

1

— An Ocean of Trash —

WHEN I WAS SIX years old, I lived in the community of Soyapango, a densely populated neighborhood to the south of San Salvador,¹ and I literally passed the days searching in an ocean of trash. I went shirtless and shoeless, with pants that were crusty and torn, and a stomach full of the edible filth I found there.

But the hunger continued, stuck to the body like an extra member, like an internal organ that had been born with me. And that was the truth; the hunger had been born with me, like an inheritance from my ancestors. It was my obligation to learn to talk with her, tease her, and entertain her while I found something to eat that was actually worthwhile.

I had become an expert at that little game of entertaining my stomach, which I had played since I was little. So it was

¹ San Salvador is the capital city of El Salvador. The city's population was 500,000 in 1970 and the country's population was 3.7 million. (World Bank. "El Salvador." <http://data.worldbank.org/country/el-salvador>)

that one very memorable day of my childhood in that heap of trash, I found something that helped me from the instant I saw it: a postcard of the snowy mountains of the United States. It served me in great ways to endure and escape from the reality of those years of incredible hunger.

During the days of intense heat, when the sun ignited in rings of fire and surged in temperature like a great fried egg in the highest part of the glass-like sky, I entertained myself by observing that postcard (I believed they were the snowy mountains of Wisconsin or Massachusetts). I told myself: in the country of the United States, life must be pleasant because if you are thirsty, you can drink snow and if you are hungry you could also eat snow. Syrup and a large bowl would solve all of my problems in that country, I thought to myself.

When the sun seemed to be against me, the stench of trash agitated me even more, and the black vultures appeared to be flying in a spiraling party over a specific point of the dump, I hurled myself down with my back comfortably against the waste, extending my hand to shade my eyes from the sun that covered my face. I was lost in the sights of the postcard and succeeded in transporting myself to happier places.

Many times, that is how I mocked the hunger and heat. Now, even though the thing is distant, I tease my hunger, talking to her, laughing in her face, and without tears I tell her “You could not beat me!” And while it’s true that this is not the story of a person that began poor and ended up immensely rich, like they want us to believe a genuine success story should be; this is a sign, maybe a peek through a crack of a life like many others: a childhood shared by thousands of children born in Central America, plundered and bankrupt.²

² Recommended reading for historical context: *Understanding Central America* by John A. Booth and Thomas W. Walker