

IN MY LIFE

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Jose Ercila: I can still remember his name, though his wife and daughter have faded now to nameless frozen images. I can catch the faint sound of his wife's voice, see her sitting on the bed nursing the infant, remember my darting glances to her face, my intense focus on her eyes. Perhaps that's why I can't remember her in any position other than calmly rocking, casting dark shadows to the corners where the cardboard wall met the bark-stripped stick frame. I can see her short black hair, her round, pretty face, long eyelashes. It was easy to focus on her face, pleasing. Unnerved by the sight of her breasts, I turned away and spoke sideways at her until I noticed I was staring at her face again.

She and Jose and the baby lived in their stick home in someone's backyard, perched atop an overgrown quarry and overlooking the westward expanse of Carmelo, Uruguay. During the day I'd sometimes see Jose riding through town on his bicycle making miscellaneous deliveries, and he'd wave, almost losing balance on the cobblestones with only one hand left to steer. Their door was an actual wooden door, but its hinges were several loops of twine, and its lock was a chain poking through a rough-hewn hole in the door and around a fat stick, the trunk of a young tree. The roof was corrugated metal that someone else had thrown away, and underneath strategic points they kept pots to collect the water.

The grass inside the home was nearly as healthy as the grass outside. One thin, worn path made its way from the door to the bed. Most of their clothes were stacked neatly in sideways boxes on top of their dresser. There was no bathroom, no running water, no electrical cables running into the home. To power their television set and lightbulb they used a car battery.

"How do you get it recharged when it runs down?" I asked Jose.

"Every eight days I take it to a man in town who charges it for me," he said. "It costs me thirty-five pesos." Seven bucks a week for three staticky channels of soap operas and talk shows.

Karina Cabrera owned four dogs and four cats and ran with them in the fields behind her apartment in Colón, Montevideo. The fields were shrinking yearly as new co-op apartments sprouted slowly, mostly on weekends and holidays, because their future owners donated labor to

lower their monthly payments to the banks. Karina wore overalls and t-shirts, studied science and English, and painted Disney characters on tablecloths and ties. She was seventeen when I first met her, haloed by the early morning light shining through the glass church doors behind her. Her long black hair fell naturally to her shoulders, her thin frame draped a colorful Indian dress, her deep brown eyes told me she was somehow different from other girls who were always chasing gringos and giggling. In my spare moments I spoke to her mother, asking questions about the family.

Ana Ritondole was my landlady in Paysandú. She was a middle-aged spinster whose father had left her a considerable inheritance by Uruguayan standards, but she still woke up early every day to work at PayCuero, the local leather-goods factory. She was good natured and meticulous, and she often surprised me with her joviality. One afternoon I caught her cutting a photo of a butterfly out of a magazine. She shushed me and explained, "Es para Solomon." My missionary companion there was an avid amateur nature photographer and had been trying to snap a picture of a hummingbird for the past several days. When she called—"Solomon, venga, venga. Depacito."—I followed him outside to where she stood hunched over and pointing at a beautiful Monarch perched on a flower. He quickly grabbed his camera and crept stealthily toward it. Just as he said, "I can't believe it's not moving," and snapped the shutter, the paper cutout fell from the flower, flitting sideways and landing face down. Ana doubled over, laughing, her gold tooth shining brightly, and Solomon and I laughed as much at her as at how she had tricked him. According to Ana, she was the only sane and decent person in the neighborhood. Everyone else: Macumberos—spiritualists—whose animal sacrifices and blood rituals were meant to curse her. She led a solitary life, feeding cats that weren't hers and taking care of the house methodically each day, and apart from her interaction with the two of us, she never seemed to deal with anyone. The neighbors next door had a ram's skull atop an old metal milk jug, and I often wondered.

There are neighborhoods that seem to exist now only in my mind, peopled by phantasms who shouldn't matter to me, but do. Many of the places have become disembodied, as if there were no way to get to them

and no way out. I can trace my path just a little ways, past the goat that was always tied to the rusted swing set, up a small hill, but then dead end. Or around a bend across a small bridge, then haze. The people I knew exist only insofar as our paths crossed, and although this is always the case to some degree, there are so many of them, and I am so far away now that the sense of disconnectedness is heightened. I shuffled about Uruguay, moving every three or four months, just enough time to meet a few people, get to where I started to care, then move on. The Spanish language, the different culture, the reversal of seasons, the loss of some of myself as I took on the persona of the church I represented; these all conspire to cut these people off and make them totalities.

