

Carnaval, Montevideo

First, to situate us in time and space: Friday, January 31, 2003, between 8:30 and 11:00 p.m. Uruguay time, which is two hours later than Eastern Standard this time of year, and which neither springs forward nor falls back, nor would it, for in Spanish, unlike English people always tell me, there are many words for the same thing, but rarely one word that means many things, and thus it is with *primavera* and *otoño*, which are seasons only, not verbs. We were watching the Carnaval opening parade at the corner of 18 de Julio and Rio Negro, the corner of the Plaza del Entrefero, named for a statue of fighting gauchos all jumbled together on their horses. The parade was a good parade, but it was what you'd expect from Carnaval anywhere. It was missing the elements that make Uruguayan Carnaval unique: the political-satirist, clown-dressed, a cappella singing groups, the parodists, the full drum corps. You could say that the people were excited and it was hot and there were almost-naked women and people dressed up with makeup or big heads made of papier-mâché, and the floats had a moon and stars theme, and my children were whining because they wanted a cheap plastic Power Rangers mask that I wouldn't buy them, but, in the end, it was another parade, and we would leave early because it was getting late.

So you can appreciate my interest when people all around began looking away from the parade and down the street at a gathering commotion. I caught the action already in progress: a shirtless man was surrounded by 1) all-in-black police with bulletproof vests and billy clubs, threatening but not connecting; 2) other police in white shirts and blue hats; 3) other police in yellow reflective vests; and 4) young men in white t-shirts with **SEGURIDAD** on the back. The shirtless man was yelling threateningly, insultingly, trying to get away smoothly, while a woman whom I took to be his wife was yelling and holding a baby in her arms. The uninvolved began yelling, too, all the

more when the shirtless man picked up a small, crying boy, presumably his son, and the police fell upon him with greater urgency, arms grabbing at the boy, others fending off attacks from the wife.

The struggle moved slowly down the street, dancing in and out of the shadows of leaves above, and as the crowd of jeering bystanders grew, the chaos muffled the music of the parade. I hung back, but my anger burned, and I surreptitiously took out my camera. I hadn't seen what the man did to deserve the police's special attention, but he was one guy against twenty, and now they were wresting his son from his arms and the boy was wailing and the police were shouting and the man was spitting in anger but impotent against the force that now descended upon and finally subdued him. I snapped two quick pictures before they shoved him into a white van and shut the sliding side door.

It was the second picture that did it.

I should explain that I realized that the police wouldn't like their picture being taken, even though they were probably within legal limits regarding use of force, and I had heard plenty of rumors in Uruguay about how the police take your camera and rip the film out, just like in the movies. Only a few months earlier, a friend of mine had scheduled an interview with a famous radio personality, Jorge Petinatti. He had driven his motorcycle across town only to be told by Petinatti that he would no longer grant the interview. As he turned to leave, my friend snapped a couple of pictures, which enraged Petinatti, who called his own security guards, then the police, who confiscated my friend's camera, tore out its film, pulled it full out of its canister. Then they took my friend to the station, booked him, and beat him up.

So when my flash lit up the scene for the second time and somebody muttered something about "there's a guy taking pictures" and several officers turned in my direction, I made like I was just casually turning around and strolling up the street while I put my camera away out of their line of sight.

They caught me anyway.

I played deaf the first two times I heard "Excuse me, sir?" but when I got tapped on the shoulder I had to turn around.

"Were you taking photos back there?" I was tempted to play like I didn't speak Spanish, but I didn't think I could do it convincingly.

Truthful: "Yes."

"That's not allowed. May I see your identification?"

Unmoving: "What do you mean that's not allowed?"

"You can't take photos of police proceedings. May I see your identification?"

Intimidating, intimidating: "I suggest you contact the United States Embassy if you have any problems with me."

"That won't be necessary. Your identification?"

Reasoning: "You're telling me I can't take pictures of a public event that hundreds of people saw?"

"I'll explain. Please come with me."

I was already going with him, and as we walked slowly up the hill several younger officers joined us. I recognized two of them—a Mutt-and-Jeff team, one tall, blond guy and one short, dark guy—from the recent fracas, and thought I recognized a woman officer from long ago, but it wasn't her.

