Evansville Review. Vol. XII (2002).

PATRICK MADDEN

We Lost Gonzalo

Near the end of calle Treinta-y- Tres in Carmelo, Uruguay, a little over halfway to the river, where the houses thin out and the grass goes uncut, there is an odd house: a large stucco two-story with balconies and shutters. People flow constantly in and out along a long, winding rail of dirt cut into the grass. Most of the house's occupants are members of the Glattli family, though it's difficult to tell who is related to whom, and how. Elder Espinola and I, Mormon missionaries, always rode around the house to the east side, to a ragged doorway cut into the cinder blocks of the basement walls to see our friend Gonzalo.

From the time he was very young, Gonzalo walked with a limp in his left leg. His parents often worried, but Gonzalo's teachers and the local doctor said he was just looking for attention. He could run and play with his brothers and the other kids who would chase away the cows and play soccer almost every afternoon in the empty field next to Gonzalo's house. But the limp got progressively worse, and Gonzalo complained of pain, especially in his upper thigh. By the time he was fifteen he was using crutches to walk and could no longer play soccer with his brothers and his friends. The doctors in Carmelo, no longer willing to dismiss Gonzalo's complaints, didn't know what they were dealing with, so they sent him to Montevideo, four hundred kilometers away. In the Hospital de Clinicas, doctors discovered a tumor on Gonzalo's spine and cancer in the marrow of his leg. The decided to operate immediately, worried that the cancer could spread to his vital organs. They decided to transfuse new marrow and remove the cancer on his spine in the hopes of alleviating the pain and staving off the spread of the cancer. When his mother was finally able to see him the next day, Gonzalo couldn't move his legs. Doctors said it might be temporary, that he could be experience some sort of post-operative complications, but whether by some slip of the knife or a necessary evil, they had left him permanently paralyzed from the waist down.

In the time I knew him, five years after his operation, Gonzalo was studying computers, English, and cooking. He spent his time at home playing chess with whomever he could find, and he listened to all the American music he could. Whenever his mother yelled for him to turn it

down, he said he was practicing his English. He had become a Mormon a short time before his tumor was discovered, and though the ordeal had helped cement his relationship with members of his new church, both in Carmelo and in Montevideo, he rarely attended church meetings on Sundays anymore.

It was because of Gonzalo and his brothers that I learned about Spanish patronymics. Not because of anything they told me; it was because of their names themselves. I knew that the Irish used Mac, Mc, or O' to derive their last names. The Dutch use Van or Vander; the English and Scandinavians use –son or –sen affixes. Still, though I had hear of so many Fernandez, Hernandez, Gomez, Rodriguez, Ramirez, and Gonzalez families, it wasn't until I met Gonzalo, Ramiro, and Rodrigo Glattli that I realized the -ez also means "son of."

In the waning summer months we took to spending our days off exploring with Gonzalo and Rodrigo. Carmelo was a town founded by Uruguay's Father of Independence Jose Artigas himself, meaning there were lots of historical sites, and more recently it was becoming a popular yachting port. Gambling was legal there, and the casino owner had built an animal preserve around the casino borders. He gave paradise and protection to the nandu and carpinchos, small ostriches and large rodents, whose less-fortunate relatives Gonzalo's older brother Ramiro hunted illegally near the river. Carmelo also featured the country's only rotating bridge, an impressive orange arch of steel which spanned the Arroyo de las Vacas on the southeast corner of town and rotated, instead of raising itself, to let boats pass by. The people in town said the he who leaves across the rotating bridge always comes back. With the blend of the rustic historical and the modern luxuries, we spent every Wednesday on the road with Gonzalo and Rodrigo, liberated from our ties and long pants, with sandwiches and water bottles in our packs instead of scriptures, and the wind blowing freely in our faces.

We went on like that for nearly two months, but in particular I remember on afternoon when we wanted to see the new balnearia, the resort beach that was being constructed several kilometers to the northwest. There was basically nothing between Carmelo and the beach except for tall trees spaced at even intervals flanking an endless expanse of vineyards and few cow pastures.

The trip was long, and Gonzalo's moto-wheelchair, a custom-built yellow machine that had been given to him by the Rotary Club, was too loud to permit much conversation. But Gonzalo kept us entertained and well rested. Well rested by letting us hitch on to his moto and stop pedaling, and entertained by swerving from one side of the empty road to the other, and by steering his poor brother, on a rickety Schwinn, into the

ditch.

