

"The bigness of the world is redemption. Despair compresses you into a small space, and a depression is literally a hollow in the ground. To dig deeper into the self, to go underground, is sometimes necessary, but so is the other route of getting out of yourself, into the larger world, into the openness in which you need not clutch your story and your troubles so tightly to your chest." – Rebecca Solmit, *The Faraway Nearby*.

I opened my eyes slowly and rolled over, still vaguely disoriented. I was wrapped in a heavy woolen blanket, sunlight streamed in between the curtains, and the mournful strains of music from the *velorio* floated down from the uphill neighbours' house. An elderly man had died two days ago and his family were observing the tradition of sitting alongside his casket, adorned with candles and flowers, while music played over a loudspeaker affixed to the roof of their adobe house. I looked up at the wall and saw Fredy and Miriam's framed university diplomas and a photo of the three of us, with Marissa, bundled up in winter clothing standing in front of a half-frozen Niagara Falls. It was January 11, 2016, my last day in Comitancillo. The day before had been busy – home visits, the closing ceremonies of Alianza's 2015 programs, and a meeting with the Director of the highschool in Ixmoco to discuss funding for such simple needs as a formal playground area, and adequate flooring for their school "kitchen" (an open fire in the center of a patio of hard-packed earth under an aluminum roof). I had returned home quite late, to find our friends Fredy and Miriam and an assortment of their children, nieces, nephews and cousins awaiting my return. It had been a difficult, though rewarding, two weeks in Comitancillo. The demands of trying to collect the data to prove that we are accomplishing our goals as a tiny nonprofit organization, while at the same time witnessing the depth and complexity of the problems faced by this community were starting to wear me down a little. Seeing Fredy and his family standing by the side of the road in the darkness at the entrance to the village of Chicajalaj, my temporary home for two weeks, brought me to tears. Their care and concern for me was sincere – don't spend your last night alone, they said, come home with us one last time before you have to leave. So it was that my last breakfast in Comitancillo was not a Clif bar from my backpack, but a plate of scrambled eggs from Miriam's chickens, and a mug of steaming *mosh* (a hot drink made with oatmeal, sugar, and milk). Afterwards I hugged Fredy and Miriam goodbye, slung my satchel across my shoulders, and walked back along the gravel road to Chicajalaj. As I neared the center of the village, I felt a cold, wet nose bump against my hand. I looked down to find *Conserge* at my side. A skinny, tricolored dog with amber eyes whom we had nicknamed "Concierge" because he liked to hang out near the front door of the Alianza clinic all day, alternately basking in the sun and hiding out in the mounds of grass on the hillside nearby. We had been trying to coax him to our place for two weeks, but he would not cross an invisible boundary about 100 meters from the narrow laneway that led to our patio. Today he was feeling bold, because he scampered at my heels all the way to the kitchen door. I peeled a hardboiled egg for him, and placed a bowl of leftover soup on the ground. He wolfed everything down, and looked

around hungrily for more. All I had was some leftover noodles, but he seemed to appreciate these, too. I opened the bedroom door to start packing my things, and he plunked himself down under the table with a contented sigh. My heart sank because I had finally befriended him, and now I had to leave. An hour later, my belongings neatly folded and packed into my backpack, I stretched out on the bed to study until the 11 am bus to Comitancillo passed by. When the bus arrived, I was sitting on a rock beside the dirt road, one hand on my backpack, the other gently massaging *Conserge's* bony spine while he rested his chin on my knee. The driver stopped in a cloud of dust, the *ayudante* grabbed my pack and slung it over his shoulder as he expertly climbed up the ladder to the roof of the bus. I stepped up onto the overloaded bus – even the driver had to concede there was nowhere for me to sit – so I stood, looking back out the windows of the rear doors, watching *Conserge* standing in the road, alarmed at my sudden departure. I felt tears welling up in my eyes, I tried to swallow hard, but it was too late, they streamed down my cheeks as I thought of all I was about to leave behind. I brushed the tears away. Sofia and Magnolia were waiting for me, to accompany me to Xela and spend one last night together before the final leg of my journey to the Capital, the airport, and the world I had left behind almost three weeks earlier. I would make them promise to take good care of my new friend.

