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# Paradise Lost

TALK | By JOYCE MAYNARD | MAY 14, 2012



The author swims off the dock of her house on Lake Atitlán. *Jim Barringer*

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FULL SCREEN

Thirty-eight years ago, when I was 20 and traveling in Central America recovering from a broken heart, I met a middle-age American couple who invited me to come along with them to Guatemala on an orchid hunt. For the next several weeks we drove and hiked through the highlands in search of rare plants. There was a war going on, in which our country's involvement remained questionable, and no doubt this had something to do with the fact that on three separate occasions over the course of those days our tires were slashed. One could have thought this might interfere with my affection for the place. It did not.

We ended up at Lake Atitlán. This was rainy season, and the unpaved streets of Panajachel had turned to mud. The town was filled with more hippies than orchid searchers — young people on the run from the draft or the constraints of first-world life, or just in search of cheap and easily accessible pot. Still, looking out over the 50-square-mile expanse of blue, with those three volcanoes rising up around its edges — this

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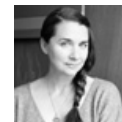
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was the deepest lake in Central America, they said — I was overcome not simply by the staggering beauty of the place but more so by the recognition that here was a spot on earth that seemed untouched by so much of the crowded, noisy, fast and increasingly contaminated world I inhabited north of the border. “El ombligo del mundo,” they called the lake: the bellybutton of the world.

What brought me back in the fall of 2001 was the departure, from home, of my third and youngest child. I was living in California at the time, my marriage long finished. My daughter had been studying Spanish in Guatemala. I had flown there to meet her just weeks after the towers fell.

The contrast was vast between the country I’d left and the one in which I found myself — the third world, my refuge from the devastation of the first. For the next 10 days, Audrey and I traveled all around the country on chicken buses, ending up at Lake Atitlán.

The war was over now, but the place had changed little over those 28 years. I was overtaken again by that same feeling I’d experienced so long ago — a connection, or maybe a reconnection, with something primal: the night sky and morning bird song, the volcano looming over the water, illuminated by not a single electric light, the stillness.

I told Audrey I envied her for having had the opportunity to live in this place as she had those last two months.

“What’s keeping you, Mom?” she said.

Twenty-four hours later I had canceled my return ticket and, for \$300 a month, rented a little house on the shores of the lake in San Marcos La Laguna, a village in which the largely Mayan population coexisted in what appeared to be surprising harmony with a ragtag community of expatriates.

This was not the wealthy retiree crowd; the gringos of San Marcos had come there lured by the presence of a meditation center and a variety of shamans, local and imported, combined with the opportunity to live on very little and enjoy a slow pace of life while still waking up in one of the more spectacular places on the planet.

Many had largely disconnected, living in houses they built without need of building permits or plans, hanging out their shingles to sell organic chocolate or offer massage while they made jewelry or stained glass; or assisting the indigenous population in constructing eco-friendly toilets or birthing babies; or opening the kind of restaurant where nobody had to worry about health inspections or a liquor license.

Over the next three months I settled into a quiet routine in my little bungalow: I spent a few hours every day at work on a novel. Twice a day I swam. And every afternoon I walked into the village to buy my vegetables and a box of cheap Chilean wine for that night’s dinner. I had no phone, no television, no radio, and the closest Internet was a half-hour boat ride away.

It is a part of this story that during this period I was attempting, not very enthusiastically, to make contact with the stockbroker with whom I had entrusted the money that represented my small life savings, earmarked for my son Charlie’s New York University tuition, the next installment of which was now due. Three months into my time in San Marcos, I made a troubling discovery on one of my visits to the Internet cafe: without my authorization, the stockbroker had put every penny of my funds in risky margin



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investments. My savings were gone.

Once, this would have represented a catastrophe, but having spent the previous months living more happily than at any other period in my adult life, I took in this news with more bemusement than horror. The decision I made (one that savvier types might question) was to refinance my already heavily financed house in California to extract, from my one remaining asset in the world, enough cash to buy a place in San Marcos. I would rent out my house to cover my mortgage and live, cheaply, on the shores of Lake Atitlán for a while, to see where that took me.

The house I found — price: \$85,000 — was a simple adobe structure with a thatched roof whose doorway was so low that a person over 5-foot-9 had to duck upon entering. But it sat on a roughly one-acre piece of prime lakefront land, on a hillside overlooking Volcán San Pedro, with its own dock from which I could dive into those blue waters any time of day or night.