As we passed where my friends and family were standing, I took the opportunity to slip the camera to one of them and to pick up my daughter. The tactic hadn't been completely successful for the arrested shirtless guy, but it seemed like a good idea anyway. I tried to be cool, but my heart was in my throat. We went looking for my wife, who had my identification.

Then more questions and bullying until Karina finally showed up, steaming. Her first words to the policeman were "What you did back there was criminal, taking that man away like that. And all of us here are witnesses."

Thanks, Karina. Just when I've got the man calmed down a bit.

"Miss, are you his wife?" pointing to me.

"How can you call yourselves public servants, the way you manhandled that guy?"

"Miss, you should show me the proper respect. Are you his wife?"

"Yes. What do you want with him?"

"Just to see his identification. He says you have it?"

I whispered in English that she should just give it to him, that she should calm down, that everything was going to be OK, and that it was because I had taken some pictures of the arrest. As I showed him my driver's license, I said to him: "Like I said, I think you need to contact my embassy."

"That won't be necessary. Wait here."

He walked away. Then it was Jeff in charge, with Mutt nearby, looking on. I negotiated with him to let me take the rest of my pictures at the parade (a little bit of righteous indignation heaped on to cover my nervousness), then he would develop the film for me and return all the pictures except the one of the arrest (they didn't realize there were two, and I didn't correct them; not my job). He and Karina exchanged contact information, and he showed us his ID card so we would know it was all on the level. I was relieved, and already thinking this would make a good story.

Then, to be nice, and to keep an eye on me, they let me past their barricade, up front to the pay seats, so I could take pictures to my heart's content, which I did: pictures of the dancing peacock-hat women and the rickety old black men with cotton beards and the corps of drummers in big-brimmed hats and knickers. Even in the absence of maids a-milking or swans a-swimming or any other of my true love's gifts, my mind was wrapped up in trying to remember how many dancers dancing and drummers drumming there were. (Nine and twelve, respectively; and it's *ladies* dancing, not *dancers*.) It was an ocular, aural feast.

But, like anything I guess, it got repetitive, and I was alone, my family behind the bars of the barricade, and I rushed to take pictures if only to get out of there.

I gave the police a small scare when I left without telling them to take a picture with my family on the other side of the barricade. But they caught up to me, and I explained that I was only finishing off my roll, and the short officer offered to take a picture of all of us.

When we were finished, Karina gave him the roll, looked him in the eyes, and said, "Remember, you gave me your word."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll make sure you get your pictures." He smiled. "Except the one of us."

And we were off, laughing about the experience, making stupid jokes, all the way home. I was already writing it out in my head, glad that I had taken those pictures, knowing that the story was already much better than just a parade. Every travelogue, it seems, has to have confrontations with the police, and here I had mine, though I had backed away from it when it threatened, forgetting the plight of the arrested man in favor of my own comfort.

Which begs the question of plot in creative nonfiction. I've caught myself thinking that life is plotless, that stories, true or invented, are impositions of a rational mind on malleable, pure experience. In other words, plot

is a human construct. But I can also believe that we actively seek out plots for our lives, whether it be in playing sports or falling in love or visiting new places or any number of things we do to entertain ourselves or to learn. And of course there are books that we read, and television shows and movies that we watch, and songs that we listen to, and long before any of these, even before books, there were stories. So how much of what a creative nonfiction writer writes was lived on purpose? It is fashionable to write as if all sorts of adventurous things "just happened," the underlying message being "my life is so cool." But what about travelogues, where a writer often takes on an incredible adventure on purpose, just to write about it, but so often still writes as if he's surprised at each new twist. It's slightly maddening to live for plot, because it never lets you rest. You're taking a leak and looking for things to write about. You hear about a festival, a demonstration, an exhibition, and even if you wouldn't have gone otherwise, you feel like you ought to, just in case something cool happens. And often, the sacrifice of getting off your duff was worth it, but sometimes it's not, and it always feels a bit contrived. When I saw the ruckus, I knew it would be something interesting to write about. I took out my camera, not exactly looking for trouble, but knowing that it was a possibility. All the while back and forth with the police, I was trying to say cool things, be a tough guy, so I could write myself that way. And how much of what I read in others' travelogues is similar? And does that make it worth less?