First Impressions.

The first day of our trip we stayed in the Capital, visiting with my husband Fernando's family. Early in the morning we went for a run, and it gave us a chance to acclimate a little – although life in the Capital is far different from life in rural Guatemala. We saw the Municipal street cleaners out in full force, sweeping the sidewalks, and the garbage collectors reclining on bags of trash in the back of the truck as they sped between neighbourhoods – each one surrounded by a brick wall topped with razor wire, incongruously layered with wreaths of bougainvillea flowers.

We arrived at Mama Lily's house mid-morning, the sun was blazing overhead, and in the heat the clicking sound of the electric fencing along the top of the perimeter walls that surround many of the houses in her small neighbourhood seemed ominous. Fernando recalls the Capital of his childhood as a very different place --- with many open fields to run in, and neighbours relaxing on their front steps in the evening. That was before the evolution of the street gangs, with their extortion rackets, and their cocaine heading north to the US and Canada, leaving a wake of misery in their path. I know that people live in even more extreme and dangerous urban environments elsewhere in the world, but I honestly don't know how people can survive in Guatemala City, with its dust and the air pollution of a million cars. Trees struggle towards the sky in the once-graceful boulevards, the sidewalks are impossibly narrow and uneven, and businesses are crammed side by side in crumbling, delapidated buildings with roofs of battered aluminium. Car parts are stacked high in vacant lots, unfinished wiring and

spikes of rebar punctuate the second levels of almost every house. On the narrow medians between lanes of traffic children wash car windows or sell oranges. Motorbikes zoom between the cars carrying entire families – mother in the back, side saddle, with baby in her arms – and pickups so heavily laden with livestock, furniture, or people that the bed of the truck seems to bend away from the cab. It seems to me that every vehicle, every animal, every person is pushed to the breaking point under the midday sun. And yet by late afternoon, a light breeze flutters in the leaves and the sharp edges of the buildings soften into shadows. You realize that the hills around the city are still quite lush with forest, the peak of the Volcan de Agua rises against the pink and blue evening sky. That night we went for a walk in the streets around our hostel and noticed what we took to be a flock of *golondrinas* (swallows) gliding in graceful circles. We stood still and listened, and realized we could hear the flapping of tiny, leathery wings – they were bats, spinning and flowing like liquid into the windows of an abandoned building.

The next day we took a Greyhound bus to Quetzaltenango, which I have always considered the gateway to “my” Guatemala: the highlands of San Marcos, with their steep roads and hidden villages. It was a long, winding route along the PanAmerican highway, punctuated by what seemed like interminable traffic jams in several of the larger towns along the way, where highways snaking down to the coast crossed paths with those climbing up into the mountains. As we finally stepped down from the bus, crumpled and minus a few brain cells from carbon monoxide poisoning, the driver – an older man with white hair and a deeply lined face – patted my arm and wished me a Happy New Year. It was a classic Guatemalan gesture – despite his 16 hour day, and his stressful, exhausting job, he emanated the warmth and genuine friendliness that I have come to associate with Guatemala.

The problem with taking the bus is that you can’t see how full they are until you have climbed up the three steps at the entrance and looked down the aisle, and by that time the *ayudante* has already swiftly transferred your bags to the roof of the bus. Too late, you realize that every seat has at least three people in it, so you resign yourself to standing in the aisle, clinging to the luggage rack as the bus veers around corners, or sitting one-eighth of your buttock on the very edge of a seat. I once read a book about the five senses which stated that studies show that human touch, even incidental and fleeting, can have mood lifting effects. If that is true it may explain why people in Guatemala seem so cheerful most of the time, certainly I should have been ecstatic by the end of that ride. I had a baby’s feet dangling in my face, strangers’ arms on either side of my neck, and the gentleman next to me was practically in my lap on a couple of particularly sharp turns. I was wedged in so tightly I could hardly breathe, and poor Marissa, overcome by motion sickness, threw up on my neck and shoulder.

