

THE SAME

By Shaun Groves

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“I am Yanci. I am six years old,” she began in her first letter to us, her blue words leaning left and then right. A green crayoned outline of her six year-old hand decorated the back of the page.

I met Yanci just a year ago. Since then we’ve read dozens of her letters around our kitchen table, written as many back and prayed hundreds of prayers for her before bed. Her life is mixed in with ours now, like the crayon masterpieces made by her hands and my own kids, jumbled together on our refrigerator door.

I wonder how much she’s changed since we met. She sat on a swing and pointed to her nose, saying its Spanish name slowly and asking me to repeat it. She cackled when I butchered the simplest words in her language so I retaliated with tickling. She laughed just like my kids.

She put bows in my hair, drank from my Gatorade bottle and took a nap on my shoulder like I was her favorite uncle who’d walked her city’s streets wearing her on my back a hundred times before. She loved to be held and you would have thought I’d given her a trip on a rocket ship when I shared my popsicle. Blue’s her favorite. Just like my kids.

I flew back to America. She went home to her parents. We became pen pals.

“When you came to see me,” she wrote, “I told you that I was not living at home because the thieves broke into it and damaged it. We are back at home now. My dad and my grandpa fixed it.”

Every night my daughter Gabriella prayed for fellow six year-old Yanci. “Please keep Yanci safe from robbers and give her sweet dreams.” Gresham, age four, prayed she’d have food to eat, specifically “macaroni and cheese and hotdogs and apple juice and cake.” And Becky and I prayed Yanci’s parents would find work and that they would see God through the people from Compassion International who loved their daughter so well for us every day.

“I asked God that my Dad will stop drinking and He answered me and he loves God. Please pray that my family will always attend church,” Yanci asked. And we do. Every night. If we forget my kids remind me.

I guess knowing Yanci has taught them compassion somehow. They do a happy dance for her when she accomplishes something big like learning how to

whistle. They pray for her when she struggles through school or her mother loses a job. They feel a little of what Yanci feels I think.

I've done my best to explain to them that God is the reason we cry and dance for Yanci. But I'm not sure their little brains get it yet. It's perplexing to my thirty-two year-old brain too.

I believe God is the one who put this ache inside us for hurting people along with an irresistible urge to smile when they do too. He's the one who whispers to our gut again and again until we move beyond crying and dancing to feeding and telling the needy how much they mean to God and to us. God does that.

And, this is the strangest part to me, God is also the one we're feeding, crying with and dancing for. When we love the least - the six year-old in El Salvador and the mom and dad who want a better life for her - we're loving Jesus.

John even wrote that if I sing and say I love God but I don't love Yanci and the thirty thousand other kids around the world who will die tomorrow without food and medicine and clean water then I don't love Jesus at all. I'm a liar who doesn't yet understand just how much God has love me and loved all the children of the world. (1 John 3&4)

Because we love Jesus, Yanci ate three meals today. She wore clothes and slept under a roof that doesn't leak. She went to school. She took medicine. She learned about Jesus. Just like my kids.

Gabriella pulled out that first letter from San Salvador a few weeks ago and slid her hand on top of Yanci's. "The same," she grinned.

The same.