Anne Stark

The Streets of Huehuetenango

I crouched, with my feet in a dusty gutter in Huehuetenango, throwing up. On a busy street in the highlands of Guatemala, I lost all my bearings. As I sat with my head between my knees, my mind was somehow detached, too sick to be ashamed. I could not see then what others must have seen—a stupid, well-off American girl, traveling alone, in her jeans and Hush Puppies with ankle socks. Twenty minutes earlier I felt okay, thinking I had previously contracted a bout of stomach flu, or maybe it was something I ate.

I was sitting at a table across from Robert, both of us discussing earnestly our plans. We did not mention my mysterious illness, not what had occurred the night before. But we were confident that if we had figured out the proper path forward, one in which I would take a bus back to our home base in Antigua, and he would notify our professors of my arrival, everything would be all right. It made sense that Robert would take the return trip on the bus, to continue his studies and pay our rent. After we said goodbye, however, and I tried to make my way to the bus station, my body betrayed me.

Robert was already on the bus, a thirty-mile ride that took three hours due to the terrain. This was 1979, a time before cell phones. We were students, on a university sponsored research project, Robert studying the Mayan roots in Christian celebrations, and myself transcribing marimba festival music on my Yamaha guitar. Robert had lost valuable time, taking me to Huehuetenango. The festivals of Skach Koyl, a traditional horse race, and the Dance of the Conquistadores, celebrating the Dia de los Muertos were about to begin.

No one stopped as they passed me by—not the men with their burdens of sticks attached to their backs nor the women with their tubs of masa balanced on their heads. An unfortunate gringa, they could clearly see, was none of their business. Small children, dressed in colorful clothes, stared at me as they stepped in their mothers’ wakes. The throng moved like a wave it separated around me and flowed in a wide berth.

Huehuetenango (Way- way- ten- angle). The name sounded like a dance or an exotic fruit. Strangely, the bright clothing people wore contrasted with their abject poverty. The
women wore the products of their own labor, having sat in the
dirt for hours working looms that were slung around trees and
their own backs. They wove their pictures of flowers and birds
and vines into the beautiful garments called *rebozos*, slung
over the head, tucked into sarong-type skirts and held together
with a long woven belt that wound around their waists.

The feet that passed me were slate-hard, dark and
dusty. The sandals did little to protect them from long hours of
walking. In Huehuetenango, everything was dusty: the bus
with its cargo of people and loose chickens, the homes that
often consisted of swept dirt floors, even the bright mangos
and papaya at the open air markets. The meat was often
covered with flies. The dust was the driving force of survival
that overtook just about everything.

How did I get so sick? I asked myself as I rested.
Was it a question of immediate causes—in invoking memories of
the night before? Or was it distant causes—Could the illness
be traced back to the trauma of a fallen hammock? To food
eaten from a street vendor? To the end of a relationship and
missing embroidery? To the spirits of the volcano Agua by
Lake Atitlan? Was it any number of unwise practices engaged
in since Robert and I first boarded the narrow Bluebird bus?

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My husband, my son and I are alone in the house.
We are having dinner together. There are some plates with
grease hugging the sides. There is still one
spare of broccoli in
the dish. Pictures on the walls and on tables at our rear show
other members of the family, two children who have grown
and gone. Other items in view are Hispanic and Mayan
artifacts, a copper cross on the mantle, an embroidered *rebozo*
slung over a chair, my husband’s blue-green eyes sparkle as he
looks from right to left at our son and then at me. His hair has
grayed over the years, but it is still thick and full.

While we eat, we discuss the topic of which question
is more important, “What?” or “Why?” This is how we like to
talk in this house. Questions such as, “How was your day?” or
“What did you do at school or work?” never get answered, but
questions such as “By saying X, do you mean Y?” engage us
for hours. We interact this way in part because we all spend
our days at the same place—the local university.
I argue that a reason for something always precedes the action,” but my husband and my son disagree. They say the “what” comes first and then the “why.”

My husband offers an example. “If I ask you to dance, I am thinking about ‘what’ we are going to do together,” he says. Our son agrees. “But there will always be a reason,” I counter. “Why do you want to dance with me? Do you think I’m cute? Do you just want some exercise? The ‘why’ of your question comes before the ‘what’?” I have convinced neither my son nor my husband, but they smile anyway. Here the exercise of logic is an expression of affection.