The Cast of Characters (in order of appearance).

Sofia and Magnolia were the first to find us at the Posada on the evening of our arrival. I have known both of them since 2003, when they first came to work for Alianza. Although our relationship as a trio bound together by the history and future of Alianza has had its ups and downs, the two of them have become inseparable, and I consider them both true friends. Magnolia is 29, a teacher and single parent with a son (Ludwing) and Daughter (Jesica). Sofia's husband also left her with three children to parent on her own – a daughter (Vivis) and two sons, Wilson and Misler. Magnolia is the more outspoken and confident of the two, while Sofia is calmer and more reticent – but her soft spoken manner belies a clever mind and an inner strength that have served her well in her difficult life.

Sofia and Magnolia spent about an hour with us in our tiny room at the Posada that first night catching us up on the programs, the participants, and local gossip. They were happy to receive the donated laptop I had brought with me, and outlined some of the work they had been doing with three malnourished toddlers who had come to their attention when their mothers brought them to be seen at the public health center (which maintains an office space in Alianza's building). The health center was closed (as it frequently is when they run out of medications, equipment, salaries or all three – which happens depressingly often). Magnolia and Sofia diagnosed the problem as one of malnutrition, prescribed a medication to kill any potential intestinal parasites, and started the children on a feeding program. They used money from the sale of medications from our low-cost dispensary to purchase a supplement called Encaparina (manufactured by the World Health Organization) and instructed the mothers on how to use it. Gradually, the children began to grow, their cheeks filled in, their eyes grew bright, and they started to be more active. Later in my visit, I met all three of these children and was very glad that Sofia and Magnolia had taken this initiative – they almost certainly saved three lives.

The day after our arrival, we went to meet Sofia, Magnolia and our new nurse, Alexander, at the clinic. It is in the village of Chicajalaj, about a 20 minute walk on steep trails from the center of Comitancillo. Living at sea level as we do, we noticed the higher altitude a bit, but it was wonderful to be on those sandy trails once again, walking past snug adobe homes and through pine forests. When we arrived, they were sitting at the desk organizing an event for the closing ceremonies of Alianza's 2015 programs. On the wall behind them were the words "Bienvenidos Rebekah y Familia", and two handmade paper flags – one Canadian, the other Guatemalan. We shook hands with Alexander, the registered nurse who had accepted a position with Alianza 7 months earlier. I knew right away that he was the right person for the job – gravely courteous and neatly dressed, with a calm and humble manner. That was our first meeting with Conserge, too, as he limped into the clinic, bowing his head to be petted and fussed over.



Alexander and I saw a few patients before lunch, then we all headed off to Magnolia's sister's home for a lunch of scrambled eggs and tortillas.

Afterwards, Sofia and Magnolia were anxious to show us the house they had found for us to rent. The owner, Fredy, was there in gumboots and an old plaid shirt stacking firewood and raking up the dead oak leaves from the patio of hard-packed earth. It turned out that he had spent almost twelve years working in a chicken plant in Mississippi, where he had picked up a little English while saving up to start a business in Guatemala City. Now he and his family lived and worked in the Capital, but hoped to one day return to Chicajalaj and live in this house, which consisted of three bedrooms and a kitchen built around the courtyard, with a latrine about 30 feet behind the house at the edge of a field. He told us he could build an outdoor shower for us, if we could wait two days to move in. It was so peaceful and spacious compared to the Posada, with a clothesline strung across the patio, and a row of pine trees at the bottom of the field. Our nearest neighbours were a half a dozen pigs in a shelter just across the trail from the patio. I asked Fredy what the hardest part of working in Mississippi had been, and he replied that it was the feeling of being "stuck" with only endless days of work ahead, and no time or opportunity for fun or relaxation. I am always struck by how desperate people must feel to attempt to migrate north to the U.S. in search of work, knowing how dangerous the journey is, and how unpleasant their lives are likely to be, even if they are lucky enough to find work.