Twenty minutes into our trip we noticed a bloated cow lying in the sun a few meters inside a barbed-wire fence. Engrossed by the sight, Elder Espinola, Rodrigo, and I stopped and explained to Gonzalo that we'd just be minute. He sat at the edge of the road idling with a smile on his face. I pulled my camera from my backpack, hiked up my socks for protection from burrs and thorns and the three of us made our way cautiously through the tall grass, ducking to step between strands of barbed wire, and into the field. The smell of rot and expiration gasses was repulsive, and thousands of flies buzzed around the swollen carcass. We took turns posing for smart-alecky pictures, this is the sort of thing you find in the Third World, I seem to be saying with a cheesy grin and extended arm showing off my find Vanna White style. Rodrigo grabbed a stick, covered his nose, and began beating on he distended hide. The cow's legs shook a little, the flies from deeper within were disturbed and flew out of its face angrily, but thankfully the cow didn't burst.

For a few minutes I was back to the ideas and attitudes of my childhood, when anything strange was interesting, and I dared myself closer to the grotesque and the sickening. Thinking about it later, though, the even became memorable because of Gonzalo, whose wheelchair confined him to the road, watching. He kept a good face about it, so that I never stopped to think he might not enjoy watching us goofing off in the sun, or that he might long to be back to normal and to run across the field. Maybe he wouldn't have minded the nauseating odor or the burrs of the flies if he could walk again.

When we got to the beach, quite a distance from the main road through a sparse pine forest growing out of the sand, I was struck by the tranquility and seclusion of the place. The strip of naked sand shone white in the sunlight, an unsure border between the wooded land and the wide river stretching off the horizon. A few hundred meters in either direction the land hooked into the river, smiling where the pines and the rocks met with the water and pinched the ends of the beach. We had left the construction of cottages and recreation facilities behind in the shade of the trees and were left with only ourselves, a rusted, washed-up buoy. It lay on its side; half dug into the sand, but still stood taller than my head. Rodrigo and Elder Espinola clambered up its side by grasping on to a rusted chain, while I set my camera on a piece of driftwood and ran back to be in the picture. There's Espinola reclining on the buoy's tilted base, Rodrigo squatting, holding on to the chain, me reaching as high as I can to show the buoy's size, and Gonzalo sitting a few feet in front of us, confined and smiling.

We raced our bikes from one end of the beach to the other, our legs burning from pedaling against the resistance of the deep sand.

Gonzalo watched and cheered. We took off our shoes and waded in the water. Gonzalo got splashed a little. I gave him my sunglasses to wear and we made our way cautiously out to the end of the pier where the concrete rose three meters out of the water. On our way we passed a woman sitting with her head in her hands, her elbows braced against her knees—the lone figure we had seen from afar. When Gonzalo offered her a boisterous "buen dia" she looked up in tears and whispered back, "si." We went on to the end of the pier.

Another picture, this time taken by Rodrigo: Gonzalo in the middle, big in the photo, smiling in my shades and giving two thumbs up. The wind blows hard from our left: both Espinola and I are giving Gonzalo rabbit ears. Behind us a metal-framed signal tower and small whisps of cloud against sky.

The next week we visited Gonzalo again. He was sitting outside listening to the radio from inside his room and talking with his brothers. Almost as soon as we said hello he asked, "Remember that woman we saw at the beach? On the pier?"

We did.

"You know why she was sitting out there?"

We didn't. Espinola said, "She wanted to go fishing but forgot her pole?"

"She was going to commit suicide."

"Did she do it?" I asked, wide eyed. The idea that we could have saved her and didn't suddenly hit me. It took a little longer to think that we didn't know that she was thinking about suicide.

"No. But she was going to. She got in a fight with her husband, and her kids weren't home, and she just took off for the balnearia. He's just a drunk anyway, her husband."

"But, how do you know? How do you know she was going to commit suicide?"

"Everybody knows now," he said. Gonzalo's aunt knew of the woman's sister, and in Carmelo everybody knows everybody else's business anyway.

"But how's she doing now?"

"Seems like she's okay. She's spending a lot of time with her kids."

In the following days and months (even now) I often thought about the woman. I tried to picture her face. The best I can get is an overweight woman with short hair, sitting hunched over, dejected-looking. Then I wonder if I've made up the looking dejected. Though I never notice what others are wearing, it seems to me she had on blue jeans and a blue button-down shirt. If I'm not confusing her with someone else at some other time, she had left a blue bicycle leaning against the concrete at the

edge of the sand. Everything blue.

When Gonzalo told us about her aborted suicide attempt, I began wondering about the woman—what she was thinking—though I never gather any more information about her. I'm not so much interested in the fight with her husband or her reasons for wanting to end it all, but I want to know why she didn't do it. I like to think it was because of Gonzalo. Maybe a little bit. Maybe you're hesitant to just jump in because the water looks so cold, so you sit on the pier to steel yourself and all of a sudden you're not alone on the beach anymore. A vibrant young man rides by in a wheelchair motorcycle, his stick legs contorted, his sneakers impeccably clean, crazy sunglasses hiding his eyes. You've seen him before in town, always happy, and though you've never spoken to him, today he says "good day!" You know it's not, but maybe you think that your problems aren't so bad when you compare them to being paralyzed. Maybe. Still your husband's breath reeks of cheap wine and he sits out back with his friends while you're inside cooking all morning. He never says thank you, never helps the children with homework, and never brings home a steady paycheck. But maybe you can leave him. And your children are healthy. What about that boy's poor mother? What about the day she found out he'd never walk again? You begin to feel a little selfish, not much, but you're recovering from the gloom that has encompassed you since the morning when your husband beat you. After the boy and his friends are gone you slowly inch away from the edge, pull your legs under you, and start the walk back to the beach with a new resolve.