Over the years that followed, I bought textiles and orchids and masks and ceramics, rustic furniture and hammocks and an antique wooden ironing board that serves as my desk. I hired a local carver to make heads that I set into my stone walls and fence posts, along with tiles brought from Italy, painted with fish. I planted fruit trees and built a waterfall and a sprawling garden and terraced stone walls to contain it all. I built a sauna, and when a builder of restaurant pizza ovens from Maine showed up in San Marcos to help local people construct fuel-efficient stoves, I enlisted him to build a pizza oven in my garden. I built a treehouse and another little ranchito for writing, close enough to the water that I could hear it lapping against the support posts.

I established a writing workshop at the lake and started bringing students down. I came to the house with a man I loved and began to picture a life in which I might move to San Marcos full time. Solvent again, I spent every penny I'd earned renovating and building: a big kitchen with a dishwasher, a guest room, a bathroom, a large patio and a huge dock with stone steps going up to a stone arch. I installed a satellite dish for Internet access.

As I set out to impose my American hunger for more and bigger on my simple Shangri-La, nature weighed in.

In October of 2005 Lake Atitlán was hammered by a powerful hurricane called Stan that uprooted trees and boulders and created an entirely new tributary that divided one side of San Marcos from the other. Across the lake, the rain caused a side of the volcano to drop off onto the land below, burying the village of Panabaj and killing virtually all of its several hundred residents — asleep on their mats when the mud hit.

This provided my first real understanding of a fundamental difference between how the indigenous people of Guatemala view disaster and how a North American does. Here in the United States, I had always expected life to go well and considered it some kind of aberration when it didn't. North Americans look for blame — and sue if possible. In San Marcos and Panabaj and all the other communities around the lake that suffered that hurricane, people got out their shovels.

In 2009, a different form of disaster hit the lake: a bloom of cyanobacteria (caused, scientists said, by a combination of runoff from chemical fertilizer, the absence of water treatment and septic systems, and deforestation) covered over two-thirds of the lake with an ugly growth, more than three feet deep in many parts, that left the once-blue water not simply unswimmable and unfishable but possibly toxic.

Then the next year, a freak storm hit the lake with so much rain that the water level rose three feet within a matter of days. That fall, with the ground still saturated, record rains continued.

Friends in California, hearing my stories, thought I was crazy to love a place like this. They hadn't swum on a night the fireflies were out, I said, or cut into a papaya, fresh from the tree. The hard things that happened at Lake Atitlán did not occur in places like Miami Beach or St. Barts. But neither did the magic parts: the little boys on my dock, shimmying up the pole to execute their crazy dives; riding on the back of a truck past the coffee fields and watching the sun set over the volcano; the night of the annual town feria when, for the price of \$23, my boyfriend and I purchased every ticket for the ancient rickety Ferris wheel they'd set up by the church, and every child in town rode free all night.

I was in California when I got the news — fall 2010 now — that a landslide had hit my property, wiping out half of my hillside, including the 100 stone stairs that led to my door, and depositing a mountain of mud at the base of my house. I wired down funds to build retaining walls and create a wall of sandbags at the poorly drained road at the top of my property. I researched varieties of bamboo to hold the soil in place before the next rain hit, and I prayed for a long dry season.

But over the next 18 months the lake rose 17 feet — a record. Houses and businesses were swallowed up. Farmland washed away. Many more houses were now threatened, mine among them.

Many theories exist as to why this is happening: some people speculate that the residue of the cyanobacteria has closed off drainage openings that once existed in the bottom of the lake. If so, the best hope is an earthquake, they say, that might create a fissure. Some old timers (los ancianos, they're called) speak of days, remembered or heard about, when the waters of the lake rose as high as the roof of the Catholic church in town. They speak of a 50- or 70-year cycle of rising and falling lake levels — a concept many of us had been dimly aware of but largely ignored over the years, though we noted the fact that the Mayan people built their homes high above the lake water we prized.

Then there is climate change and the increasing frequency of dramatic weather events around the planet. Time was, events like the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, the floods from Katrina, the Japanese earthquake, were distant tragedies I responded to by writing checks. My dream of living near water was undisturbed. Now I picture that water that I've swum in all these years swallowing not just my house but also whole towns well known to me, and the newspaper and television images of disaster take on a chilling relevance.