The former boxer, now in his late fifties, whose plaques and yellowing photographs adorn his walls; the young man who put all his money into his motorcycle only to have it stolen at gunpoint by some neighbor kids; the escaped convict who police can't find because they're scared to enter his barrio; the kids dragging a cinder block across the road to stop cars, pop open their trunks, and grab whatever they can find; the possessed man, laughing out loud, shouting, "Espiq Inglis! Espiq Inglis!" and "We killed him—your Jesus—nailed him to a cross!"; the housebound widowed sisters for whom I often ran errands, bringing spinach and boñatos; the bicycle repairman, hidden behind hundreds of rusting unclaimed bicycles, shouting out hellos whenever I walked past in the street; the man who had erected his shack above some abandoned underground wine cellars and who one day gathered his friends and me to lower him through the broken ground down into one, where he lit a fire and explored until we pulled him back up; the Lebanese carpenters who custom built a bed long enough for me and who called my friend "Charlie" even though his name was Hubble.

Hugo Andrioli, his wife, seven children, three dogs, two chickens, and two cats lived across town from and in worse conditions than Jose Frcila. Their house was made log-cabin style with sticks, and plugged with black plastic garbage bags. They had two beds inside, lumpy mattresses, dogs lying on the pillows, black plastic perforated by thatch sagging from the roof, a palpable sensation of fleas jumping and biting, no "facilities," no kitchen, one small gas garrafa for cooking and one pot caked with pasta, chickens scratching in the dust. They smiled often, never seeming embarrassed by their poverty. The two teenaged daughters tried to wash and keep their clothes clean for school, and I imagine what they must have been

going through in such a small town, where everybody knew their house and their situation. The little ones ran naked outside with knotted hair, chasing the chickens and splashing in the drainage canal that ran a few feet from their home. Everybody said Hugo was a nice enough fellow, but you can only make so much working manual labor changas one day yes the other day no. That man's too lazy, they said. It's a shame about those children.

One young man lived somewhere in Danubio on an east-west street cut off on the west by a canal of bathwater and sewage, a haven for rats and tall grasses and garbage. A bridge led across the barrow to tall canes of bamboo and wooden ranchitos, where patchy dogs cowered in the shadows and snapped angrily when you walked by. Somewhere near there, connected perhaps only in my memory, lived a woman, old and white and thin, whose husband couldn't give up smoking even though the doctors said it would kill him; and it did. In Carmelo one afternoon I helped a man clear a field, hacking at intertwined bamboo roots, laughing that we were, literally, *bajando caña*, which is what the people call reprimanding. In the same part of town one night I finally understood "you don't have to turn on the red light" when I saw the lights, heard the commotions, saw the women smoking in the shadows. Nearby lived an intensely zealous evangelica woman who once asked me to close my eyes, hold her hands, and repeat a prayer. We were standing only a few feet from the street, and I worried what the people passing by might think.

The places, I can't get back to; the people, I can't fully remember. Sometimes I worry that they might not remember me either. As if my own existence or validity depended on their memories in the same way their existence in my head depends on me. I feel as if my mind only skims the surface of the complex relationships I've formed and almost forgotten. I can't begin to fathom the chaotic interplays and crosses, the weavings and departures. It's as if we're all somehow connected, but nobody's paying attention; nobody cares.

My memory is sketchy on the black man with a limp he got from the army, whose house I helped paint, but I remember vividly the orange we used and the ladder I brought with me, balancing it on my shoulder as I rode a bicycle down a hill to his home, almost catching it on an overhanging branch and spilling out into the path of a bus. Al-

most. I can't remember how many men were with me slapping wet cement on the walls of another house I helped build, but my wrist, even without the trowel, remembers the technique, can imitate the fluid motion. Of the countless people who learned a little bit of English from me, Serrana Rodriguez was my favorite. She was only five and, having been born blind, was an excellent listener. Her mother wanted her to have it all, though the family had nothing. I can still hear her reciting, "One, two, tree," slowly, in her sweet voice; I can see her smiling, her head swaying back and forth with each syllable.

