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Where the Children Gather

Sophie Sadat-Ketabchi

Every morning at the same time, all of the unassuming, brown, dirty children gather at the large, wooden gate. A visitor pounds the large steel knocker. The enormous door is a portal, an opening to a secret palace filled with efficient little children, orphaned and trying their hardest to adore every day and prosper within the fresh community.

It was I one morning, months ago, who lifted that large steel knocker, letting its heaviness fall loudly against the corroding wood. One of the older boys, peering through an empty space between the planks wanted to know who I was. My face was unfamiliar to his bottomless brown eyes.

“¿Quien es, quien es?” echoed like a thousand tiny voices. My Spanish faltered, not because of a lack of understanding, but because my nerves were creating knots in my head, tangling my thoughts. My desire to enter and belong here drew me in closer, closer.

“Me llamo Sofia y estoy aquí como un voluntario.” All of the little voices giggled with excitement. I glanced around, continuing to filter my surroundings through a cultural sift as I had done on the forty-minute journey over. “*Casa Hogar*,” read a large, hand painted sign. The primary colors were chipping, leaving almost nothing, and the sign showed years and years of attempted livelihood. It took some time for the wooden door to fold open, but when it did, it opened very slowly. There stood what seemed like a thousand children. The number probably came closer to two hundred. Four hundred pairs of eyes fixed on me. Their skin, the color of softened leather, or wrinkled bark, the color of Quechua descent, filled the space. Their fingers, dirty from breakfast and from the rubble that lay scattered around the bare courtyard, lifted all at once with miniature attempts at welcoming hand waves.

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The orphanage was one of only two in the Peruvian land that had managed to acquire some sort of government funding. The children living in the many bare and square bedrooms were called orphans, but were more often products of poverty, abuse or overly large Peruvian

families. The majority had family, and plenty of it. Whether the family would ever want them back or be able to support the children was the real issue.

The large building consisted of three stories. The first story was home to two large cafeterias with splintered wooden benches, bare kitchenware and half as many scratched metal utensils as there were children. There was a bakery with which I would become intimately acquainted. The bakery had one large island table, very high windows, a mixing machine twice my size and three large brick burning ovens. The other rooms on the first floor belonged to the administration. At the center of the building was a corridor covered in native murals. Walking through the corridor felt like walking into a historical convent with dark, damp insides and walls that bounced what you said right back at you. The bright colors tried so hard to make everything better. The colors seemed to release stifled screams for better food, better education and more love for the children. The offices of the administration were bare. There were desks, of course, and elementary finger paintings on the wall, but things seemed scarce, third-world.

The administrators themselves (there were three) were like stoic mothers who led monotonous lives. I could tell there had once been fire, deep love and caring for these children, the years had hardened them. One administrator came maybe once a week and the children celebrated like Christmas each and every time. He was always smiling, with a hopeful air and usually brought treats. He was a healthy man with clean, dark skin, but his life, like the other administrators, was free from the orphanage. Of all of us, he had the most hope.

There were many rooms and residences on the other two floors. The boys' quarter was on the right side of the building, the part that curved into an L shape, and the girls' quarter was in the main run of the building, the part that faced the empty playground and the ugly, half rotten rows of plantain and banana trees. Each room held ten to twenty bunk beds. Each bunk bed was covered with burned and tattered sheets; half had extra blankets and half of those had pillows, but not pillow cases. The bed spreads were pathetic, but the little children adored their beds. Lucky children received donated sheets from the volunteers depicting American Disney princesses dressed in pink, which by this time were ultra faded.

Attached to each living space was a bathing area. The bathing areas were reminiscent of cow troughs, filthy and communal. There were no showers, just plastic buckets and sponges, the

sort that we would use to wash our cars. These were for the children. On the third floor, there were two sewing rooms each with four sewing machines. The sewing rooms were right in the middle of the girls' sleeping rooms, and access to them was very easy.

None of the rooms were well lit and they barely any had windows. They looked like outfitted caves. A balcony, in similar fashion to the balconies at cheap motels, ran along the backside of the top two floors. The view from the balcony could have been beautiful if the dust and fog, constantly suspended in the heat, were not in the way.

As far as I could measure, the orphanage had a substantial amount of surrounding property. Within the bare, cement courtyard was a pseudo-soccer field. The field, however, was not a field, but rather a short, hard driveway with etched lines to determine where the children could stand and where they could make goals. Grass grew where it wanted to in the courtyard, but it appeared weakly and sporadically. This main area lay just inside the large, wooden gate and right in front of the two cafeterias, the bakery and the girl's sleeping rooms.

Around the other side, where the boys lived, the grass was thicker, not bright or happy or green by any means, just plentiful. There were rusty cages for a few animals, like one large, brown boar and many skinny cows and goats. I assumed there would be chickens as well, but I never saw any. The children didn't understand what I meant when I flapped my arms and elbows hopelessly about my body, having forgotten the Spanish word for chicken. There was also a balding peacock.

Beyond the caged animals and the bare courtyard, were the lines and lines of plantain and banana trees that could be seen from the top balcony. On days when I needed to grab a free moment from the screaming, smiling, dirty children, I would sneak out of the cafeteria, walk briskly across the courtyard, and push myself into the canopy of trees. These days were the hardest, the days on which I felt the guiltiest. I could escape, and, eventually, I would be able to leave. The tree trunks were skinny, the leaves frail, dry and contorted. My walk wasn't at all alluring, just as none of the Pica Piedra town was, but the vitality of the trees and their sense of being needed, really being needed, was so exotic and clever to me.

