



Learn English Through Stories

B2 Stories

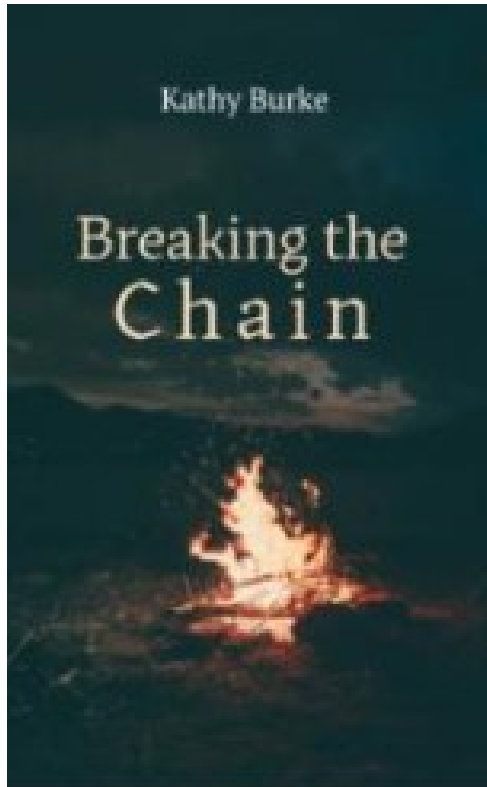
Intermediate Plus level

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Kathy Burke

Breaking the Chain



Breaking the Chain

By Kathy Burke

Juanantes Dios Rodrigues was a poor farmer. He was a good man, a good husband. He worked hard and lived a simple life.

One night Juanantes took a bottle of whiskey to the field behind his house. He didn't usually drink alcohol. He hated the taste, although people said it was better than most other pleasures in life. Some people had even found the "good light" after drinking alcohol. A person who experienced the "good light" was able to leave this earth and, for a short time, stay between two worlds, in a place where death couldn't touch them. This light meant good health, long life, happiness, good business. Everyone searched for this light. But Juanantes didn't drink - until that night.

There was no reason for his drinking - nothing to celebrate, no anger to drown, or sadness to forget. But he couldn't fight his desire on that night. When he had finished the bottle, he heard a voice. The voice commanded him to go to the top of a mountain called the Hill of Sand on the first Tuesday of the ninth month, at midnight. There he would find a large fire in the forest. He would see a bag by the fire. He had to approach the fire and pick up the bag before the fire burned it. Inside the bag there would be treasure and something else, a mandate. He had to do exactly what the mandate ordered him to do.

On the first Tuesday of the ninth month his wife, Cardenala, went with him to the Hill of Sand. They left at midnight, as the voice had instructed, and walked through the forest. They were afraid but excited at the same time. The noises of the night were all around them. Eyes shone in the dark, watching them.

Juanantes had told Cardenala about the voice during a moment of weakness, as he lay there recovering from his night of drinking. He knew now, as she pushed him forward in the darkness, that it had been a mistake to tell Cardenala. Since he had told her about the voice, he had had no peace. He couldn't work. His farm and his animals had suffered. Cardenala wouldn't leave him alone, day or night. Even in silence they knew each others thoughts.

To him the mysterious voice he had heard was like an evil curse. But not to Cardenala. To her it was a way of escaping from their poverty, the way to the "good light."

Juanantes wanted the treasure but at the same time he feared it. He wasn't sure he should do what the voice had commanded. But Cardenala's desire infected him. She decided for both of them. They would go to the Hill of Sand. They would do exactly what the voice had told them to do. They would find the

treasure. She planned. She worried. If the bag contained money, how would they spend it? If it contained jewels, who could they sell them to? She woke him up with her fears.

"The police might ask questions. If there's gold in the bag, what will we do?"

The more she pushed, the more full of doubt he became.

"I may be poor, but at least I'm happy," he told her.

She called him a coward and threatened to go alone. So they went together on that dark night.

At one point Cardenala wanted to turn back. She suddenly had a black thought. She could see danger waiting for them. She called to Juanantes, but it was too late. He didn't hear her. He didn't answer. He didn't even turn his head. There was no moon. Cardenala could only see his white hat in the darkness.

He walked on without stopping, without thinking. He wasn't cautious or indecisive now. There was another Juanantes inside his skin, fingers holding tightly onto his machete, eyes staring. What had caused this change in him? What was driving him forward?

At last they came to the fire, an enormous, blinding fire. Juanantes waited for a moment, silent, thinking. Should they turn around? Could they escape this? Forget it had ever happened? Cardenala said nothing. Then Juanantes rushed forward and saw, where the voice had told him it would be, an old cloth bag. He quickly took the bag, almost burning his face in the flames, and returned to Cardenala. Suddenly ambitious again and filled with curiosity about what was in the bag, he took Cardenala's hand and they ran from the place.

They could see nothing in the darkness. They felt the outside of the bag. Bones? And something heavier, with a weight like metal. Juanantes opened it and felt inside. It was impossible to see but yes, there 'were the bones of a man, a machete, and in a smaller bag, a bottle of whiskey and some gold coins. Was this the treasure of the dead? It was all a mystery. He found a metal box and opened it. Inside he could feel some kind of paper - a document. This must be the mandate.

