

La Escucho

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When I started my career as a passionate photojournalist, I never expected it to be my demise. I was a naïve 20-something year old, ready to leave the United States and travel the world, capturing its majesty with the click of a lens. That was when there was beauty to capture...

I had come back to Guatemala on a whim. When the depression became too much to handle, I knew there was only one cure: to go back to the place that had given me life in the first place. This country had inspired me to begin my career in photojournalism 20 years ago. Its indescribable spirit had awoken a hunger in me to capture the lives of people all over the world; how could one species live so differently? Now, a lifetime later, I was back, yearning for the indescribable knowledge that spread through the wind here—a wind which seemed to have passed through the United States unacknowledged, albeit uninvited.

Now, I sat on a bus winding through the hilly dirt roads, on my way back to Monterrico. In my hand was the picture that had started my career—the one I had taken in Monterrico long ago, along the shores of the magnificent Black Sand beach. The picture captured the gummy smile of a young, Guatemalan child, standing at the waters' edge, looking into the sea. Looking at the picture, I thought back to that day. In my broken Spanish, I had asked the young girl what she was doing. She had replied, "I am listening to the water, my grandmother asked me what it was saying." Puzzled, I had turned from her and found who I assumed was the girl's grandmother approaching me. After introducing myself as an aspiring photojournalist, I asked, "What does your granddaughter mean? What is the ocean saying?"

The old lady scoffed, the wear of years in the sun burned into her face. A fire seemed to set itself ablaze in her eyes and I had known instantly that my question had awoken anger in her core. In broken English, she began to speak. "You Americans will never understand.

But since you wonder, I will tell. The ocean has spirit, like you and I. It talks, like you and I. So does breeze, animals, skies. The difference between you Americans and us is that we take time to listen. Spirits are all family. Open your ears, child, maybe someday you can hear too. If you do not listen to spirits, you will see the damage.” I remember chalking up her explanation of a ‘talking’ ocean to old age, even lack of education—an empty threat on deaf ears. But why was this woman so angry?

The child turned back to her grandmother and smiled, breaking my train of thought. “La escucho, abuela!” she exclaimed. I hear her. Her? I looked around for someone else before realizing the child was talking about the ocean. The grandmother smirked, seeing the confusion on my face. I tried to hide my expression, embarrassed, knowing I was turning red. When I saw the girl’s face, the pride in her eyes at her discovery, I grabbed my camera and took the picture that lay in my hands today. Even if I did not understand the depth of emotion that seemed to be before me, covering my face with the camera was an easy escape from my discomfort, a retreat from the smallness I felt in not being able to connect with the world.

“Americans,” the grandmother had scoffed. “Never listen. All show.” She scooped up her granddaughter and began to walk back to their village. I felt exposed, as if the woman had known that I was trying to hide. All the while, the granddaughter chirped, “La escucho, abuela, la escucho.” This picture, and that memory, sent me on my lifelong journey to understand what I was missing. What did this country understand that I did not? What sparked the anger that old woman felt? Why did I feel exposed, naked even, after that encounter?

I put the picture on my lap, resting my head on the bus window, the sun beating down on my skin. Guatemala was scorching in the summer, never mind being on a bus without air conditioning. After years of traveling, taking pictures of people that seemed more connected to this world than I, I felt drained. I have spent my life searching for what I witnessed the little girl find that day on the beach and I have been unable to find it. Now, on my way to Black Sand beach once again, I hope to truly listen to what I have been unable to hear before. My head began to throb in anticipation. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep...

The bus arrived at the village shortly after the sun had set, dark shadows engulfing the village I was staying in. Flashlights spotted the air like fireflies as the men returned to the village from a long days-work in the fields. I knew from the last time I had visited that men woke up each day before the sun rose, walked miles to the banana vineyards, spent the day in the blistering heat macheting the lands, walked miles back to the village, and slept a few measly hours before waking to do it again. My face reddened as I thought about the prospect of getting off a vehicle knowing that these men did not have such a luxury. I knew they were used to Americans coming to do missionary work in their village, but it still felt unnecessarily flashy for me to be arriving on a bus. I gathered my belongings and stumbled out into the night. Some women rushed towards me to grab things from my hands, leading me to my hut. I made my way the best I could in the darkness before crumpling onto the blanket that lay on the dirt floor. I lay awake for a while, staring at the ceiling, waiting for sleep to take me away.