As I put the food away, I spot the black and white photos stuck to our refrigerator door with flat magnets. They were all taken by a friend of Yvonne’s when we were staying in a small village outside of Antigua, Guatemala. In the first one, the woman we called Abuela, sits yoga-style on the bare dirt with a backstrap loom set up in front of her. She is in the process of weaving. The deep wrinkles in her face belie years of hardship, but it is impossible, just as it is with Buddhist monks, to guess her age. If I could read her thoughts, I would guess that she is being indulgent towards two silly young women who want to record her expert work on the loom. I doubt she has ever seen a developed photograph. In the second photo, a girl of about eleven stands with her hands placed in the position of a concert soprano, one hand cupped on top of the other. She is proudly wearing the recently finished rebozo, one that she will wear for most of her young adulthood. Her smile belies a warm, open heart, inherited from her mother, a woman who once prepared a very memorable dinner. In the last photo are two more of the children in that family of seven, a seven-year-old girl balancing her four-year-old sister on her shoulders. In all three cases, the subjects never saw themselves in the photos that were taken, yet they all had their own ideas of the pose. It lends credibility to the idea that there was a “why” before the “what.”

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In a shack owned by a man I only knew as Señor, I was falling asleep. There was wood and dirt and two hammocks—and nothing on the dirt but two backpacks, a satchel and a case bearing the guitar that I had brought all the
way from California. The only furnishings in this ten-by-ten room, just off the main road in a Mayan village, were the two hammocks slung from end to end. As I drifted into sleep, the earth seemed to shake, and I thumped into the dirt. My rear end sustained the fall, but my thinly clad body became wrung in one end of the hammock fabric. The upper end of the hammock was still attached to the wall. I spent the rest of the night in the same position because, with no electric light, here or outside, the dark was as complete as blindness. Days earlier, I had to go pee, but could not find the door of the cabin to make my way to the outhouse. I hid my shame from Yvonne the next morning by taking a palm frond and sweeping away the evidence; thus I discovered the single advantage of dirt.

The day after the fallen hammock incident found Yvonne and me both standing outside as Señor hammered in new holds for the hammock while he chuckled with his friends. These men could not understand why two white girls would be in their village, except that Yvonne was learning to weave from one of the elderly women residing in the area. Every day Yvonne walked to the house of Abuela and attached accepted the yoke of the loom around her back. She sat on the ground and wove from morning until night. She produced something long and thin and colorful at the end of each day.

Not long after we moved in, we were surprised by an invitation to dine with Abuela’s family. Her daughter fixed us tamales, and we ate them with heavy hearts because we knew that the scant pork in those tamales were the whole family’s protein for months. The family had a small garden of calabasas and maíz, but they relied on the hard work of the men on the coffee plantations to bring other sustenance. Before I set out traveling with Robert, Yvonne and I brought over a large basket of fruit to Abuela’s family. Then we took a series of black and white photographs.

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After dinner, I point to a knife, serrated and dotted with butter, resting on our red countertop. “How can the knife by itself be a stimulus?” I ask my son. The three of us—father, mother, son—are now discussing a phrase that our son has brought home from his studies in psychology at the university.
After throwing my arms about wildly at this oxymoron—a neutral stimulus?—I get out *Webster’s Dictionary* to prove my point. The definition in *Webster’s* states that a stimulus is something that incites action or thought. If something is neutral, then it’s not a stimulus at all.

My husband and son do not see it that way. In their view, if the phrase has been used by the experts, then it must make sense. “It is an artifact of the profession—’my college professor husband says. “—it’s jargon. It is the assumed midpoint between positive and negative stimuli.”

I get that. But as an English teacher, I have to turn back to the common usage of words. “Take this knife, for example,” I say. “When it is laying here immobile on the counter, it is not a stimulus. But when I move it like this…” and I place the blade edge so that it is hanging precipitously off the edge of the counter—“I would call it a stimulus.”

“Not always,” says my husband. “If that knife is pointing at me, even if it’s safe, I may want to move it. Or if it’s dirty, wash it.”

“A stimulus can cause a thought process, and you can’t see a thought,” says our son, a grin on his face. “Is a thought an action?”

I pause, caught in a standstill, looking at two tall and handsome men staring me down. I’m wondering if the neutral stimulus could possibly be the “why” that precedes the “what.” We load the dishwasher with dishes that will come out sparkling clean at the end of the wash.

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Some time before Robert and I took our trip to Todos Santos, I paid a quetzal for a cob of hot-peppered corn on a stick. That was a lot of money, since a quetzal equaled about one American dollar, but the vendor didn’t have change for so large a bill, and I gave the rest as a tip.