The events of later that night have never been fully understood. In the early hours, when it was still dark, as Cardenala lay sleeping in their bedroom, Juanantes opened the metal box and read the mandate. The mandate told him to kill a man, Prudencio Salvatierra. Kill? Juanantes shook with fear.

He left quietly and went to a bar to have a drink. He needed a drink now, to calm himself. He needed to think. He was lifting his glass to his mouth when he heard someone say the name of Prudencio Salvatierra. The sound of that name

filled him with hatred. His glass crashed to the floor. He couldn't see. He couldn't think. He wanted this man's blood. He had to spill this man's blood! He pulled out his machete and rushed toward Prudencio Salvatierra.

"Fight or be killed like a dog!" he shouted.

Prudencio pulled out his machete. "Who are you? What do you want with me?"

Juanantes attacked him. There were screams. People were running. Tables and chairs were knocked over as people crowded around to watch. Juanantes was wild, with the strength of ten men. His machete came down again and again on Prudencio Salvatierra until the bar was red with his blood. Prudencio had no chance. Within minutes he lay dead, his body in pieces.

Later, Juanantes was questioned again and again by the judge. Why had he fought with Prudencio Salvatierra? Juanantes could give no answer. There was no logic. No, they had never met before. No, he was not an enemy - until that night. Until the moment when Juanantes heard his name, the name he recognized, the name that was written in the mandate.

Juanantes was found guilty of murder and sent to prison for ten years.

Cardenala found employment as a servant near the prison, so that she could visit Juanantes every Sunday. After many Sundays they began to talk of when Juanantes would be freed.

"What are you going to do?" asked Cardenala.

Juanantes heard her words again and again in his mind. What are you going to do? What are you...? Not we. He looked hard at Cardenala, as a policeman looks at a suspect, searching for signs. Was she planning to stay in the city? Was there another man?

"Tell me, Cardenala. Aren't you coming back with me?"

"No."

Her quiet answer, her guilt, hit him. For a moment he couldn't speak.

"All right. All right. But I must go back to our village. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I know. But I don't care what you say. I'm not going with you. I went to see the priest. He told me it was the work of the devil. I'm not going to fall into that trap again."

"The priest? Why did you go to the priest?" he asked her.

"My boss wanted me to. He was worried about me. He's very kind to me."

Juanantes knew it then. He knew that he was losing Cardenala. Prison was bad, like a kind of death. Four walls. Always the same four walls. The desperate faces. The waiting. The long, lonely nights. But losing Cardenala? No. Impossible. There was nothing he could do, though. When the evil light has fallen on a man, everything goes wrong. He would have to go back to their village alone.

The following Sunday Cardenala came to visit as usual.

"You've come," he said.

"Of course I've come. What do you mean?"

"Well, I thought..."

"You thought! You thought! You think too much!" laughed Cardenala.

In her mouth a new gold tooth shone.

"And this tooth?" asked Juanantes.

"Oh, my boss paid for it."

"Your boss again. And you paid him back?"

"Of course. Stop questioning me!"

Juanantes asked again. "Are you coming back with me?"

"No, Juanantes."

Short and sharp. It cut his heart.

"Well, at least..." He stopped. His voice left him. "At least this way I know," he finally managed to say. "These things happen to people who have swallowed the evil light."

His sad eyes grew hard as he watched Cardenala's face.

On his last day he gathered his few remaining possessions - a few clothes, old and full of holes now, and the torn pieces of a picture of Cardenala. He had torn the picture up, put it back together, torn it up, so many times. But still he saved the pieces.

He went to a hotel to stay that night and filled in the form at reception with his full name, Juanantes Dios Rodriguez. Then he left with no explanation. Why? The keys! Those large, heavy room keys reminded him of his prison cell, of hundreds of cells. He wandered around without sleeping or eating until his stomach ached with hunger. But he couldn't sit in the cafe, where people stood in line like prisoners. So he walked along the dusty road toward the mountains. He knew something still had to be done.

He had killed Prudencio Salvatierra ten long years ago. Now he had to obey the mandate's final order.

He went to where he had been living with Cardenala. Nothing had changed. Everything was as it had always been. The trees, the rocks. It even seemed that the same old dogs still, now, after ten years, slept in the sun.

Juanantes felt full of sorrow. But he wasn't doing anything. He wasn't living. And so, without further thought, he called on the wise old man, Tata Guamarachito, for help.

"It's no good being in this condition," the old man told Juanantes. "You're good for nothing. Nothing goes right. I know why you're suffering. As a young man the same thing happened to me. Yes, I can help you. I can help you understand what you're dealing with. I can advise you about what you have to do."

"But I don't want to do what the mandate ordered!" shouted Juanantes. "I have no enemies."

"It's not necessary to have an enemy."

"Yes, but to bury the evil light, this evil light, which by accident or pure bad luck I've fallen into, I know that I have to write a mandate, an order to kill someone. I have to put that into the metal box. But I keep telling you: I have no one to kill! It's hopeless anyway. The evil light has entered my body, like sand. I cough. I even cough blood! It's in me. It got into me in prison. I..."

