

---

# THIS IS WHAT YOU'RE HERE FOR

ERIN ANNUNZIATO

This was our second time at Missionaries of the Poor. *Okay, you can do this. God, just go in. This is what you're here for.* I quickened my pace to combat the impulse to turn around and run. Run back to the school we had just come from, back to the dormitories we were staying in, back to the airport. *Stop being scared; you're terrible; stop. Stop. STOP. Just keep going. This is what you're here for.*

The bright blue building itself was beautiful, but subdued with age. A few young boys standing on a balcony on the second level peered down through the colorful foliage lining the walkway guiding us to the entrance of the first floor. Inside, three large rooms housed around fifty children aged a few weeks to thirty years who had willingly or reluctantly been abandoned by families unable to care for their extremely debilitating disabilities. They were instead cared for by a Catholic order of residing Brothers, a small group of locals, and a rotating host of ambitiously joyful foreign volunteers – supposedly including our group.

Through the gate to the first level, I immediately saw the boy who I had held at the end of our first visit. His short stature and permanently pleasant boyish face constantly begged for attention, and was currently targeting a white female volunteer from another group visiting the center. I impulsively turned my face away and walked closer to my group members. *Hey. What are you doing. He means no harm; he didn't mean to...* Last time, when I returned him to his crib before leaving, this boy had completely overpowered me: clinging to my neck and back and torso, begging without words to be held longer, pulling the V-neck of my sweaty cotton t-shirt down to my skirt waistband. Exposed, exhausted, and embarrassed, I had burst into tears in the middle of the room – in that moment I had hated that boy. *Hated.* Despite his severe disability, innocent intentions, affection-starved face, and despite the fact that I had actively and knowingly prepared for months to interact with and 'serve' others just like him, I hated him for his desperate, physical request for love and attention.

*I hate myself.*

This time, I walked into the room with the 'babies,' stroking their heads, rubbing their backs, and telling them someone was here. This room was set up like the other two: cribs lined four walls surrounding two rows of more cribs that created aisles. I absorbed their unregistering faces attached to curling bodies of frail limbs and malformed appendages. *Oh God, what are you doing, don't/don't/DON'T cry again... good. Keep going. This is what you're here for.*

---

One of the children restlessly flailed her arms and contorted her face in pained expressions. I rubbed her back. “Hi there, what’s bothering you?” I barely whispered, knowing I wouldn’t get a response. But moments later, she lay still, her face calm, eyes closed. Impulsively thinking I had hurt her, I withdrew my hand. She opened her eyes and her spastic movement resumed. *It can’t be that simple...* but as soon as I started rubbing her back again, she calmed once more. I was astonished. *This is what you’re here for...*

In the other two rooms, I repeatedly greeted blank faces and gently touched my skin to theirs. I hugged a few children in their cribs, but maintained my ground and refused to pick any up, remembering the boy from last time. *You’re terrible.* Walking out of the rooms and into the foyer, I was alone for a moment.

*If this is what you’re here for, what is this?*

It was a question I had been asking myself frequently since I deplaned in the Kingston airport. I had arrived with a group of 25 students who had also spent months preparing for the Jamaica Magis service trip led by Father Michael. In his hometown, he wanted us to experience God; he wanted us to see those we served as equals without pity, without thinking of ourselves as ‘us’ and the poor as ‘them.’ On my first day, I had stepped off the plane with the clearest eyes I could manage and began to simultaneously absorb and feel both everything and nothing.

As I walked through the foyer and back onto the patio where I had seen the boy-who-made-me-cry when I arrived, raw questions fired off in my head. *Where is God, where is He here? What if I had been born into poverty with a severe disability? I could be like them, exactly like them. Do they know they could have been born into something else? Into my world? Do they know this when they see me? Do they see me? What do they know? What do they think? They cry, they must feel, they must think. I must do something, if I could just...*

Most of the children on the patio were with volunteers, but a boy and girl placed in wheelchairs were sitting by themselves. They were completely immobile, and their eyes glazed over; they – whoever they really were – were trapped deep in bodies that bound from rather than bridged to the world.

*No. This is exactly what you’re NOT supposed to be thinking: there’s no ‘us’ or ‘them’, no ‘us’ or ‘them’, no ‘us’ or ‘them.’*

I walked over to these two children, greeting them quietly and grazing their twig-thin arms. As I stood over the boy, my nose then my gaze immediately followed the trail of flies buzzing around his shorts: he was sitting in his own feces. I immediately took a step back, horrified – he couldn’t even cry out like newborns with full diapers, let alone walk himself to the bathroom. Despite the Brothers’ sincerest efforts, this center was underfunded and understaffed relative to the amount of attention and supplies each child truly needed. I wondered how often this kid sat in his own excrement. Retreating, I left

---

the patio. *How old is he? Who else has this problem? Probably so many, all the time, everywhere. STOP you're pitying them... God, I'm pitying them, I'm not supposed to be pitying them. Ok he's probably one of the lucky ones, to be cared for here... maybe it's not so bad... maybe he doesn't feel it...*

Upon stepping into the foyer, trying to shun these thoughts by wondering how long it would be until we were whisked away and moved on in our itinerary, I almost laughed at my instant feeling of dumb clarity. *He's human. Like you. He feels it. Like you.*

I stopped one of the group leaders. "Hey, um... there's a boy on the patio who went to the bathroom in his pants. It seems like he's been sitting there for awhile. Should I...?"

"Oh. I'll go tell one of the Brothers."

Within minutes, the boy was wheeled past me – presumably to be cleaned so he could sit more comfortably in a fresh outfit.

*God, this is what I'm here for.*