I noticed that I was losing weight on the trip, but I didn’t know why. The bus rides were long and demanding. Sometimes Robert and I were too tired after a bus trip to try to find food at the end of the day. We knew that we shouldn’t eat fruit and vegetables from outdoor markets, but some of the towns that we visited were so small that they lacked a single restaurant. We were both trying to save money.
The taste of the corn was certainly a dollar’s worth. It had been barbequed on a hibachi until tender and caramelized, and then dusted with a finely ground, red hot pepper. The kernels burst with juice in my mouth while the pepper stung my tongue. It was a battle of competing sensations. It reminded me of that other meal, the meal of tamales cooked over an open flame, the most valuable meal in the world to Abuela’s family because it was all they had to give.

When we got to Todos Santos, in the mountains north of Huehuetenango, we found a small pension and rented one room for the two of us. There were no showers, and the restroom was an attached outhouse, located downstairs from the rented room. In this sleepy little village, this was the normal arrangement.

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After dinner and dishes, my husband and I settle down on the couch in the front room. On one of the end tables is a little handmade book, one that I purchased in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. The pages are rough brown construction paper, and the binding is wood and twine. There are about fifty pages in the book, and the first page has the heading that makes a play on our last name. Over the years, I took it upon myself to record some of the sayings that my family repeats so often that they become our mantras. One of those sayings is a sentence that I repeat often to our youngest son: “Everyone is a hypocrite about something.” I always say this after he has identified what he sees as one of my many inconsistencies. I tell him that once you really commit to something, you will find that you are vulnerable to being labeled a hypocrite. Being nineteen, he is yet to commit, so he just sits back and laughs. His mantra is a line from the Rush song, “if you choose not to decide you still have made a choice.” I’m thinking about the relationship choices I made when I was a few years older than our son is now.

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Towards the end of my three-month Guatemalan trip, I broke up with my boyfriend in California. This was the third time we broke up. Despite the fact that we were sleeping in the same rooms, it had nothing to do with my companion Robert.
I went to great lengths to dismiss any romantic notions between us, even to the extent of making up a Spanish nickname for him, Conejo (Rabbit), with which I pestered him now and then. On his part, he could have been gay, because he showed little interest in women. At least I couldn’t detect it. He was pale and soft-muscled, not a large person, but he had a lovely head of thick black hair. He was a very analytical guy, telling me that he only slept two hours a night due to the constant activity of his brain. When I stared at him in disbelief, he assured me that two hours was all that a human body really needed.

I broke up with my boyfriend because he wasn’t writing letters to me. Our relationship had developed to the point where it marriage was in the backs of our minds, and yet we weren’t sure if we were true to each other. During the first part of our trip, I was imagining our wedding, and even looking at traditional Guatemalan dresses as wedding gear. I was embroidering in rainbow threads the head of a Mayan warrior on a plain white buttonless cotton shirt that the man I imagined my boyfriend, as my husband, would wear. I wrote him several letters hinting at a possible wedding. After a month or so, when I didn’t hear from him, my thoughts started to change. It was as if I’d reached some sort of tipping point because my thoughts ran in the entirely opposite direction. I was through. Yet I still continued with my embroidery, thinking it would serve as some conciliatory gift.

I was unable to embroider during the bus ride from Huehuetenango to Todos Santos because of the harrowing ride. The roads were windy, narrow and gullied, barely hugging the tight mountain cliffs. Chickens squawked in their tight cages on the ledge above our heads where I set my embroidery aside. The scenery out the window was dense and green; the late October sky was gray with thunderclouds.

When we shuffled to get off the bus at its final destination for the day, I reached up for my ex-boyfriend’s shirt and found that it was gone. In the confusion of chickens and children and corn, my exquisite embroidery had been misplaced. My heart was heavy, and my blood flow seemed to slow down. I didn’t really want to break up, did I? Perhaps I had harbored some hope that our relationship would not actually be over. And yet I had already sent the break up letter.

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Anne Stark

My experience of Guatemala was a mass of contradictions. Here are some of the things I told my family about my trip of 1979:

General Fernando Lucas was President of Guatemala while I was in the country.

There were armed guards on the street corners in Guatemala City.

Anti-American sentiment was widespread in the mountain villages.

Guerilla militias were holed up among villagers in small cities such as Todos Santos.

My wealthy host family from Guatemala City had cut glass on the tops of their outer walls.

The closer your ties to Mayan culture the poorer you were.

My middle-class host family in Antigua kept the price tag attached to their stove.

Corn, beans and squash, in ancient times and now, make a complete diet for Mayan villagers.

My American friend was paraded down the street of a small Mayan town by paramilitaries.

The armed guards in Guatemala City, wearing berets, did not smile at you as you passed by.

I brought my Yamaha guitar to Antigua and sang Italian folk songs with it.

The cousin of my host family in Antigua proposed to me.

My boyfriend from California sent me several letters that never got to me.