Or maybe you're a gringo missionary, one year of service done with one more year to go. Sometimes you get down, thinking about home, wishing you could listen to all the new music that's coming out, feeling sorry for yourself all alone and struggling with the language, with the culture, with the food, with the refection. You wonder sometimes why God doesn't listen to you, why it has to be so hard. Then you meet this kid named Gonzalo.

I wonder at the friendship we had, so quick and so sparse. With my demanding schedule of missionary work, we had only Wednesdays to get together for fun activities like going to the beach or touring Carmelo. And I was only in Carmelo for four months, and I don't think I met Gonzalo until at least a month, so how did we become so close with so little time? Or were we as close as I remember? What's more, Gonzalo was a justifiable part of the missionary work I was doing: he was an inactive member of the church, so we could visit him to lift his spirits and animate him into going to church on Sundays, though we never did achieve that second goal, and very early on I stopped worrying about it. So what does that mean, that, in some measure, it was my job to be his friend? And

what does it meant that I can't remember our conversations in any detail? Can't reproduce here a single meaningful thing Gonzalo ever said to me? What effect did it have that he was crippled? Did I feel pity for him? Was that my motivation? How much did it matter that Gonzalo, unlike so many others, wanted to know me, Patrick Madden, the person behind the interchangeable gringo Mormon just like all the others who've been in the town since the late 1940s?

I don't know, except to say that I must have felt pity, but I don't think that was all; and I wanted badly to be known as myself, not as automaton; and I scheduled visits with Gonzalo on the same folded yellow weekly planning card with other appointments that I have since forgotten completely, but my motivation to see him was not the same as with those other people; and I have un unreliable memory: it captures feeling and importances much more readily than it does words. And as for the time: maybe you don't need a lot of time to grow to love another person so compatible, so beautiful.

One of Gonzalo's favorite songs was "Tratar de Estar Mejor" by Diego Torres. He played it constantly on a tape he had made from songs on the radio. His mother said he listened to it whenever he felt alone or discouraged. The song's advice: "Try to live life to the fullest. Try to be better off." I can't say that the song would be more than another insipid nostalgic love song to me had I not learned the lyrics from Gonzalo. Now it's inextricably tied to him. I helped him with the English lyrics of songs like "The Sign" and "Interstate Love Song." I promised to send him tapes of my favorite American music once I returned to the United States, and I did.

Before I left Carmelo, I saw Gonzalo late at night at the Plaza de Independencia, where he often came at night; but this time he was there to say goodbye before my bus left to take me to Montevideo. We knew I wouldn't be coming back, at least not for a long time (the rotating bridge doesn't get into specifics). Though it was past eleven o'clock, the plaza was filled with people. At one end a converted blue bus advertising "The Gorilla Woman" was busy collecting money from thrill seekers who, after a few minutes, emerged from the back of the bus with quizzical looks and chatted excitedly with friends. Street vendors lined the sidewalks, and the rich odor of their milanesas, chorizos, panchos, and the like filled the air, almost tugging at the pesos in my pockets. We had to shout to hear each other over the din of the summer night crowd.

We ran through the preceding months, laughing and high-fiving, making fun of Espinola, picturing Rodrigo rolling over his bike in the ditch. I mentioned the church for one last time, but now it was a different sort of request. I wasn't worried so much about his soul or about the

numbers of people in the meetings each week, but as a friend I wanted him to feel he belonged. He believed, he assured me, and left it at that. I asked if he still had the puzzle I had lent him a week earlier, one with eight metal rings on stems protruding from a wooden base, and with a wire hoop wand threaded through the metal circles. He had wanted to solve it, remove the wand from the rings, liberate it, and so I had told him to work on it in his spare time. The lesson of the puzzle was to "endure to the end."

"I can't find it," he said.

I smiled, knowing that he was lying, but it was okay. "Well," I said, "if you ever find it, go ahead and keep it." His mother had told me he worked at it every day.

Gonzalo smiled a bit, and then my bus pulled around the corner.

Though it seemed we had talked about almost everything we had done and how we'd enjoyed it, we couldn't get through goodbye. I stepped onto the bus silently with a quick wave.

