

Patrick Madden

## I Saw a Mountain

Montevideo, Uruguay—if you can accept Mar del Plata, Argentina, as Adam's apple—is the goatee on the chin of the harelipped, bulbous-nosed, east-facing profile of South America. It sits at the southernmost tip of the country, diagonally northeast across the Rio de la Plata from Argentina's capital, Buenos Aires. Approximately half of Uruguay's three million people live in Montevideo, spread out in hundreds of barrios along radians of streets and highways that spin off from the downtown like spokes on a half wheel. In the time I have spent in Montevideo, both as a missionary and a husband, I have lived in three spoke-end neighborhoods among people I have grown to know and love as much as any I've ever lived among. I am taken with the people and the places of Montevideo; it is as if it were my own discovery, a playground of wonder where I am at once insider and outsider, observer and participant.

Whenever I'm in Montevideo, I feel both accepted and somewhat out of place. My height and complexion are an almost giveaway that I'm not from the country and, coupled with my clothes, make it hard for me to blend in with a crowd. And although I speak the language with very few errors, my accent is close (even other Spanish speakers can peg a Uruguayan accent with its *zh* sounds for *ll* or *y* and its unique second-person-familiar *vos* conjugations), but not quite. Most Uruguayans are descended from the Spanish, but the melting pot is seasoned with people of all provenances, except for the original native Charrua, who were, as were the Eastern tribes in my own country, driven and killed soon after they were discovered. During the midday rush on Avenida 18 de Julio, the city's main drag, you might be surprised to see blond and even red heads among the sea of dark-haired, well-dressed men and women.

The English built Montevideo's electrical and train systems, and their railroad's black and yellow bee colors still adorn the uniforms of the football team they founded, Peñarol. Scattered in small enclaves throughout the country are groups of Russian

immigrants who retain their language, their customs, their style of dress, so that, even in the summer, you sometimes see them, colorful scarfs and skirts that reach the floor, flannel shirts, grizzled beards, and floral suspenders, as they walk about the town pushing carts selling cheese and milk. I once met a family of Irish, four straw-haired young boys with variously missing teeth and freckled faces; “O’ Nay-eel” they pronounced their name, and they couldn’t tell me the first thing about Ireland. Portuguese slave traders brought Africans first to Brazil, then to Uruguay, but South American economies have never been any good under the Europeans’ heavy hand, and blacks in Montevideo have always been officially free since 1813. Every February, to kick off Carnival, their heavy, frantic drums pierce the night, and their women, bulging in platinum bikinis and high heels, shake and dance while the crowds lining the streets of the Ciudad Vieja cheer. Brazilians, they of mixed African, Portuguese, and Indian stock, often come to Montevideo for the same reason Uruguayans go to Brazil: it’s not as far as the United States, but they say the money’s flowing and the jobs are plentiful. Because of Uruguay’s neutrality in two world wars, it has become a home for Italians, Slovaks, Arabs, Japanese, Germans. A dentist named Adolfo Perez who once worked on my teeth, a tall blond-haired blue-eyed man, lives only a few blocks from the Barrio Judio, several blocks of multicolored two-story tenements, each home a different color than the next, alternating through the rainbow’s hues in what looks like a giant-sized lifesaver roll.

When my father learned that I would be living in Uruguay for two years, he told me to let him know when I found “Monty’s Video.” I have not yet found it—not even a Spanish variation, something like Monte Video—and maybe I never will. But the strange name of the city (this, after all, isn’t La Paz or São Paulo or something easy) begs an explanation. There are two stories in wide circulation about the origin of the capital’s name. Both hail back to the earliest Portuguese explorers, whose expeditions “found” Montevideo from right under the Charrua and Guarani Indians who had been living there for centuries. One story says that a Portuguese ship’s navigator was keeping a record of high points on the southern coast of the yet-unexplored lands as the explorers made their way west from the Atlantic and into the Rio de la Plata. As he counted, starting from nobody knows where, his maps showed the sixth such hill as that on the western hook of land overlooking the small port of modern-day

Montevideo. Because they were traveling from East to West, and because they were writing Roman numerals and speaking Portuguese, the navigator marked his map with the shorthand, “Monte VI de E. O.” That is, “Sixth Mountain from East to West” and only a dropped-e away from the current city’s name.