In the morning I sat up, stretching out. When I started my career, sleeping on the ground would have been nothing but now I smirked as I heard my joints popping. It was still dark out, but I could smell food in the air. I wandered out of the hut towards the fire by which breakfast was being cooked. I sat down at one of the wooden tables, observing, by firelight, children emerge from their huts, holding their sibling's hands. The older sibling in each family catered to their younger siblings, making sure they could find their way in the dark and had a place to sit. With the seats quickly filling, the older siblings stood behind the youngest without complaint.

When the food was ready, the woman preparing it put it in a large bowl and brought it over to the children's table. Immediately, I knew it would not be enough for the crowd of small children. Nonetheless, the oldest child grabbed the bowl and placed a little bit on their siblings' plates before passing it on to the next family, watching the oldest sibling there do the same. This cycle continued until the bowl made it back to the child that started the round. No food was left in the bowl. The child put the bowl down and began tending to their sibling, feeding the helpless baby, seeming unphased that no food was left though I knew the child was hungry.

“Hey, are you Leah?” asked a voice behind me. I swiveled to see a white woman approaching me.

“Yes,” I answered, a little surprised to see whoever she was.

“My name is Bethany. I came to Guatemala to do missionary work when I was 17. When I graduated high school, I came back to do some soul searching. I found it and didn’t want to risk losing it by leaving. It’s a humbling lifestyle, to say the least. Anyway, I run the missionary programs for this village and others in the area, so basically that means I take the rich people that come here and try to show them the consequence of their wealth. A missionary brought one of your pictures a while back and gave it to me. I have been dying to meet you to ask about it, and when I heard you were coming back I figured now was my only chance.” Bethany reached into her back pocket and pulled out a picture of a mountain with a man holding a bundle of bananas in the foreground. Even in the dark, I knew what picture it was—this was another picture I had taken in Guatemala on my first trip that I had published alongside the young girl on the beach. Behind the man, mountains reached into the sky, making him seem miniscule, nonexistent. In fact, unless you looked at the picture very closely, you’d likely miss him altogether in favor of the grandeur behind him.

“Well Bethany, it’s nice to meet you. I’d be happy to answer any of your questions about the picture.” As I spoke, my stomach began to grumble. I hadn’t eaten since before my flight. Bethany began to chuckle.

“I’m so sorry. I sometimes forget about my previous life. If I remember correctly, regiment deems you need breakfast in the morning. I was supposed to bring you some. And I did! Here!” Bethany reached into a basket she was holding and pulled out a bundle of bananas. “Feel free to eat as many as you want.”

I took a banana before giving the remainder of the bundle back to her. “Here, give the rest to the older siblings. I noticed they did not get any breakfast.”

Bethany shook her head in response. “Surely you do not understand. It’s a kind gesture, but the children will not eat this. And before you ask—it is not because they are picky. You see, the banana is a symbol of the lives these people live. It is a piece of fruit that does not represent Guatemala but instead is fuel for America and the other ‘lands beyond.’

It confuses them why more of their old playing fields are being wiped out and sprayed with fertilizers for these curvy yellow things. Even if they wanted to eat them, the companies that buy up the land here and hire Guatemalan men to work it are strict about them taking any produce back to their families, so why get accustomed to the luxury? Profit beats people, every time. We have this bundle because I requested some for the missionaries, which I will treat you like. It is specifically for you.” Bethany put the bananas back in front of me. “Now before you say you don’t want them, understand these people will be upset to know you are unsatisfied with the offering and will try to give you more of something they barely have themselves.”

“But what will happen to the older children then?” I asked, guiltily peeling open the banana even though I had lost my appetite. “They gave all their food to their siblings.”

Bethany smiled. “Of course they did. This is why I found my soul here. In my experience in America, people hoarded in times of crisis or sought to own and dominate other people, places, and things. But here... Here is different. The older siblings trust that when they give, they shall receive. And not in that cliché way Americans talk about at Christmas time. The older siblings give to their younger sibling and trust that down the road, the spirits will see to it that they be gifted themselves. Maybe by someone other than their younger sibling, but gifted all the same. Did you also notice that the older sibling only took what their younger sibling needed, so that everyone got some? Try that on in America where siblings fight over the 15 red crayons the other won’t share. It’s just a different way of thinking here. It’s cyclical and reciprocal, not winner take all.”