My colleagues kept us well fed during our stay – and now that it is well known that we are vegetarian, there are fewer awful “I have eat this to avoid offending my host” moments. Magnolia had us over for lunch and served vegetable chow mein and fruit salad. Sofia prepared us *chilaquitas* – melted cheese between slices of a type of squash coated in an egg batter, with beans, rice, and tortillas. We ate sitting around a wooden table on her patio, overlooking her steep, terraced fields, pine trees, and the valley below. Marissa was delighted because Sofia has rabbits, two dogs, an emerald-green parrot, a pig, and a hen sitting on a batch of eggs in a crate under the kitchen counter. Alexander hired a taxi to take us to his family’s home in Tuichilupe – when I protested that we could walk or take the bus he stopped me gently, saying “*Es mi deseo de llevarles a mi casa para disfrutar de un almuerzo juntos*” (It is my wish to take you to my home for a meal together). He lives with his extended family on a farm. By local standards they are quite well off – with a variety of livestock, a small tree nursery, and a concrete patio. We had a lunch of spaghetti with tomato sauce, cucumber salad and watermelon juice. We experienced each meal as a gesture of friendship and appreciation, which made them that much more memorable.

For three days in a row we had been treated to lunch, and on the fourth day, I decided to make *them* lunch, so, with Sofia’s help, I cleaned and lit the *plancha*, chopped a pile of tomatoes, potatoes, and carrots, bought some bread at the *panaderia*, and prepared a lunch of vegetable soup, dinner rolls, hard boiled eggs, and fruit. Over lunch we explained to Alex how we had come to start Alianza, and we talked about how I hope to one day obtain visas to bring them to visit us in Canada.

Late one afternoon, after Fernando and Marissa had left for the Capital, en route home to Canada, I returned to our rented house with good intentions to study and do some exercise, but instead I lay down on the bed to read and fell asleep for an hour. I was woken by voices in the courtyard – Sofia and Magnolia had stopped by on their way home from the clinic. They told me they had had a good meeting with the newly-elected village authorities (who had just taken office), and secured their support for our programs. While they talked, I prepared mugs of Encaparina, then joined them on low stools around the *plancha* (a flat-topped wood-burning stove made of brick). There was brief silence, then the mood turned serious for a moment as both women told me how much they valued their work with Alianza, and how much it meant to them to be able to help people in their community. It was one of those moments when the vision that underlies this whole project came into sharp focus: working together to improve access to health care and education. And for me, the more personal dream of crossing boundaries and becoming part of this community – not just a visitor, or an outside observer, but someone with a commitment to this place and these people whom I admire so much. After they left, taking the last bus back to Comitancillo, I cleared away the mugs and walked across the patio under a blue-black sky so full of stars they seemed to compete for space. I brushed my teeth and washed out the mugs at the *pila*, then returned to my bedroom, turned out

the light, and prepared for sleep. A short time later, there was knock at the door accompanied by soft voices. It was Rosaura, Magnolia's sister, and her entire family. Magnolia had been worried about me alone at the house, and asked them to come and offer one of their children to keep me company. It seems very strange to Comitecos, accustomed as they are to life surrounded by extended family members, for anyone to live alone.

On my final day in Comitancillo, Sofia, Magnolia and Alexander had organized a closing ceremony for the 2015 programs. Juan Jose Chilel, one of our scholarship students, was emcee. Alexander was a good sport about filling in for a missing dancer in the choreographed opening dance. Magnolia had prepared a few lines of welcome in English. Thirteen of the 22 scholarship students were present – two of them have finished their programs in teaching, and two more in accounting and bilingual (Mam-Spanish) business administration. The other nine were away working on the plantations on the coast, or in the Capital. The grandmothers' group – vibrant in their colourful *huipiles* and graceful headdresses-- got up and said a few words, as well as the 10 prenatal "graduates" and their newborns – all dressed in their matching outfits chosen by Sofia and Magnolia. The ceremony ended with traditional Mayan dances performed by Sofia and several of the scholarship students.

