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Irma

Her picture hangs by a magnet on our refrigerator door. She is sitting at a plain wooden table, looking up from her class work to smile for the camera. She smiles with the uneasiness of a seldom-photographed child. She is surrounded by some of the things you would least expect to find in a classroom: an oil drum turned on its side, an orange propane tank, a single abandoned shoe, an empty coke bottle planted in a pothole on the dirt floor. Gravel is strewn about her feet. Behind her, at the top of a concrete wall, is a sliver of an overcast sky. There is no roof over her head. She is the latest in a long string of children assigned to us through an international children's aid organization. Her name is Irma.

Donna and I began sponsoring children the first year of our marriage, long before we had children of our own. Our first sponsor child, Humberto, was a source of great interest and concern for us. We wrote to him often, sent him birthday cards and Christmas gifts. He was like a son living away from home. But eventually he left the aid project, and we were assigned another child, and then another, and another. As our lives grew more hectic, our sponsorships grew less personal. We wrote less, wondered less, worried less. Then came the option of automatic bank withdrawals. Suddenly it was possible to go months with hardly a thought of the children whose well-being so depended upon our support. We continued to sponsor children, but it cost us little and thrilled us less. We now had children of our own to order our thoughts and lives. Our

hearts throbbed for these. And so the children assigned to us became more numbers than names, dollar figures to add to our annual tally of charitable giving. But then came Irma, and all this changed.

She is case number 310 at Centro Educativo Ixtlyollotl, project 1694, but I had to look all this up to know it. For this sponsor child is not a number; she has a name. She is Irma to us, because care should not be cold and distant, because of our own children's unexpected interest in a long-distance sister, and because of prayer.

Irma was born in the same month of the same year as our middle daughter, Rebecca. They share the sign of Capricorn. But here the similarities end. Irma has rich dark skin, silky black , and deep brown eyes. Rebecca is fair-skinned, hazel-eyed, and blond. Rebecca enjoys a life of plenty. Irma comes, quoting her case portrait, from “a humble and numerous family,” living in a one-room house and barely subsisting. Rebecca has flown in a jet airplane, vacationed in Hawaii, and visited Walt Disney World, Orlando, twice. Irma will be lucky ever to leave Puebla, the region of central Mexico where she was born.

These are the givens, the built-in inequities of things. Rebecca and Irma are thousands of miles apart, but they entered this crazy world at nearly the same blessed moment of time, and to Rebecca that makes them practically twins. Now she is no longer the lone child in the middle. And so Rebecca and her siblings began to think about Irma, to draw her pictures and write her letters. At night, they began to speak of her in their prayers. In this way, case number 310 at project 1694 became Irma.

Irma Tlachi Cuamani to be exact, though we don't include her other names in our prayers, not the least of which because we can barely pronounce them. But my children

pray for her and the reason is fascinating to me. It is because they have decided that this is the way you communicate verbally with a sister living far away and without a telephone. They have determined that prayer is the telephone, and that the operator is God.

What do they say in their prayers for this sister they have never met? They pray for her family, for her happiness, and for her teeth. Irma's case portrait divulges that she has little access to dental care. It tells us her personal dental hygiene is slight. "You mean, she doesn't brush her teeth?" they ask. And so we pray for Irma's teeth. Pray for a toothbrush and toothpaste, and for a dentist like Dr. Kahn. We pray that Irma's teeth will stay healthy. My children's teeth get fluoride; Irma's get prayer. It may not be a fair tradeoff, but it is something.

We write to Irma as well, and sometimes she writes back—although usually her *communiqués* read like form letters, as if she copied them off the blackboard. She doesn't answer many of Rebecca's questions to her, but Rebecca doesn't seem to mind. Irma's letters are in Spanish, with a typed translation. Our eldest daughter, Rachael, who has been taking Spanish, tries to make her own translation. She is helping us with "*Hola querido amigos?*" (How are you doing?), and "*Adios y gracias portado.*" (So long and thanks), and especially "*Patrino te quiera mucho!*" – We love her very much, too!

Like our Rebecca, Irma is now already twelve. Before long, she will graduate from the aid program, and we will be assigned another child. He or she will probably be younger than any of our own children. The likelihood of their forming a strong connection with this new child may lessen. This constant swapping out of children takes its toll after a while. And, like their parents, our children's lives may simply get too

hectic. More time will go by, and most likely we will lose contact with Irma altogether. We will almost certainly never meet her in person. But for now, we have Irma in our lives, and especially in our prayers.

To lie beneath the same night sky, to gaze into the face of the same full moon—these things we share with Irma. As the moon reflects the light of the sun and beams it back into our eyes, perhaps the light from Irma's eyes makes the same journey. And if the prayers we pray stir in the heart of God, maybe ours and Irma's prayers will continue to meet there and mingle. Maybe they will do a dance, with God keeping time.