I thought back on my own childhood. I have a younger sister and we were always fighting. I wanted the bigger piece of cake, I wanted the newest toy, I wanted the attention—and as the oldest, I had felt I deserved it. I felt another sweep of embarrassment come over me. Never once did I consider that others had far less—that perhaps having the most did not make you rich but instead exposed your selfish core. These children had more generosity in them than I had seen in my whole existence. I gazed over at the small table on which the children ate. The younger siblings showed their gummy smiles, laughter emitting as their older siblings worked to feed them. The older siblings looked tired, aged

beyond their years from needing to care for their siblings, but had a smile on their face just the same.

“Anyway, can I ask about the picture now?” Bethany asked, pulling me once again from my thoughts. She picked the picture up from the table where it had been lying in front of me. She stared deeply at the picture before asking, “Who is this man?”

“I’m not sure.” I answered, picturing that day in my head. I had been more focused on the mountains behind him.

“I’ve always wondered. Did you want him in the picture?” I thought back to that day, how I had been trying to get the perfect mountain shot all day, but I knew the man would never move. I had already taken a lot of shots with people and I wanted to try to get a pure landscape picture.

“I don’t think I did,” I answered candidly.

“Can I tell you why I have always loved this picture?” Bethany asked.

“Please,” I replied.

“To me, it represents why I left America. No offense, but I feel like being blunt is the only way to get my point across.” She paused, looking up from the picture, meeting my eye.

“I can handle it,” I promised. She pushed the picture across the table towards me.

“Please look at it while I try to explain this picture through my eyes.” I did as I was told, looking down at the picture, making out as much of it as I could in the emerging light from the sun. “Okay. I have rehearsed this in my head a million times so I hope it comes out right. Look at that mountain, it’s magnificent—there is no denying that. Now, look down at that man. That’s right. Really squint and look at him, holding the bananas that he does not even like to eat. Now, see what I see. A man with nothing, despite years spent breaking his back for people he will never see—and that will never see him. He works right next to this mountain you spent time admiring. In fact, you enjoyed it so much you photographed it for millions of others to see. Yet, he does not get to enjoy the nature he loves.

“Cultures experience nature differently. This man, he can hear the land weeping as fertilizers are poured on it for the very bananas he has to tend to. And he can do nothing about it. He is forced into a life that defies his core morals and that causes him immense

pain each day, physically, mentally, spiritually, and on other dimensions Americans do not even know exist. Meanwhile, a white woman that owns more than he ever will is behind the lens, clicking away, wishing he wasn't there. And that...that's the part that gets me most. This tiny speck of a person, holding up bananas like a white flag, is an imperfection in the photograph. Seeing him takes away from the world you wish to experience. Your wealth would lead you to believe you can only see beauty in the grandeur. But what about listening to what nature is really saying in this picture? To me, the man is saying, 'Look how small these bananas are in the scheme of things. You want them? Come get them. But take them from here and see what they really mean.'

"You see, what this man hears everyday when he goes to tend the bananas is that he is no different from the land he is on. He is disposable, a means to an end he never benefits from. And each day passed is another day he goes unheard by the very people whose empire is built upon him. That is what I see when I look at this picture. Disposability. Invisibility. Ignorance."

I looked up at Bethany, tears streaking my cheeks. "Leah, I know you are not a bad person, and I do not mean to make it sound as though you are. You just do not see these people the way that I do. And I wish you did. But if it were that easy to see, I would like to think the world would not be this way. Out of sight, out of mind. This part of the world is out of sight. You'll see when the sun comes up what the lifestyle of the wealthy world has truly done here. And I truly do admire your work. You give an outlet for people like me to really see this world at face value instead of the superficial crap the media streams, and that's the first step to breaking ignorance. So really, I applaud you, even if it doesn't sound that way."

"Thank you, Bethany. I just do not really know what to say. The guilt I feel now is immense. I was like 25 when I took this picture and I'd like to blame being young for my ignorance, but I just witnessed five-year-olds with more character in their fingertips than I have in my whole body." I put my elbows on the table and laid my forehead on my open palms, dropping the picture back on the table and closing my eyes. Bethany's voice rang clear in my head—"out of sight, out of mind."

“Well. Let me tell you what. Keep your eyes closed. Now, picture the last time you were here. How did everything look?” Bethany asked, her voice more soothing than it had been before.

