

Where “You. Can. Do. This.” comes from: A story of missionaries, a war zone, knitting, and a big mouth.

written by Holly

August 6, 2021

By Holly Lisle

“You can do this.” It’s the thing I tell writers. It’s the thing I tell anyone who’s afraid to try something different, new, difficult, scary.

“You can do this.” When I say it, I mean it, because I have lived it, over and over and over.

But this story is about the first time I lived it, and it starts in 1975, in Chiquimula, Guatemala, with me opening my big mouth.

It starts with a missionary minister named Peckerhead (pretty sure his last name was Douchebag), and his wife Whoopsie. (All names of church folks not related to me have been changed in this story since Peckerhead and Whoopsie would have to be pretty damned old by now, but they might still be alive.)

And it starts with a visiting delegation of Quakers who were in Chiquimula to tour the Friends Mission, probably invited in the hopes of those same visitors leaving big donations to help keep the place running.

Why the hell were we in Guatemala?

Good question.

In theory, my parents were in Guatemala so that my dad could

handle the mission finances, and so that my mother could be the hostess for the visitor guest house/ rooming house for single missionaries.

In fact, we were living in the middle of a freakin' war zone (Guatemala's civil war was alive and kicking and leaving head-high lines of bloody bullet holes on the walls of ancient church ruins in our very town, just a few blocks from our house) BECAUSE Mom thought she could blackmail God into healing my sister of cerebral palsy and mental retardation if she became a missionary, and *because* she'd strong-armed my dad into getting into this (poor guy thought he might be able to at least get some decent hunting and fishing out of the adventure, but no. Not in a war zone).

And I and my younger siblings were not at boarding school. We were sitting in the mission house of a deeply unpopular religion (Central America is pretty much pure Catholic, and Protestants of any stripe, including Quakers, were still The Bad Guys), and because in spite of the gawdawful number of mistakes my parents made – (Re-read the previous paragraphs, imagine **you** had three kids and the same 'opportunity', and start listing their mistakes. It's a fun game.) – ...*in SPITE of their mistakes*, my parents did one thing right.

Even under pressure from their fellow missionaries to send us off to boarding school in Huehuetenango, my parents refused and kept all three of us with them.

Keeping us around might have even seemed like a mistake even to my parents sometimes (most certainly in the story I'm about to tell, which had to have made them question not sending ME off, at least)... but come 3AM on February 4th, 1976 when the earthquake hit, they were the only missionary parents who knew right away that their kids were still alive. Or would know for quite some time. After the earthquake, the other missionaries' kids were 135 miles away, across ranges of mountains, separated by roads that had fallen off the mountains during

the quake, and blocked by rock falls – in a country at war with itself that had mostly non-existent long-distance communications.

In 1976, the majority of Guatemala (including the town I lived in) had no running water, iffy electricity, terrible roads, the ongoing war, and nothing even remotely like telephone access from town to town. Or even IN town.

I've never been back, but based on what I experienced living there, I'm betting there are still parts of the country up in the mountains that don't have phone access. Or electricity. Or running water.

ANYWAY...

This story is about the dinner for that visiting delegation of Quaker tourists whom Peckerhead was hoping to hit up for donations after their visit. All of us and all of them were seated at a long, long table, with the maids serving local foods the cook had made. (Yup... missionaries with cooks and maids – I thought that was weird, too).

And Peckerhead (who was fluent in English and Spanish and knew a bit of some of the local aboriginal dialects) was blathering on to his rapt audience about the inferiority of the Spanish language to English, and how ridiculous some of the conventions of Spanish verbs were – and he decided to use SER and ESTAR as his examples.

Both words mean “Is/Are”. She IS pretty. He IS old. She IS married. He IS cute.

But SER is used to describe things with conditions that are permanent.

ESTAR is used to describe things with conditions that are temporary.

And Peckerhead explained in some detail the meanings of these

two verbs to his audience as part of the story he was telling, because he told them he had found something absolutely hilarious (and as he put it, stupid) about Spanish.

Keep in mind that this minister who is the head of the Chiquimula mission is telling this story to a long table seated around which are fellow missionaries, three kids, and about twenty deeply religious people who've paid a bunch of money to travel to a *Quaker mission in the middle of a war zone*, because this mission in this place **matters to them**.

"The crazy thing is," he said, after describing the uses of SER and ESTAR, "that Spanish uses the verb ESTAR, the one that means things are temporary, to describe **death**."

He was expecting a big laugh after that line. There were, instead, a couple of polite chuckles that sputtered out quickly.

Which is when I (a fifteen-year-old complete nonbeliever with absolutely no filters who nonetheless knew her Bible quite well) piped up with the words, "But according to the Bible, death is **supposed** to be temporary."

.

.

.

And THERE was the laugh Peckerhead had been expecting to get.

.

.

.

