

LA NIÑA

As I walked from the hall into the lounge with a stack of styrofoam cups, I heard the low murmuring of voices. No loud voices, not even among the children. The group from El Paso was eating fruit and snacks and drinking coffee and milk. The faces that I could see expressed no emotions, not even from the children. Some looked wary, some showed a stone-faced acceptance. But smiles, laughter, tears, joy, sadness... anger—these were all absent from the room, even among the children.

An hour before, they had filed off the bus at the Diocesan Center, tired, hungry, confused. Now they were patiently waiting for room assignments, a place to stay for a night or two before being moved on to their next destination. It was impossible for me, a privileged, middle-class American male to imagine what they were thinking, what they were feeling. What would I do? How would I react if I was in their situation?

One of the other volunteers from Saint Michael moved through the room with a bunch of bananas.

“Banana?” she asked a young mother with two small children. “¿Te gustaría otra banana?”

“Gracias,” the woman answered, accepting the offered fruit.

I continued on to the coffee table and put my stack of cups beside the pot. The coffee urn was low so I started for the kitchen to see what I needed to do to refill it.

A room just off the hall had been stocked with donated toys to occupy the children. I looked in as I passed. A small girl, no more than four or five years old was alone in the room. She was playing with a bunch of colorful plastic blocks. She looked up as I paused in the doorway. Her large soulful eyes would have stopped the artist Margaret Keane in her tracks.

“Hola,” I said.

She looked down at the floor, but didn’t go back to the blocks. I had interrupted her project.

¿Puedo? I asked and slowly got down on the floor. I picked up several blocks and started a stack of my own. Her head was still down, but I could see that she was

Michael Myers,
October, 2020

watching what I was doing. My stack was five or six blocks high when I nudged it and it fell over.

“Oh, no,” I moaned.

She looked up and her eyes got even bigger.

Carefully, I rebuilt my stack. When it was eight blocks high I waited until I was sure she was looking and then with an exaggerated gesture I bumped it over. I put my hand to my face.

“Oh, no,” I said again, hamming it up. We looked at each other. Her face was so somber, so forlorn. I have grandchildren. I had never seen any of them look so serious. We each returned to the task of stacking blocks. I was seventy-five years old. My knees were aching. My back was screaming.

She stopped building. I looked up from my stack. She had a tall pile of blocks in front of her. When she saw that I was paying attention she slowly, deliberately knocked her stack over.

“Oh, no,” I said. Putting my hands up and shaking them. “Oh, no,” I repeated.

And she smiled. A smile that made an old man forget his aches. A smile like children of that age are supposed to have. A smile that should soften the heart of the worst cynic. A smile that reaffirms the faith in a loving God.