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The bell rang for desayuno and all of the little bodies scuttled into the dining rooms, sitting their miniature bottoms on the decaying wooden benches. I wanted to improve my Spanish, so selfishly, I wandered over to the table of pre-teen boys. I figured they'd chat with me and force me to pull the vocabulary out of its hiding place in my memory.

“¿Quien eres? ¿De donde vienes? ¿Y porque? ¿Y cuantos años tienen? ¿Qué vas a hacer? ¿Dónde vives?” they asked, the questions coming like rapid fire.

The questions were like rockets. My language was awfully simple and American and all at once, the table of boys dropped their bread loaves, snapped back their heads, and laughed like pompous little business men.

“No te preocupas, señorita” said a shy, presentable one. He had stopped his laughter upon seeing the look of uncultured horror that had filled the freckles in my face. “Ellos necesitan un poquita de risa de vez en cuando. Este lugar es tan oscuro.”

The boy looked to be about fourteen, probably one of the oldest of the group. His jeans were washed in the fashion of the early 90's, speckled white. They looked cheap. The neck around his t-shirt was so stretched that it looked as if someone had dragged him by that ribbing. He wore a baseball hat that was a funny color purple and his hair, damp or greasy (I wasn't sure), stuck out from underneath like hay from a scarecrow. His skin was smooth, but scarred, like the texture of crushed velvet when you run your fingers the wrong way over it. At fourteen, he was handsome, and his jaw line marked the potential to be very, very attractive.

“¿Puedes ayudarnos en la panadería? Necesitamos hornear todo el pan para mañana.” “You have to do what,” I replied, flustered by my how hard it was to remember Spanish. He looked confused. I tried in Spanish, “Necesitas hacer que?”

Salvador explained to me how he and two of the other boys at the breakfast table were responsible for baking the entire day's bread supply. They would bake all morning so that the orphanage could eat the following day. I thought, “Salvador was smart.” He knew I wanted to improve my Spanish; he wanted extra help in the bakery so he would have more time to kick the soccer ball around on the crumbling tarmac. The other two boys were called Henry and Carlos. Carlos was older than Salvador, but his skin was much lighter, his face rounder and gentler, and

he never asserted himself in the same manner as Salvador. Henry was just a little child and followed the other two.

We baked two sorts of bread every morning; one kind of dough was traditional and the other one was infused with plantains from the outside rows. Henry was a diligent worker. He showed me all of the different ways to roll dough. We made buns, croissant-like pastries, and braided loaves; it was quite sophisticated. Salvador spent most of the mornings showing off, but all three of the boys managed to find time to tease me and every one of my pathetically twisted bread pieces. When the first batch came out of the oven, little Salvador coveted a few for me. He said "Estos son para ahora, y los otros para mas tarde cuando te sales," like a grown father or brother worrying that I wouldn't have anything to eat later that evening. The bread, simple but delicious, would become my morning staple. I never greedily took any for myself though; I always waited for Salvador's approval. The bread loaves were something he was proud of; he felt accomplished in giving them to me, and delighted proudly in my enjoyment.

I spent almost three weeks doing exactly what I had done that first day: knocking on the large gate, waiting for entrance and acceptance, surveying the land; lastly, helping to feed an entire orphanage, while guiltily enjoying little tastes of something so mundane yet so indicative of misfortune.

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It was the Thursday of that third week when I started to realize what *Casa Hogar* was all about. The boys and I were on our third round of dough when the kitchen door fumbled open. The door was heavy, like steel, but a totally different weight compared to the main door of the orphanage. There in the doorway stood two of the ever-absent administrators. I jumped a little on my feet, attempting to imbue my task with intention. My Spanish faltered as it had the first day I had arrived at the orphanage.

"Hola, Señoritas. ¿Como estas? Los chicos y yo estuvieron casi listos para traer el pan a la cafetería," I claimed. In a heavily weighted accent, one of the two women responded.

"No te preocupas – Don't worry, we are not here to check on "el pan." We're sure you're doing just a fine job – our chicos are so dedicated and good about this." My body swayed a little from front to back, just within the boundaries of trepidation.

“We’re here for Salvador. Well, his family is here for him. Salvador, go upstairs and collect your things. Su tía le espera a la puerta.” Nervously, I glanced at Salvador. I would have swiftly focused elsewhere or continued with the kitchen work, but his brown eyes had become so bottomless, begging for me to fill them. We locked thoughts for an instant; his expression was like a heavy door knocker rapping on my vulnerability, wanting the gate to open. Salvador glanced around momentarily, and making a basket out of his oversized, over worn, dirty shirt, filled it with bread buns and knots. He lifted the funny color purple hat from his head and patted it down on Henry’s. Carlos bid some sort of colloquial Peruvian goodbye and Salvador pushed harshly past the administrators and beyond the steel door.

“Gracias, hasta luego,” said the two women to me or to the other boys, and they trailed after Salvador. I fixed on the door, watching their shadows diminish against the hallway wall as they walked further away. When I turned back to the boys, they were back at work. Carlos was knotting plantain dough into beautiful little buns and Henry was using all of his little body effort to lift the trays from the highest rack in the oven. Neither one of them flinched, so I returned to work. We worked at least fifteen minutes in lifeless silence before Henry spoke.

“Ud. sabe, Sofia – su familia quizás quiera que usted regresa en cualquier tiempo. It’s not important what you want. It only matters what is better for the rest of the world. ¿Ud. entiende? Do you understand?”