By then I had enough to write about, and I was happy, but I took my time, and before I could write the episode with an uncertain ending (would I get my film back?), I received a call from the second commander of the National Police—the *corazeros* (the word being unfamiliar, I didn't quite catch it then, but learned it later)—Major Mendoza. He immediately started explaining, with punctuating chuckles, that he had been made aware of the situation Friday night at the parade and wanted to personally apologize for his men's behavior. They were young, he said, and didn't know how things worked, and they should never have taken my film from me. "You're a visitor," he said, "and I want you to have a good impression of Uruguay." He would give me back my entire roll of film, nothing removed, and with his apologies. When could I go to see him?

Now I was confused, and my imagination began to feast on the uncertainty.

"Tomorrow?" I said.

"Good. How's ten o'clock?"

"That's fine."

"I'll send my men to pick you up at your house. What's your address?"

"Victoriano Alvarez 6131 . . ."

"And just because you're being picked up in a police van doesn't mean there's anything to worry about, ok? Everything is fine."

Now I really was worried. I normally eschew melodrama, but some part of me that has seen too many movies and read too much Uruguayan history was inventing a whole torture/disappearance scenario. Why couldn't he just send me the film with his men? Why did "apologize personally" have to be face to face instead of over the phone? Why would he specifically tell me not to worry? Why would he think I'd be worried?

I asked Karina what she thought. She wasn't any help. She's seen too many movies too.

So I called Arturo Dubra, my Tupamaro friend. He was more comforting. He was sure they'd give me the royal treatment, especially because I was an American. This from a man who *had* been tortured by the police and imprisoned for sixteen years. I figured I ought to believe him.

At just past ten on Monday morning the police came in a white van with "Serving Our Society" on the side. As I locked the gate behind me and ducked my head to get in, my mind was racing, my heart was pounding.

I was calm and collected on the outside, and I *did* go with them, so my rational mind was able to overpower my imaginings. But even as I made polite conversation with the driver (Where are you from? What do you do? What does *corazero* mean? ["breastplate"]) my eyes were wide, my calves were twitching, and my fingers were aiming at the door handle just in case.

We arrived presently at the barracks, an extensive white-walled compound near the corner of Propios (now officially José Batlle y Ordoñez) and José Pedro Varela. I was directed to an office near the front door of the main building, where I waited for a few minutes, shook hands with some policemen, and then entered. There I met a smiling Major Mendoza. He was wearing tight-fitting dark gray riding pants tucked into his boots. I tried not to stare or smirk.

He got right down to business, giving me the photos (already developed), and flipping through them to show that they were, indeed, all there. He paused on the pictures of the arrest. "These are them?" he asked.

"Those are them."

"No big deal."

"Yeah."

The pictures weren't very revealing. You could see some policemen (national and local), you could see a shirtless guy, you could see my wife (though I hadn't seen her when I took the picture), but there was no real hint of impropriety or violence. I supposed that they had decided to apologize and return all the pictures only after they had seen them. Karina was sure that I received such special treatment only because I wasn't Uruguayan. I had a lot going for me.

Major Mendoza repeated a lot of what he had said on the phone: that his men were young and inexperienced, that they should have never taken away my film, that Uruguay is a free country. He talked about his work as a United Nations peacekeeper in Angola and how every place in the world with conflicts is a rich place, rich in resources that people fight over. He showed me his plaque from the UN. We talked about how living in another culture broadens one's perspective, makes one understanding of others. I told him how Karina and I always spoke Spanish at home so our children would learn two languages, and how they spoke Spanish very well, but with humorous mistakes. He said he had been to the United States, but only in Miami. And he had been in charge of security when President George Bush Sr. visited Uruguay. He showed me a picture of himself and Bush smilingly shaking hands, and some other pictures with the president of Brazil and the president of Argentina. Somewhere in the conversation I mentioned that it's harder to drive in Uruguay because there are big busses and small mopeds and slow-moving horse carts, and he said that the horse carts were a social blight. "Those people, they don't do anything. They pick through garbage." I thought it was a harsh judgment, but basically true.