The maid of my host family in Guatemala City set each place with a demitasse spoon.

The father in my Antigua host family got drunk every night on a type of local moonshine.

President Lucas received over 10 million USD to fight the paramilitaries in the mountains.

Lucas’ actions against the Mayan villagers from 1978-1982 are called the Guatemalan Genocide.
Robert and I checked into the little pension, and we rolled our sleeping bags over the two cots that were really just wooden slabs. It was October 30th, and we planned to see the Day of the Dead and All Saints celebrations. The name of the town meant “All Saints” in Spanish, and this feast was the town’s crowning celebration, celebrating its Catholic and Mayan heritage.

That night, however, instead of restful sleep, I experienced fevers and chills. Robert, who was probably not sleeping anyway, but instead was meditating beside me, started to get worried about my restless tossing. He got out of his sleeping bag and covered me with it. When I still complained of chills, actually crying out, he climbed up on the slab and put his body over the mound of down covers to warm me up. He helped me down the stairs to the outhouse and stood outside in the dark until I was ready to come out. On the way back to our room he whispered plans for the next day.

Back on my pad I was able to sleep. I doubt whether Robert got even his two hours that night.

The next morning, after the dawn broke, we climbed on to the first bus out of town. The anticipated steep decline, the switchbacks, and the jostling made for an uncomfortable trip as the bus inched its way towards Huehuetenango. At the station we got our tickets and dropped off my bags. After we had a small breakfast in a café a few blocks from the bus station, I gave Robert my share of the rent. We discussed to meet again in California at the start of a new school term. We said goodbye amicably, neither of us mentioning the long and strange night we spent together.

With Robert gone, my thoughts ran into a muddled jumble: So now I have five blocks to walk. Using this bus ticket is my only way out of disaster. If they load my luggage, I don’t have enough money for another ticket. There is no one who knows me here to help me. There is nothing in this situation that is either logical or definitional. No explanations of how or why or how I got sick. Only that I have to get on that bus, no matter what.

I hobbled to the station five steps at a time. My stomach was empty. I dry-heaved every now and then; my brow was sweaty and my limbs shook with weakness, but there was no more danger of curbside spectacles. Then the station door opened, and I was inside. My bags and my guitar
Anne Stark

were still in the corner where Robert and I left them. I fell in a heap on the floor next to them.

The bus pulled up and I crawled into my seat. My seat companion was an Englishwoman. She took one look at me and offered her shoulder as a headrest. My neck was too weak to resist. I slept all the way to Antigua where my teachers were ready to pick me up and take me to the hospital: there I was immediately stuck with an I.V. by an old man with a kind face. I was diagnosed with amoebas, and parasites, and hepatitis. In the days of my recovery, friends and fellow students came by to visit, but I was either asleep or partially conscious because I didn’t remember them. Yvonne left a gift of green woven cloth behind; others left a poster of Lake Atitlan. As I returned to my parents’ home in Southern California, my family embraced me with love and concern. By that time, my eyes and my skin were bright yellow.

When I returned to classes in the spring, Robert had moved on. The last time I saw him was across the table from me in the little café in Huehuetenango. In my mind’s eye, his usually analytical face is streaked with emotion. If I could have expressed my thoughts at that moment I would have said, simply, you just saved my life.

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I pick up the homemade book and open it to a nonsense poem I wrote for our kids during the years when they were old enough to do dishes and young enough to have favorite utensils to eat their breakfast cereal with. The refrain goes: “The checkered spoon, the checkered spoon; I feel like a goon with my checkered spoon. I love the sun, I love the moon, but most of all, I love my checkered spoon.” This jingle seemed to entertain our youngest son and our daughter, next to him in age. It did not do much for our oldest son or my husband, who merely tolerate such silliness. This quality my husband has—call it steady fortitude—is one of the reasons that we are married today. Because when I sent him that breakup letter from Guatemala so many years ago, he chose to ignore it.

Over the years my husband’s told the story of our break-ups so many times—with our kids rolling their eyes—that I’m thinking the line, “When Mom broke up with me…”
will end up in the book now called “Stark Remarks,” after our last name.

My husband’s teasing reminds me of how I never meant to add more burden to the people of Huehuetenango. The questions “Why did I get sick?” and “Why did no one stop to help me?” pester me occasionally, but the equally unanswered questions “Why did Robert help me as he did?” and “Why did Abuela’s family feed Yvonne and me?” seem more important to me now. In this situation, there was no way I could determine the reason anything happened; only the actor knew the “why” of his or her actions. But this “why” brought my husband to me, and that’s all that matters. With no more philosophical discussions in the back of my mind, I give him a big hug and leave it for another day.