“Everything was as green as ever. Lush. Grand. Serene. I mean... you live here, you know this place can’t be put into words. Black Sands beach brought me back this time. I long to hear the ocean.” I pictured the young girl in my head as I thought of it. “It was like there was some kind of magic in the air that everyone could feel but me. I came back to see if I could feel it this time, but after this morning I am losing hope.” I sighed deeply, feeling the full depth of the pain that brought me back here.

“I hate to say this to you. But it will get worse before it gets better. I want you to think more deeply about this village in particular. What was it like, strictly from a visual perspective?”

“Well, there were huts. Not many. I’d say about 15. Families lived in each. They were about the size of my living room. Dirt paths. A school building. The breakfast area.”

“And what was everything made of?” Bethany prodded.

“Uhm, straw? Palm leaves?” I was caught off guard by the question.

“Was there any trash, per chance?” Bethany asked softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Not that I remember,” I replied.

“Okay. The sun’s out now. Get ready to see the light, and with it, the new reality. Open your eyes.”

I lifted my head and opened my eyes. Bethany was gone as were the children that had crowded the breakfast table. I looked around as my eyes adjusted to the light. That’s when I saw it. Trash. It was everywhere. I recognized some of the labels, especially on the plastic bottles. Next to the fire pit that was used for breakfast was mounds of cardboard, ready to be burned despite the toxins I knew would be released into the air. I ran into one of the huts, looking for Bethany, and saw the beds—old plastic bags stacked on top of layers of cardboard. Feeling sick to my stomach, I began to run. Surely, this could not be real. Before I realized where I was headed, I heard the waves crashing. Black Sands beach. The end to the nightmare. As I passed the final clearing, I fell to my knees.

Trash covered the sand to the point it was invisible. The water was a sea of plastic. Dead animals littered the trash heaps, both on the shore and in the ocean. Standing in the trash (in the water or on the land, I was not completely sure—it looked the same covered in waste) was a grown woman. I recognized her immediately. She was the girl in that first picture I took. I stood, in a trance, and walked towards her, stumbling over the trash to meet her. I fell to my knees when I made it to her. She stared straight ahead, towards the ocean, but I knew she knew she had company.

“La escucho,” she whispered, her voice indistinguishable from the wind, to the point I was not sure if it was spoken at all.

Putting aside the risk of looking crazy, I asked, “What is the ocean saying?”

“La escucho,” she whispered again, unmoving. This time, however, the inflection of her voice had changed. It carried with it pain, agony even. This young girl had watched the ocean she had loved turn into garbage from a land she would never know, and with that, she carried the burden of its pain. Tears silently swam down my face as I looked out at the ocean. This beach was supposed to be where I found myself again, where I finally found what I had searched the world looking for. Now that I was here, it was too late. I began crying harder, realizing that even after hearing the pain in this young woman’s voice, all I could think about was myself.

“Leah!” I heard Bethany’s voice calling for me. I stood and made my way back to her.

“When did this happen? How did this happen?” I sobbed, the questions barely understandable.

“When? Always. It’s been happening. Slowly, over time. Why do you think it hasn’t gotten any national attention? What’s one more piece of trash? Nothing, when it looks like this. Nothing, when it’s going off with the other disposable people instead of the backyard. How? The people that do this do not care about nature. Think about when you came here before. Did you care about nature? Sure, in a superficial sense. You maybe cared deeply about it for a moment in time. But overall, when there are 70 different types of fruits and vegetables in the grocery store at once and the convenience of a quick water bottle, who stops and thinks about what that actually means? You are privileged. You don’t have to.

We do. She does. Her name is Viajar. It means ‘to journey.’ What kind of journey is one that never leaves this small square of earth? When you’re connected as spiritually as she is, it is the only journey that matters. Do you know why she’s standing out there in the water? Go ask her.”

Hesitantly, I stepped through the trash until I was at Viajar’s feet once again. “Why are you here?” I whispered, my voice hoarse from crying.

Viajar’s breath caught for a moment. A flash of annoyance rushed over her face before leaving an expression of disappointment. She knew who I was and saw that after all these years, I still did not understand what it was to be connected to the earth, what it was to appreciate the life we are given.

Finally, she released a long sigh. She seemed defeated, saddened that she needed to offer an explanation. “What she feels, I feel. For when we stop and feel the pain that we are putting on her, this ocean of ours, we may try to understand. We see what we are doing...but we see deeper than just trash in water. We see the slow evolution of what has happened, of what is to come. We see the result of a lifestyle I have only heard about. One which everyone thinks I want to be a part of—one which I despise for the assumption. I would never treat her in this way. So how she must live, I too shall live. In your mind, we are one in the same either way. Disposable. Unimportant.”