The last memory I have of Sofia and Magnolia from this trip is of the two of them standing among baskets of lemons and piles of dried chiles in the market near the bus terminal in Xela. They had accompanied me half way on my long trip back to the Capital, and we had breakfasted in a café just off the gracious Parque Central. Ours is a two-tiered relationship – on the one hand we are colleagues, and sometimes we find ourselves at odds over the details of running Alianza. They experience it on a grass roots, day to day level, whereas I am half a world away, and my involvement is sporadic, in short, intense bursts of activity to fundraise or network with supporters. On the other hand, we are old friends, despite differences of culture, language, and experience. Although almost a year passes between our face to face meetings, we always fall comfortably into each others' lives for a few weeks.

Fredy Matias Lopez & Miriam Temaj & Family.

It never takes long for Fredy to make an appearance each time we visit – he long ago took us under his wing. He and his wife, Miriam, are teachers in the remote village of Tuixoquel. Over the years we have worked together on a variety of projects –school buildings, scholarships, support for an alcoholic recovery center. They have three children – Jeremy, Lester, and Belinda. Fredy's younger brother, Rigoberto, also works at the school as a kindergarten teacher, and lives next door to Fredy and Miriam in the village of Ixmoco.

It was New Year's Eve, the end of our first full day in Comitancillo, and we were sitting on the grass behind the Posada chatting with Alianza's accountant, Rene Perez, when Fredy and Rigoberto arrived, with six children

in tow. School is out and students are on vacation from late November to early January in Guatemala, and families take the opportunity to come together to celebrate Christmas and New Years. Fredy is one of five siblings, and his sister and brother-in-law and their children were visiting from the Capital (Guatemala City). The kids were excited because Fredy and Rigo had promised to buy fireworks to celebrate the New Year. We all trailed along the main street, stopping to buy candles, fireworks, and candies. The shopping complete, we piled into a pickup truck, on loan from Fredy's eldest brother, and drove over to Fredy and Miriam's house where supper awaited us.

Fredy had built a small crèche with clay nativity figures, a wooden stable, and pine branches strung with tiny, twinkling lights. Marissa played with the eleven children, all cousins, who ran wild throughout the house and patio. I gave informal consults about migraines and acid reflux and sprained ankles at the kitchen table. And all the while, Fredy's mother wandered around feeding the chickens and the pigs with a cigar hanging out of one side of her mouth. By 11 pm, Fernando and I were ready for a nap. A few minutes before midnight Fredy woke us up for the fireworks. At this juncture, I should point out a few key differences between ourselves and our hosts. Whereas we are cautious and safety conscious, Fredy and his family, and, dare I suggest it, Comitecos in general, are risk takers who, while aware of the possible consequences, prefer to put them aside and seize the moment. We are health-conscious, vegetarian, exercise fanatics, while they are decidedly carnivores who prefer rides in the back of a pickup truck over long hikes. And while we seek out solitude and quiet surroundings at times, they thrive on noise and colour and boisterous gatherings.

Nowhere are these differences more marked than on New Year's Eve in Comitancillo. At midnight, all hell breaks loose – kids run wild in the streets with volcanoes, wagon wheels, spinners, whirlies, cannons and a dozen other types of fireworks. And not from a safe distance either – they light them from candles held by their parents, then run to place them in the street, or hold them while they spew brightly coloured sparks and showers into the night sky.

This blatant disregard for personal safety was once again evident on our day trip to La Castalia – a series of natural hot springs nestled deep in a valley just outside the town of San Marcos. After a restless night (sometimes I am hit with a bout of insomnia, replaying stressful situations in my head), we walked the three kilometers to Ixmoco where Miriam had prepared us a breakfast of poached eggs, boiled greens, and fruit. Then we piled into the pickup – eleven adults and eleven kids. Since Fredy does not drive, he had asked his friend Edgar to take us on the 2 hour trip to La Castalia. I almost backed out, but commitment to our friendship and an aversion to offending my old friends, made us climb into the cab. The unflappable Edgar drove along the winding roads on the edge of the mountains as we headed into San Marcos. At one point the Municipal Transit Police stopped us because we were going the wrong way on a narrow one way street, but as Edgar pointed out

politely, there were no signs to indicate this. The police let him off with a warning, and a comment about the number of people in the vehicle, but no fine. Noone knew exactly how to get there, so after several stops to ask directions, and some virtuoso driving maneuvers on Edgar's part, we started the final steep descent to the hot springs.