"Thank God we are given time to get away," a man named Luis told me this February. We were surveying the tourist cabanas he'd built in the nearby village of San Juan, with the dream of using the proceeds to fund a clinic there. "In Panabaj, they had no warning."

To many at the lake, what's happening now is linked to a date significant to all in the Mayan world: the end of the Mayan calendar, on Dec. 21, 2012. Many say that date marks the end of life as we know it.

"It's a chain of destruction," said Nana Maria, a shaman candle seller in San Juan. She spoke of the cutting of the trees, the algae, the appearance of the black bass and the disappearance of the native ducks that used to be so plentiful, the landslide in Panabaj, the sudden arrival of grebes, and now the rising waters. "The planet is crying. People have disconnected from nature."

Now nature is connecting with us.

A year had passed after the big storms before I went back to San Marcos. It was too sad to go. Over those months, the men who look after my garden, Mateo and Miguel, rebuilt my dock, then rebuilt it again two more times. When the water reached halfway up the entry gate, they moved that, too.

Now I saw for myself what happened to this place I've loved for almost 40 years, not simply the repository of my savings, but even more so my sanctuary.

It is one thing to know your dock is under water. It's something else to pull up at that dock and look through the water (clear as ever now — the cyanobacteria have receded) and see, 18 feet below, the stone platform I once stood on, where children of the village used to come to drop their strings for catching crabs while I executed my sun salutations.

When a landslide hits, the hillside can be shored up and protected. But when a lake goes up, and your house sits close to it, there is not much to be done but stand and watch with a certain stunned acceptance, not altogether unlike what I experienced that day at the Internet cafe, 10 years ago, when I learned my savings were wiped out.

At the rate the water's going up, the ground floor of my house — where the kitchen is — will be underwater in a year. Then goes the upstairs. Already my sauna's submerged, and the ranchito I loved to work in is one good rainfall from being flooded.

I try to focus on what remains on the higher ground: banana trees and jocote, bouganvillea, huele de noche. This spring at the lake I swam day and night and slept with the windows open to hear the lapping of the water and the birds when the sun came up. Enjoy this place while it's here, I told myself.

I have come to a surprising acceptance of what's happening. Surrender, maybe, is the better word for it. The idea that any of what we have will last forever is a dream.

On one of my last days at the lake, I took a boat around the water, driven by my friend Domingo, an indigenous man whose family has lost much of their property in San Pedro to the lake. Several times we pulled into one village or another and saw submerged buildings and flooded onion fields, or met people (local and gringo) who'd lost their bar or hotel or home. We passed the showplace houses of the wealthy Guatemalan families — owners of Gallo beer, Pollo Campero — who have been rumored to be talking about bankrolling a giant drainage pipe. Rumors only, most likely.

"To the Mayan people, everything is about cycles," Nana Maria told me. Rain comes down. Plants grow up. The lake rises. The lake falls. The lake rises again.

Later I shared a meal with Dave and Deedle Ratcliffe, a couple in their 40s (he's American, she's British) with two young sons, who run a diving center beside the dock in Santa Cruz, a town hit hard by the lake rise. Their restaurant is not likely to survive another rainy season, and once it goes they — like so many others I spoke with that day — have no idea what they will do.

"Find religion? Find tequila?" Dave said.

"At the end of the day, nature's going to win. Meanwhile, we've had ourselves a big adventure."

Our conversation that day turned to an extraordinary archaeological discovery first located by a diver at the lake in 1996 and only recently explored. Called Samabaj, it is a ceremonial site dating from over 2,000 years ago — with intact stelae, bowls, sculptures and five stone docks — submerged under 115 feet of water near Cerro de Oro.

“It’s not just us that this happened to,” Deedle said. “That place sat on dry land once, too.”

It’s spring now. The rains have started. Back in California, I watch the weather reports from Guatemala. An image comes to me: of a diver, some day far in the future, excavating the lost village of San Marcos and coming upon a set of stone steps underwater and a stone arch — the puzzling presence of Italian tiles and carved stone faces set into the rock. Somewhere, a little ways from that — housing a school of fish, perhaps — he finds a pizza oven.

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