“Out of sight, out of mind. But never out of yours, on either count,” I whispered.

“Perhaps you Americans are smarter than we give you credit for,” Viajar said as her eyes finally wavered, sweeping over me. She seemed skeptical, untrusting, as if she had only ever known pain.

For a while, we stood there in the silence. I closed my eyes and listened to the waves crash on the trash-covered shore. With my eyes closed, the rushing of water did not sound much different than I remembered when it was clean. I could imagine the beach vividly in my mind—the blue waters standing out in sharp contrast against the black sand, engaged in what I always considered to be a battle for complete ownership. Knowing what I know now, I realized that the tides were never a battleground but instead a place of reciprocal giving. What the ocean had given, the land had then given back. Through this, life was

created and could thrive. This concept was lost on the American people who viewed everything as a transaction. I shuddered at the thought.

Opening my eyes, I was brought back to present time. The trash that surrounded me was overwhelming, engulfing.

“How does this make you feel?” I asked Viajar after a while.

“Pain. I feel pain that I am a pawn on a chess board that I never wanted to be a part of. But I also feel pride. If something as beautiful as this beach is going to be taken down, I want to go with it. I am proud that I am able to think that way. I want people to truly see what they are doing. Perhaps adding humanity would help? I am not sure. But nothing has been successful yet.” Viajar stared out at the ocean, her eyes saying far more than her words were letting on. “If a family member were sick, would you still care even if you hadn’t heard of the disease, or if you never saw them? Perhaps science hadn’t proven their disease existed yet, so you did not believe their illness. That family member is this earth—this very beach. It’s my people and others around the world that are weeping the same as I. The disease is pollution, global warming...The result is this. We don’t have the resources to stop this, and those that do are still trying to decide if the illness is real. I have spent my life learning English, hoping to someday mobilize change. But as I’ve watched my family die from the heat in the fields and trash slowly piling up, I felt this sense of it being too late.”

I stood silenced. Embarrassed. I wondered if any of the trash at my feet was once mine. I realized it did not matter either way. It was here. If mine wasn’t, it was somewhere else doing the same. I began to cry more openly, audible sobs escaping my breath.

“See, now you feel it too. The pain of the violence that has wrapped our town. We are considered at no higher degree than the waste of your land.” Viajar sounded spiteful as she said these words. She turned and started to walk away, leaving me in my despair. I had found what I had traveled the world for. The ability to hear and experience what Viajar had instilled in me 20 years ago and yet, I was left with more dissatisfaction than I had begun my journey with.

“Wait!” I exclaimed, turning back to Viajar. “I have an idea. I cannot fix what has happened, but maybe we can use my platform to make change. I can’t bring everyone

here to experience this, but I can try to bring this to everyone else.” Viajar looked at me skeptically. “Wait here.”

I ran back to the camp, grabbing what I needed before returning to the ocean and Viajar. “Hold this,” I instructed, handing her the picture of herself when she was young—the picture that started my career. “Now, go stand on the waters’ edge and hold that picture to your chest and then look at me.” Viajar listened to what I had said. She looked up at me with solemn eyes, unsmiling. I grabbed my camera and snapped the picture.

I looked down at the picture I had captured. Viajar, holding a picture of herself 20 years ago, smiling on a clean beach. Now, she stood in her misery with trash surrounding her, making the landscape nearly unnoticeable. I walked over to Viajar and showed her the new picture.

“I’m going to publish this everywhere. I’m going to call it: ‘La Escucho, 20 years too late.’”

Viajar laughed bitterly. “This will not change what people feel at their core. Perhaps it will evoke sympathy for a moment, but surely you are not naïve enough to believe it will cause a revolution. I want people to see what they are doing, yes, but you cannot come here, all high and mighty, and think one picture will save us—that you can save us.”

Viajar handed the picture of herself as a child back to me before slowly walking back towards her village. This woman stood in stark contrast to the child I had met. She had lost all sense of excitement, of trust that everything would be okay, of playfulness. I felt an urge to run to her, to explain that when the world saw this picture, surely some would reevaluate their choices...but I realized I could not honestly say that change would happen. I felt the burden of this reality crash down on me, leaving me with one question: what can be done? □