I am beginning to hear the words the volcano roars in the night, the truth I crash into.

I can't end the reign of the dump. I can barely touch the monster except through this one child, this family, this smallest gesture. What are my poems about volcanos in the face of this? Nothing and never enough. Here's volcanic. The people of the dump would not call their daily existence courageous, nor would they see their daily bravery as exemplary. They do what must be done, and if it means desecrating the dead so that a living family is not desecrated by the monster, they will do so with a complicated and insistent courage I had not fathomed. But they would not call it courage; they would not think it brave. They would simply do the thing that must be done.

Now I imagine them all going home to the faded turquoise room, eating the cold tortillas, trying not be pierced by the shards of poverty or indignity they had faced that day. Imagine

Oliver's quiet resilience, the brightest piece of the Guatemalan puzzle, as it fits quietly into place. And my place? Forget metaphor and pretty words, forget the volcanic poems. Enter Oliver's quiet. Sponsor a child. Write the letters. Visit when you can. Say the words of gratitude that he stays in school, gratitude that he loves the lions, that his mother rolls the beads into the spirals of beauty that become a gift. Offer gratitude that he lives, and his life is of value. Expect nothing, but practice constant hope for them, for your own greater understanding, for hearts made larger.

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