It was deep and loud and rich, and it lasted a long time – and it was *at* Peckerhead rather than with him – and to make matters worse, Whoopsie, who had no doubt listened to that

pedantic jerk tell that story a lot of times to a lot of audiences (he had his patter down, and it was a smooth, smooth telling), was laughing her ass off, too. And she blurted out in the sort of voice that carries across oceans, not just tables, "Oh my God, Peckerhead... SHE'S RIGHT!!!"

Cue killer glare from Peckerhead to me.

Cue the small, smug grin on my father's face. He didn't like Peckerhead, who was an arrogant blowhard.

My mother had her eyes closed, and a pained expression on her face. She was no doubt thinking (and not for the first time) *Condom. Condom. Condom. We should have used a condom.*

Can't see how this ties in to "you can do this" or writing fiction, or even knitting? Hang in. It's coming.

Fast-forward a few months to Christmas Day, which, it being a religious holiday, all the missionaries celebrated together in the library of the Guest House.

Everyone was getting and giving gifts, and all the missionaries got gifts for all the children, not just their own. This was non-optional. All missionaries gave one gift to each child, and were informed in advance which children would be there so that they could be given gifts.

This was NOT some lavish extravaganza. None of the gifts were big, because missionaries make almost no money, and everything given had been purchased on the local economy. We got things like sandals made with soles scavenged from worn-out tires (these are really cool – they are rugged, comfortable, practical, and I had mine for years, until I finally lost them in one of many moves), and hand-woven scarves or blouses (Guatamalan weaving is *gorgeous*, and those gifts were spectacular)... but it was one gift per family per kid.

The gifts were almost uniformly wrapped in real wrapping paper

(brought in from the US). Almost uniformly had a ribbon around them (with the ribbons saved because they would be re-usable the next time someone needed a present).

I got a couple nice things. A book. A blouse.

And then my gift from Whoopsie and Peckerhead.

It was in a used, wrinkled brown paper bag. No ribbon, no attempt to make it look like anything but "You are out of favor, you big-mouthed kid."

In it were two bent, battered, clearly used sticks. A pair of knitting needles – long, thin, painted gold but with some of the paint scratched off. And a small ball of red string. Used, ratty, thin string. Twine. Coarse, scratchy, thin red twine.

It was a gift (technically). I had not owned it before the exchange. I owned it afterwards.

But it was a "letter of the law, not a spirit of the law" gift.

They had to give me something. It was clearly the shittiest thing they could think of to give me, presented in the shittiest way they could think of to give it to me.

I looked at my gift – clearly a "we don't like you" gift. Looked at them. No smiles, no "Merry Christmas." No pretense. I had embarrassed the shit out of the guy who was the head of the Chiquimula mission in front of a room full of people who were supposed to see him as a *Great Man Doing Great Works*, who happened to be one of the big guys over all the Quaker missions in that area.

Whoopsie probably knew how to knit, since she'd owned that pair of used needles – but she did not offer to teach me, nor did she include any instructions or a little book or ANYTHING.

Fine by me. War had been declared. Two used sticks. A dirty

ball of skinny cotton string.

Okay, I thought. I can work with that.

Fifteen-year-olds are difficult people.

Contrary, obnoxious, full of alien hormones and horrifying desires they can't control and energy that has to go somewhere...

It's tough being fifteen in your home country (I know because after the earthquake, I got to do that, too.)

But in a foreign country, mix that with being a beginning speaker of the local language – so it was hard to make friends – and having absolutely NOBODY who will discuss or explain your alien urges and desires and changes your body is going through – remember, MISSIONARIES – and being cooped up in the mission compound almost all the time because WAR ZONE – and then ice this particular Hell cake with the fact that fifteen is the age where in Latino cultures girls become women – which means that to a certain sort of Latino male, this means “open season” has just been declared on YOU.

In those circumstances, you can become a really special kind of crazy.

I was all the way there. SPECIAL crazy.

So, hit on and touched and smirked at by scary guys if I dared to go out alone... (NEVER WALK ALONE)... followed by staying cooped up and isolated most of the time – (I'd been a day student at the Quaker boarding school in the mission briefly, but it ran on a non-US school year, and closed for “summer vacation” after the New Year's) I decided that I was going to teach myself to knit.

If I could get a revenge gift, I would engage in revenge knitting.

I would take those two skinny sticks, and that ball of string, and I would make something with them.

Problem: I knew shit-all about knitting.

But back when I was eleven, my friend Cathy W. had taught me to crochet. Cathy lived across the street from me in the Shel-Mar trailer park in New Phila, Ohio. I met her after my family got back from Alaska, where my parents were MORAVIAN missionaries and dorm parents in the boys dorm of a children's home. Completely different churches, dogmas, philosophies... Hey... I come by my special kind of crazy honestly, and I think I've even managed to tone it down a little.

So by the time I was fifteen, I knew **one** thing about making fabrics by hand.

You use loops.

For crochet, you use a hook and loops, and you can make sweaters, and slippers, and big blankets, and little hats, and extravagant lace tablecloths – and I have done all of those things.

Back then, though, I'd only had one ball of yarn (the buying of which was a big concession by my mother because we had no money) and one crochet hook, given to me by Cathy, either with or without her mom's permission.