Bismark Echeverría owned a draperies and housewares store on Avenida 8 de Octubre, in La Union, near downtown Montevideo. During the time I knew him, his house was undergoing renovations and expansions, and his and his children's cars were often parked in the street. His Mercedes was the only car with an automatic transmission that I ever saw in Uruguay. He had paid dearly to get it, he said, bastard customs officers. Every other Wednesday I met him at La Pasiva Restaurante across the street from his store, and he treated me to lunch. I looked forward to those days and spent his money rather more wantonly than I would have my own. He gave generously, and I ate heartily. Perhaps I jumped too eagerly at the chance to live as I had in the United States. A missionary's monthly allowance could never allow a meal in a restaurant. But as I consider the kindly old man, always sitting waiting for me at the same table, always wearing the same brown tweed jacket, I wonder if his kindness might not have been better spent on someone more needful, more deserving.

Teresita Fernandez and her husband, Jose, were expecting for the fourth time during the months that I knew them. Three previous pregnancies had ended in miscarriages, and Teresita was still bothered by the term "aborto espontaneo." She wondered if she had done something wrong. They rented a storage shed on Avenida Zorrilla in northeast Paysandú—whitewashed cinder block and thatch roof, deadly spiders perched in the corners—and Jose raised chickens and worked the night shift in a bakery. When their daughter was born, after months of mandated rest for Teresita, handfuls of pills each day, and several emergency trips to the hospital, she was hopelessly deformed. I remember my mixture of joy and sorrow, the feigned congratulations, the silent relief that she wasn't mine to take care of.

I held her when she finally came home after nearly three weeks in the intensive care unit. Her crook arm dangled uncomfortably, tapping my side as I bounced her, and I can still see her crusted tears, still hear her weak cry.

Among the many platitudes offered as consolation to mourners is this: "He lives on in our memories." Ironically, those same memories are the very stuff of mourning. My wife's brother, whom I never met, was killed by a jealous roommate in the military who may or may not have been simply "cleaning his gun." Though Bernardo's pictures adorn the walls of the apartment and his military plaques and medals shine in the early morning light, his family almost never speaks of him. When I ask my wife about him she starts to cry. He was the oldest child in the family; she, nine years younger, the youngest. Because their father was in and out—traveling the country by bus with two fifty-pound bags of garlic that he sold piecemeal at the almacenes and spending the money in the bars before he left each town—their mother went to work at a relative's factory. Bernardo was in charge in the home from the time he was twelve. My wife considered him her best friend and most loving parent. Still, most of the stories she tells me about him are the ones she couldn't have witnessed. One afternoon young Bernardo saw the garbage men passing by the apartment and remembered that he hadn't taken the garbage out yet. He quickly grabbed the bag and ran out, yelling after the men to stop. "Señor recolector de residuos!" he said. "Señor recolector de residuos!" He caught their attention with that. One of the basureiros accompanied him back home and told his mother, "You have a very polite little boy, Señora." He told her what Bernardo had called them, and Bernardo explained, "My teacher said we shouldn't call them 'garbage men' because they're not *made of* garbage." Karina laughs as she tells me this, then she's quiet, and I don't know what to say.

Karina Cabrera was the only person I've ever met who solved the balancing nails puzzle on her own. You need fifteen nails with wide heads, nothing excessive, but enough to grab on to the other nails. Hammer one of them an inch or so into a wooden block. This is the foundation; make sure it's steady. The challenge is to balance fourteen nails atop the one. After fumbling for a minute or two, pathetically trying to will chaos into submission and force the mass of nails to defy gravity, most people give up and ask for help. But Karina sent me away, vowing to balance the nails before I

came back the next day. What Karina figured out was that the nails need some kind of structure to hold them together. This sort of thing doesn't just happen on its own. To build the structure you lay one nail flat on the table, as a base, and lay twelve of the others perpendicular to it, alternating side to side, one this way and one that way in equal numbers, heads catching the shaft of the base nail, until you're looking at something like a fish spine: one nail in the middle and twelve other sticking out from it at right angles. Top it off with the last nail, parallel but opposite the base nail, then lift from the bottom. As gravity pulls, the twelve angled nails will form a sort of roof, interlocked like fingers, their heads eagerly grasping the top nail and holding them in place. When perched atop the foundation, the structure is sound enough to be jostled and spun, its low center of gravity giving it stability and balance.