As he was speaking he lost control and fell, coughing, to the ground.

But the old man was still not persuaded. "How do you know it's the evil light?" he asked calmly.

Juanantes told him that pieces of the evil light were everywhere. He saw them clearly, dancing around him, causing him to cough, giving him night fevers.

"Then get away from them," was the old man's advice.

But Juanantes asked again, with anger now, "How can I do this if I have no enemies?"

"Calm down. I'm only trying to help. And don't blame yourself so much. You've paid your debt in prison for killing Salvatierra. You killed fairly. The two of you faced each other as men, with machetes. Salvatierra died and you lived. If you hadn't followed the mandate to kill someone, you would have been killed yourself. Because it was written.'

But Juanantes was still unhappy. "It would be better if I were dead."

"Don't talk like that. In my experience it's never better to be dead than alive."

"What has to be done then? What must I do?"

"You must light the fire of evil light and write your own mandate to put into the metal box by the fire."

"But I've told you. I can't write this mandate."

"Juanantes, if you let me, I'll show you a way to break the chain of death, the chain which has caught you."

"No, Tata. If I break the chain of death, it will only bring me more tragedy. More sorrow! I..."

The old man interrupted. "The evil light that's around you is responsible for many deaths. It's time to put an end to it. I've told you that I can show you how to break this chain. Be brave. Believe in me. Write your own mandate. Use your own words. The words of Juanantes Dios Rodriguez, a man of honor. Then we'll do together what has to be done."

They arranged to meet in nine weeks, when the night would be at its blackest. On that night they waited, hidden behind some trees. They heard the sound of a horse coming, slowly, cautiously. Juanantes lit the fire. The horse and rider slowly approached the fire. The rider got down, with his gun in his hand. A moment passed. There was silence. Then the rider rushed toward the fire, took the bag which Tata Guamarachito and Juanantes had left there, jumped onto his horse, and rode away into the night.

"See how simple it was," said Tata Guamarachito, throwing his arm around Juanantes's shoulder. "Look at you! Already the evil light is leaving you. The sadness is lifting. But have you broken the chain of death? The bones, your machete - the same machete you used to kill Salvatierra - the bottle of whiskey, the gold, were all there in the bag. But you didn't order anyone to be killed. So what did you order instead? What did you write on that piece of paper, with your signature, which you put in the metal box?"

"That one thing I can't tell you. It's my secret."

"But you didn't order anyone to be killed?"

"No. I told you, I couldn't. I have no enemies."

"Then what was your order?"

"I repeat, Tata, that's my secret."

"All right. I respect that."

"Please forgive me, Tata."

"There's no need. Men with secrets are always interesting to me. But let me tell you. You're breaking a chain, a chain that has caused many deaths and destroyed many lives. I'm..." Tata Guamarachito coughed, the heavy cough of a smoker. "I'm close to 100 years old. But when I was your age... How old are you? About thirty? When I was your age, I fell into the evil light. I was ordered to kill a man, Belisario Consuegra, a man I had never met. A man I had never seen. But one day, I was at a market buying a horse and I heard someone shouting, 'Belisario! Belisario Consuegra!' My blood turned cold. I couldn't see or hear. I took out my machete, found him, and ordered him to defend himself or be killed like an animal. He fought. But I killed him. I cut him into pieces. The smell of his blood made me crazy."

"But did you bury your evil light with a mandate?"

"Yes, Juanantes. There was a man, a Mexican, my enemy. My mandate was found by Placido Salgaespera, and Salgaespera killed the Mexican with his machete. Salgaespera's mandate was then found by Remigio Huertas, who killed Salgaespera's enemy, and it has continued in this way. Say that you've broken the chain, Juanantes. Tell me this."

But Juanantes only sat silently watching the sunrise. He always watched the sunrise, but had never liked the morning. Now, however, freed from the evil light, it seemed to be the most beautiful dawn he could ever experience. Suddenly he wanted Cardenala. He wanted her so badly. But he stopped these thoughts as soon as they began. Why should he want her? He knew now that Cardenala was part of the evil light which had brought him to this place. Because of her, Prudencio Salvatierra now lay cold in the ground.

When the sun had fully risen, he offered Tata Guamarachito payment for his services. The old man wouldn't accept money.

"I want only to know your secret. The mandate that the horseman read."

But without speaking, Juanantes walked away.

He was going down the mountain when he suddenly changed his mind, turned, and started back toward Tata Guamarachito. Walking, then running, shouting, "Tata! Wait! I will! I will share my secret with you!"

When he reached the place where they had sat, he bent down and whispered in the old man's ear.

"Is that true? Was that really your mandate?" asked the old man, smiling, trying to hold back his tears of joy.

"Yes. Yes. That she too would be torn up when the picture was torn up. Now I know, Tata, that when I tore up Cardenala's picture in prison it began to free me, to free me from her evil power. Woman, when she goes bad, is the worst of all evil lights. Because of this, my mandate ordered the unknown rider to take the picture of the first person with an untrue heart that he found, the first unfaithful friend or lover, and tear it into pieces. There are many ways of destroying someone."

- THE END -