I crocheted the same ball of yarn into the same square – over, and over, and over. Ripped back, worked on perfecting my stitches, ripped back again. By the time, three years later, that we took off for Central America, I was very very good at that one stitch, (double crochet). Good enough that I was satisfied, and had put the final version of the square and the crochet needle in the drawer, and had forgotten about them.

But... now I had a ball of string and *two* needles. And there wasn't a hook on either of them.

I had never seen anyone knit. There were no knitters in my family.

So how exactly did you use those things?

I knew I would be making loops.

So I tried tying a loop at one end of the string, and then winding the string around one needle in a big spiral. Then I tried to poke the other needle into the spiral to pull a loop through, and got... spaghetti.

It all fell apart.

The solution was not a spiral, then.

I considered that I'd had to hold a saddle on the back of a horse with a knot called a double clove hitch, and that these were sturdy knots that would save you from falling off the horse onto your head. Very good, very strong, very important knots.



So I worked a bunch of those onto the needle, made a loop through the first one— and it WORKED.

Pulled the string through the second one... pulled the loop across to the second needle... and... dammit... spaghetti.

But the first loop – half a clove hitch – had worked... so I made a bunch of those, and discovered that yes, indeed, I could pull stitches through a complete row of those loops, and they would not fall apart.

I did that to the end of the row, turned the needle around, and pulled the string through the first loop going the other way. And the next, and the next.

I did that for a little while, working back and forth, and got a definite fabric. I discovered that the direction through which I pulled the string changed the appearance of the fabric.

I then remembered the existence of a lovely wool sweater, left by some previous inhabitant of the room my sister and I shared, shoved down into the bottom drawer of the old wardrobe. It was ratty and moth-eaten, but it had cables and other fancy knitting, so I pulled it out, found a hole where there was a cable, and started unravelling, and I watched how stitches (including cables) were made by unmaking them, and then reversing the process.

I discovered that if I was very careful, I could pull off two stitches of my slippery cotton string, carry them over two stitches still on the needle, and while holding the loose stitches in one hand and squeezing really hard, I could move the two stitches I was crossing over to the other needle, put the two stitches I was pinching in my left hand back on the first needle... put the other two stitches back on the first needle, and then when I knit, I got a CABLE.

It took a number of tries and a lot of whispered swearing, because the string was small and slippery, and the needles were small and slippery, and even the tightest stitches I could make with slick cotton string fell apart at the tiniest provocation...

But after numerous tries, I had the first twist of the first

cable that held together and didn't cause me to rip all the way back to start over because I didn't know how to pick up dropped stitches that laddered.

So... Hot shit.

One cable down.

Literally unravelling the mysteries of the moth-eaten sweater one stitch at a time, I discovered how to make seed stitch the same way. And vertical ribs.

And after I had knit a front, and guessed at a bind-off – I think I just ran the edge of the string through all the raw loops, then tied a knot down into the side of each piece – I did a matching back, and two sleeves.

And then I sewed the pieces together with what was left of the string.

There were no edgings, ribbing or otherwise. And the entire sweater would have been a bit baggy on a Barbie doll, but not too baggy.

It wasn't lovely.

It wasn't professional.

But it was my very first piece of knitting ever. And finished, it looked like a real sweater.

It was cables and texture, taught to me by a moth-eaten sweater, two skinny, beat-up, gold-painted sticks, and a single small ball of red cotton string desperately unsuited to the purpose.

And it was a triumph for me.

I showed it to my mother when it was done. She stared at it. Said, "You made that?"

And I said, “Yep.”

And I grinned.

I didn't knit another thing until I was twenty, and had a lot of empty hours at night because I was doing a nursing residence at Butner in North Carolina. It seemed like a good idea to knit a sweater for my then-finance. It, too, was a real sweater – this time with ribbing and stripes because I bought a pattern at the same place I bought the yarn, and I figured out how to read it. And the sweater I made him looked good... until he put it on and I discovered it would have fit a moose.

But that's not the point.

HERE'S WHY THIS MATTERS.

The moment I taught myself how to knit was also the moment I discovered that, no matter what I wanted to do, if I wanted it enough to find a way – I could do it.

My motive for learning how to knit – at the time – was pure revenge. *You give me a shitty gift to punish me at Christmas, I take your shitty gift, spit on your punishment, and turn it into something really cool. The hell with you guys.*

It was a lousy motive.

But it was a good skill. And teaching myself that gave me the knowledge – years later – that if I wanted to teach myself how to write commercially viable fiction, I could.

I didn't figure THAT process out in one week. Teaching myself to write well enough to sell took me seven years.

But I did it.

And if you are willing to put in the work, to make the effort not just once but over and over again until you get it right...

you, too, can find a way, or make a way, and own the skills you yearn to have.

If you want to write **fiction... You. Can. Do. This.**

Get your free writing class... How to Write Flash Fiction That Doesn't SUCK!... HERE!

Contents © Holly Lisle. <https://hollylisle.com> All Rights Reserved