If that story sounds a little improbable, then you may side with most Uruguayans I asked, whose version of the story is simpler. As the Portuguese made their way along Uruguay’s southern coast, the sailor in the crow’s nest saw a faraway hill through the fog. “*Monte vidi eu!*” he shouted. “I saw a mountain!” Just how or why the crow’s nest shout came to be the city’s name was never explained to me. But what’s undisputed in both these accounts is that the city was named for el Cerro, a strategic hill on the western hook of land that encloses Montevideo’s bay, a hill of fantastic stature in a country of mostly pasture and very little variation in elevation.

Carrasco, a spoke-end on the east, with its beaches and fruit stands, strands of pine forests in sand, bridges and shopping malls, is home to the Montevideo rich. They make their money selling drapes and clothing and CDs and no-stick pans on Avenida 8 de Octubre, working the banks and movie theaters on Avenida Uruguay, manning the hospitals and inter-departmental bus terminal on Avenida Italia, selling autos and appliances at the malls: Montevideo Shopping or Portones. People’s homes in Carrasco are wired with burglar alarms, barricaded by eight-foot fences and window bars, guarded by Dobermans and German shepherds, hidden behind palmettos and plantain trees. On the beaches people play sand soccer, sand volleyball, sand paddleball. There are fewer dogs than people in Carrasco, one of the only places in Montevideo that can make this claim.

In Colón, where my in-laws live, I walk east from their apartment complex, a Death-Star-like conglomeration of gray four-stories around a central brick tower, to get to Plaza Colón, Club Atlético Olimpia, La Pasiva restaurant, and the center of action. The streetside *carritos*, gleaming silver boxes on wheels, send smoke signals to the orange and purple sunset. Grilling meat smells fill the air: *chorizos, milanesas, hamburguesas, chivitos*. Fifteen pesos buys you a *milanesa completa* on a *tortuga* roll: a thin fried breaded steak with lettuce, tomato, onion, mayonnaise, ketchup, mustard, cheese, bacon, ham, hard-boiled egg slices, peas, corn, pickled cauliflower, broccoli, carrots, and jalapeños, pressed flat between the two halves

of the roll with a flat iron so it won't fall out and served in a bag so if it drips the bag will catch it. Teenagers on tricycles cart tape decks and heavy speakers that repeat ad nauseam advertisements for the local stores: "Super Totis: *con gran variedad de productos que usted necesita para su hogar-r-r. Cada miercoles recibe un diez por ciento de descuento en frutas y verduras.*" With my wife I have often walked west from her parents' apartment, into the fields and woods, through the high grass and bushes, past the giant ombu tree with an immense hollow among its roots, where, she says, a hobo used to sleep, past the grove of ten-foot-high scrub trees where escaped lunatics from the nearby mental hospital hid out, past the crumbling brick tower and abandoned underground wine cellars, through a line of dense trees and eroded footpaths and horsepaths, to the farmers' orchards, where Karina and her dogs and her friends came as children to steal fruit in autumn.

The streets of Piedras Blancas, in northeast Montevideo, between the Danubio football stadium and the hippodrome, are concrete slabs divided at even intervals and spaced at a perfect distance for the kids who slap a tennis ball with rough-hewn wooden paddles back and forth between themselves all summer long. On the corner of Aparicio Saravia and Belloni, soldiers armed with machine guns guard a staunch-white military *cuartel*, and they will not answer questions. Just past them, at a tri-intersection nicknamed La Tablada, traveling merchants and junk salesmen gather for the *feria* on Sundays. They spread out blankets and set up wooden booths, leaving their horses grazing while they drink, shirtless and reclining on the grass, showing their wares. Once a friend of mine saw his own bike, which had been stolen three days earlier, for sale at the *feria*. He noted it curiously and kept walking. A few blocks in from the *feria* are the brothels and the hovels. The corners are strewn with dead chickens, red ribbons, and popcorn, the sacrifice meant both to bless and curse, depending on who crosses it. Among the squat, overgrown houses on *calle* Homero you'll find several Macumbero gathering places, their windows laced with rivulets of hardened candle wax, their insides laden with sacrificial altars, statues of saints and demons, golden chalices and bowls of popcorn. The apartment where I lived, one of six units linked by a narrow alleyway in the owner's backyard, was bombarded at all hours by Piedras Blancas' favorite *cumbia* music, a painful mismatch of horns and synthesizers with sobbing, sensual lyrics. At Christmastime on my street the people erect a hanging scarecrow Judas every third house or so. During the weeks

prior, the children have been petitioning, "¿*Monedas para Judas?*" and they've used the money to fill the straw men with fireworks. At the stroke of midnight the Judases are up in flames, the song of frogs falls silent or is buried under the crackling explosions of thousands of fireworks, the darkness flashes bright in machine-gun-quick flashes, the pungent smoke drifts with the wind through the drainage canals and past the high trees, west to the hippodrome, near the corner where the transvestite prostitutes lie in wait, where someone has painted, in white letters outlined in red, an ironic call to revolution:

FEDERACION URUGUAYA DE ANARQUISTAS: UNASEN!  
URUGUAYAN FEDERATION OF ANARCHISTS: UNITE!