La Castalia turned out to be a pleasant surprise: four concrete pools of steaming water set along a ledge overlooking a narrow canyon with trails linking the pools and a simple, tranquil restaurant. We spent a few hours splashing around and teaching some of the kids to float on their backs.

On the way home, Edgar (whom I had at first taken to be somewhat stand-offish) opened up a little. He mentioned that he would like to be able to see a little more of the world, and I immediately pictured him coming to visit us one day – I would love to show Comitecos around our little corner of Ontario. The requirement for a visitor's visa is incredibly frustrating to me, not to mention discriminatory. Fredy and Edgar described life on the fincas (plantations) on the coast – picking 100 pounds of coffee beans and carrying the sacks on your back to the depot a mile away for about \$5, sleeping crowded together with a dozen other families on wooden planks across saw-horses under an aluminum shelter. It is an extreme form of exploitation,

born of greed and fueled by desperation, and I do not know where Guatemalans find the resilience to survive it year after year. To put it in context, a teacher, like Fredy or Edgar, can make approximately \$8000-12,000 Cdn. per year, whereas a day labourer on a farm or plantation makes only about \$2,300-\$3000 per year. Small wonder, then, that so many young people are eager to pursue an education if given the opportunity.

Our last outing with Fredy, Miriam and Rigoberto was to their school in Tuixoquel. Again we piled into the pickup for the 45 minute drive into the mountains. Fredy's nephew, a tall thin young man from the Capital perched on the side of the bed of the pickup looking strangely out of place with his black baseball cap with a large gold medallion on the front, and a t-shirt with hip-hop emblems on it. I never learned his name, we dubbed him "the DJ". After a breakfast of garbanzo beans, watermelon, and tortillas in the school building constructed in the typical fashion from cinder blocks with aluminum roofing, we played basketball with the kids. Meanwhile Fredy and a few of the men from the village rigged up some speakers, tapping into the electricity from a lamp-post by the side of the road since the Ministry of Education had not paid the electricity bill in months. Fredy presented the parents' committee with the new laptop and the Guatemalan flag he had purchased with Alianza's contribution. The DJ wrapped the silky blue and white flag around his thin shoulders to show it off. Then Miriam, her sister in law (Maria), Rigoberto, and the DJ performed a traditional Mayan dance.

Back in Comitancillo, Fredy insisted on buying us lunch in a *comedor* before they gave Fernando and Marissa a lift to Xela en route to the Capital. As we ate, seated at a long wooden table, I was thinking about how different Fredy and his younger, less well-off brother are. Where Fredy is confident and opinionated, a leader, Rigo is quieter, more reserved. He is gentle, fun-loving, and possesses an irrepressible optimism despite the multiple challenges he faces.

I would be remiss not to mention, in closing, our newly graduated law student, Oralia. Over the past six years, she has struggled to put herself through law school while raising her son and working at various jobs, most recently as a Spanish-Mam translator at San Carlos University in San Marcos. She has also assisted in legal aid cases to help women obtain support payments for children abandoned by their fathers. She has been part of our scholarship program for three years now, and we will be supporting her through her final year as she defends her thesis and becomes a full-fledged lawyer. Nothing feels better than to see someone like Oralia reach her potential – no longer dependent on a menial, low paid job, she can work towards creating the future she envisions for herself, while at the same time setting an example for others in her community of what is possible with a little help and a lot of hard work.

So I would like to end this dispatch by thanking you – for reading this, for paying attention to our work, for supporting us with your dollars, your skills,

and your encouragement over the years. Please stay with us – now that we have caught a glimpse of what can be achieved we will never, ever give up.