By now I was comfortable and feeling foolish for my earlier unease. Major Mendoza was a regular guy in silly pants with a family and a job to pay the bills and a desk phone that rang constantly that he didn't answer and a cell phone that rang less frequently but which he did answer, and it was after one of his cell-phone calls that he told me he had a meeting with some minister of something or other and would have to say good-bye. As I shook his hand and walked out the door he mentioned that he'd be working security at the Llamadas that Friday night, and I should ask around for him and he'd let me up front to take some pictures. I said I would, then his inferiors drove me home. They weren't the same officers that had brought me to the barracks, so

we had the same conversation I had had on the way in, except that the driver asked me if it was difficult to write a book. I told him it was.

It wasn't until later that I realized I had been placated, diverted, and maneuvered and misdirected away from that flash of indignation that had led me to snap the pictures in the first place. I was not handled the way a Uruguayan would have been handled, but I was handled nonetheless.

The Llamadas, or "Callings," are unique to Uruguayan Carnival. They began in the black neighborhoods of Montevideo in the middle 1860s, though their influences are from slavery times (before 1823, in Uruguay's case). Three or four drummers would gather during Carnival and, by playing their unique rhythm, call their companions to join them. Soon the practice expanded to other neighborhoods, and because the black population in Uruguay has always been small, and in perhaps uncharacteristic harmony between the races, corps soon included more whites than blacks, often with whites painting their faces black (a practice that is not continued today). The government eventually capitalized on the spontaneous acts, organizing them into competitions, concerts, and parades, and the drum corps expanded to include dancers, twirlers, acrobats, beauty queens, and old men and women dressed as slaves dressed in their masters' clothes. Though the imagery hearkens to grim times and events, the mood of the Llamadas is celebratory and always respectful of African and African-Uruguayan culture. The Llamadas, then, evolved into the drum corps' parade and competition. Today, if members want to "call" each other to practice, they use cell phones.

When we arrived at the Llamadas, as luck would have it, Major Mendoza was there at the first crowded intersection we tried. No searching for him, no asking around; there he was. So was Jeff, the short officer who had taken my film in the first place. So we all got through the barricade, Karina, her sister, and I, past the pulsing crowd, into the front row, and Major Mendoza smiled and assured me I could take all the pictures I wanted.

So I took all the pictures I wanted of the surprisingly unredundant procession of similar drum corps with their sponsored banners up front (All Power Replacement Parts, Angelita Pasta Factory, Bar Michigan), followed by young children playing drums and dancing, followed by strapping young men in traditional African dress, followed by huge flags twirled and spun by thin, colorfully dressed men, followed by scantily clad teenage

girls dancing, followed by old black men in top hats and fake white beards walking shakily alongside fat black women in bonnets and billowing dresses waving balsa fans, followed by voluptuous women in high heels and bikinis and multicolored peacock hats, followed by two peppermint-striped stick-twirler men, followed by two sequined flamboyant men, followed by three beautiful, full-curved vedettes, followed by between fifty and eighty drummers all in knickers and laces up their calves and wide-brimmed colorful hats banging out with sticks and hands complex interlaced rhythms on one of three drums, sizes large (*chico*), larger (*repique*), and largest (*piano*), so that it seemed the thunder itself were singing.

It happened again and again, with varying colors and varying rhythms, and, unlike at the opening Carnival parade, I never got bored.

That is what I want to take away from the Llamadas: that I never got bored, though the groups were composed of the same categories of people in the same order, and their rhythms were basically indistinguishable. I could have stayed all night (the parade ended after 5:00 a.m.), but Karina and Graciela wanted to leave around midnight. I want to say that a parade ought to be people walking and playing drums and dancing. No floats, no cars, no girl scouts doing nothing but holding flags and walking out of step. A parade should be a smile on every face, a display of talent and coordination, sweat and emotion. A parade ought to be thunder singing.

Awash, pounded by the beating, I thought of interconnections: *this is all because a drunken shirtless guy took a swing at a police officer.* (Or so the policemen claimed.) And my father said, "Life is cool. Even that shirtless guy's misfortune helped make your life a little more interesting." Again, harsh, but also true.

Among the many things I had said to pacify the policeman who first confronted me about the pictures, after I had told him to take it up with my embassy, was "I'm here writing a book about Uruguay, and I write about whatever's interesting." It was the truth: partly a threat, partly a plea, partly an explanation meant to allay his fear that I would turn the photos over to the anti-establishment press.

"Write whatever you want," he said, unfazed and tough, challenging.
OK, big shot, I will.