"*Peatonos*" signs in Montevideo are like limited edition prints, each one seemingly different from the others, as if commissioned of different artists. One *peatones* sign features two satchel-toting, fedora-topped men who, it was pointed out to me, resemble Jehovah's Witnesses. Another strikes a familiar motif—that of school children walking hand-in-hand—but the characters' slant seems off, as if they were about to fall over, and the thing suggests drunken stupor. My favorite sign, the one that inspired me to someday (not yet) form a band named the Peatonos, and even suggested the music we might play, shows a single pedestrian: perfectly round, black head, slightly curved, thick lines for arms and legs. He's leaning forward slightly with one fist in the air and one behind, and seems to be ready to mosh. More than "Please watch for pedestrians," this one seems to be saying, "Beware."

The joke about walking around town is somebody asks you, "How'd you get here?" *¿En cuál viniste?* They mean "In which bus?" *En el once*, you say, and it's funny because everybody knows there's no bus number eleven. I always assumed they meant that each leg looks like a number one; when you put them together it's an eleven. Although I never became proficient at memorizing the seemingly hundreds of different bus lines and their various routes, I knew the ones I needed most: the 130 and the 148, which took me from Avenida Garzón and Calderón de la Barca to downtown, the 105 or 151 from the corner of Belloni and Carlos Nery to downtown, the 468 or the 2/77 combination from Carrasco to Colón, one hour winding through enough streets to pick up almost everybody, it seemed, just to make a ten kilometer trip as the crow flies. Every

February 11 each third bus you see is headed to G<sup>TA</sup> DE LOURDES, usually filled with old women saying the rosary and fanning themselves and jumping to the shady side of the bus whenever anyone gets off and a seat is freed up.

Most of the city buses are owned by their drivers, and so each bus has its own special flavor. Most drivers listen to the radio while they're driving, and that means anything from American and British rock standards (lots of Queen, lots of Guns N' Roses, lots of Rolling Stones) to old-time tangos by Carlos Gardel. The kids enjoy the new wave of Latin Pop: stuff you hear here nowadays like Ricky Martin, Enrique Iglesias, Shakira, and stuff you'll probably never hear, Auténticos Decadentes, Enanitos Verdes, Pericos. Every bus is modeled after a basic style, though the paint jobs differ to denote one of seven major companies. Behind each driver's seat is a sheet of Plexiglass meant for protection and advertisements and individualistic expression. On these windows into the drivers' souls I have seen posters of the Virgin Mary, John Lennon, Che Guevara, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Marley, the Sacred Heart of Jesus; bumper stickers that say no smoking, no spitting, no cursing, no drinking *mate*, Help Keep Your Montevideo Clean; political stickers for Millor, LaCalle, Ramirez, Tabaré, Sanguinetti (who won the presidency in 1985 and again, after a five-year hiatus, in 1995); banners for soccer teams: Nacional, Peñarol, Danubio, Liverpool, Defensor, River, Boca; smiley faces, marijuana leaves, Garfield, middle fingers, droopy dogs, majestic horses, How's My Driving? Call 1-800-ANDA-CAGAR. You get on the bus in the front, pay the *guarda* who's sitting just inside to the left, you find a spare plastic seat or, like as not, stand holding a metal rail that runs down the center aisle. When your stop approaches you make your way to the back door, hit the button or pull the cord or make a *ch-ch* sound to advise the driver, then hop off quickly; some drivers never make a complete stop.

On the bus, I have seen old women with plastic-knit shopping bags full of vegetables, and groups of schoolchildren wearing identical white tunics with identical blue bows under their chins, and young girls in tank tops and flip-flops carrying towels on their way to the beach, and longhaired young men wearing torn blue jeans, and studious women in white blouses and navy knee-length tight skirts and nametags, and black-cloaked bearded men with stovepipe hats and curls down past their ears. An intracity bus ticket costs only about a dollar, and you can get on and off anywhere along the route

for the same price. The deal is even better for vendors, minstrels, and mendicants, who, whether by law or only by tradition nobody could say definitively, are allowed to ride a few blocks for free, as long as they're shouting or playing or passing around the collection plate. Though I have seen out-of-work construction workers with children to feed, ragged women selling plastic bandages for double the price you'd pay in a store, fast-talking con men selling sets of magic markers that will run dry within a few days' time, panty-hose salesmen who demonstrate the durability of their hose by tying them on the handrails and poking them with shish-kabob spears, and children so dirty you suspect they've strategically smeared their faces in mud, I have only paid out pesos to the musicians, one time a pair of Peruvians I knew playing *quena* and *churango* and singing, who gave me back my money with interest the next time I saw them by treating me to a home-cooked meal, Peruvian style, which meant lots of spices. Food in Uruguay is well-seasoned, but never *picante*. A friend of mine once gave a kid some Big Red gum, and even that was too "hot" for the kid's palate; he had to spit it out and gulp down a soda.

Once, at night, another missionary and I were late getting home and decided to catch a bus instead of walking. We stood under the corrugated metal roof of the nearest *parada* and held out our arms in the customary signal when a bus approached. The driver slowed as if he were going to stop, then opened the door, and shouted "*¡Huevos!*" ("Eggs!" but more in line with slang "Nuts!" or "Balls!") before driving off without us. Once a man standing in the aisles, though there were seats to spare, shouted out to no one in particular, "*Tengo frio frio frio frio frio. Tengo fria fria fria fria fria.*" He held out the first syllable "*ten-n-n,*" then the rest followed in staccato succession: always five *frios* or *frias* in a row, always alternating between being masculine and feminine cold. Once, during a drought in which an entire sector of northern Montevideo had been without water for several days, all the buses that passed were stopped at a makeshift toll booth on Avenida Aparicio Saravia between San Martín and Mendoza. Masked juvenile bandits ran through each bus they stopped, collecting ten pesos apiece from each of the passengers. It took almost two hours for word to spread to all the bus lines so that the buses could be rerouted. Once an elderly, feeble woman tripped on the stairs as she was getting on the bus, spilling her change into the aisle and under several passengers'

feet. Immediately three people jumped up to help her, and another young man got on his hands and knees to search for her money. When he couldn't find the full fare, he reached in his pocket and made up the difference.

One afternoon I received a phone call that Graciela Lopez, a woman I had known in Piedras Blancas, was in the nearby Sanatorio Americano. During the four months I had lived in her neighborhood, she had cared for me as if I were her son. She fed me once a week, washed my laundry, baked cakes and cookies, and allowed me to sit inside her family's home by the fire and watch the World Cup, which, in those days, was in round-the-clock coverage on the television even though Uruguay hadn't qualified. The details of her condition were scant: a few days earlier she had felt extreme stomach pains, and her doctors felt it best to send her *urgente* to a better-equipped facility. When I arrived to see her I was escorted to the ICU and entered her room alone. I was unprepared to find her in the state she was in. There were several prone figures in shadow, and I originally looked past her, searching the room for her familiar and cheerful face. She was stripped and covered by a sheet to the waist. Thin, naked breasts flattened against her obtrusive ribs. Her skin was taut and grayish, marked by pocks and bruises, and I was sure I was seeing death. I prayed for her, my ears ringing with the steady rhythm of the machines, my jaw fixed sternly against the pain, then left the room in silence. On my way down the stairs I wept.

Sometimes when I imagine heaven, the scene is like this: swords beaten into plowshares, infirmities healed, a view of the water to the horizon, hope where there was none. Graciela Lopez has climbed to the top of el Cerro, one of her daughters arm-in-arm with her, the other daughter chatting feverishly with me and my wife, catching up. On top of the hill is the museum built from the remains of an early Spanish fort, glittering white in the late-afternoon sun, its cannons soldered shut, but still watching over the river bay. They show me where the *Graf Spee*, a Nazi warship, was scuttled after overstaying its welcome in the neutral waters of Uruguay. As we pass in and out of rooms, they show me the artifacts of war: the uniforms, bayonets, medals, paintings, the relics of their forefathers' fights for independence. But I am paying only half attention. I am watching Graciela carefully, noting her strong step, asking her how she could have possibly made such a full recovery. "I went to see you," I tell

her. "I know," she says. "I am here because of your prayers, and the prayers of others like you." As the sun sets, I catch her silhouette against a backdrop of swirling sky, and though the fort's walls reach a few feet higher, there is nothing above her atop this hill. She looks all around her, soaking it in, smiling, and tells me again the story of the sailor in the crow's nest: "*Monte vidi eu! Monte vidi eu!*"