More than three years after I last saw Gonzalo, I got a letter from another friend in Carmelo. "Write to Gonzalo," she said. "He's been in the hospital for a month. Es bastante grave." That same day I wrote out how much I cared for him and how much I missed him. It was hard to shoot the breeze one-sided; with Gonzalo our conversations lasted for hours, playing out intricate lines of philosophy and religion mixed with the culture and news of the day, but there was never anything rehearsed of planned about it. I never had to wonder beforehand what I 'd talk with him about. In my letter I told him I was studying literatura inglesa at BYU para un master's, which I didn't know how to write in Spanish. I told him about my son who was beautiful and growing and learning quickly and who could almost walk already. I though about cutting out the part about walking, but in the end I left it in. I though I'd give him hope and strength to fight through whatever problems he was having. People in Uruguay always exaggerated about their sicknesses; bastante grave couldn't be that bad. I told him I'd see him next time I was in Uruguay. Two months later another letter told me, simply, "We lost Gonzalo." I closed my eyes and put the letter down.

I wonder what it was like for him in the end. No so many years before he awoke to new life without the use of his legs. From the joyful innocence of boyhood straight to a kind of hell. His mother told me he was depressed for a long time; didn't want to see his friends, didn't want to go outside. He asked his parents for a Walkman and spent his days killing batteries. The family moved to the basement and gave Gonzalo the room by the door. From then on everything had to be planned, calculated. But in time he grew to accept his condition, and one day he decided to go out

with his mother to the store. He built from there.

And now, if what they say is true, it must have been something like a reversal. When he was young he had no idea how serious the operation was. Nobody told him. It's not certain whether his paralysis was a necessary result of the surgery or an accident. Certainly he was unprepared. But they say he spent his last weeks preparing this time. He knew condition was worsening, and he talked about death without fear. He'd lived enough in his incapacity, lost enough of his boyhood dreams, and changed enough of them for new ones that he now always showed a good attitude about life while living with his pain. This time he was aware of what was happening. And he knew how he would wake up.

What did he think about when he closed his eyes for the last time? Could he still feel the pain? Did he know when he looked up at his mother and felt her hand stroking his cheek what would happen next? Where he'd be? How his family would take it? Did he know when death came, or did he slip away into unconsciousness, subconsciousness, superconsciousness? Did he feel the way I imagine he felt, hope he felt—free of his chair and wheel? Welcomed into his rest. Did they speak? Or did they just know—he, who bore the other's pain, forgave his sins, and he whose pain had purified him?

This past year, two-and-a-half years after Gonzalo's death, I returned to Carmelo, just as the rotating bridge predicted. I was hurried and hemmed by my bus schedule—I got in just after eleven and had to leave again by six-thirty to make it back to Montevideo—and each family I visited wanted me to stay longer than I could if I were to see everyone. I waited until the end of the day to borrow a bicycle and ride out west on calle Treinta-y-Tres to the Glattlis' home. I was unsure of what I would say or who I might find, but I felt I needed to go.

There were people on the balcony playing cards and drinking mate, probably Gonzalo's distant relatives I assumed, and a radio blared The Rolling Stones. I noticed their quizzical looks and gave a quick salute, but I didn't recognize any of them. In any case, without my white shirt and tie, I didn't expect that any of them would recognize me. Around the side of the house I found Gonzalo's father watering plants. I had rarely spoken with the man when I was a missionary, but I knew who he was, and I felt good when he said, "You're Gonzalo's friend. Have a seat." He shook my hand. "I'll call my wife."

When Gonzalo's mother saw me she ran to where I was still standing in the shade near the chair her husband had offered, and she hugged me. "Madden!" she said. "I can't believe it!"

I stumbled through a perfunctory yes it's me so good to see you. The three of us talked for a few minutes about how's it going, how good to

see you, it's been so long, what are you doing with yourself, and then Gonzalo's mother began to cry. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that you make me remember Gonzalo. How much he appreciated you, Madden."

I was glad to be talking about Gonzalo, glad they were not upset that I had come precisely to talk about Gonzalo. "I miss him a lot," I said.

What was it we said? Platitudes and truisms, praises for the dearly departed. I knew it as I was hearing myself saying how much Gonzalo meant to me that I was doing him a disservice by reducing him to the words I'd learned and rehearsed for such occasion, but at the same time the words rang true. In the mounts of Gonzalo's mother and father, the prepackaged sentiment I would normally criticize became meaningful. He was their son; what else could they feel for him but love and loss and regret? He was my friend. I missed him. For a while that was okay.

I can't remember much else that we talked about, or I don't think it important enough to tell you. I checked up on some facts of Gonzalo's illness, explaining that I had written an essay about Gonzalo and our friendship. They told me the details, correcting some of the misconceptions I had: how Gonzalo had always walked with a limp, how the doctors thought he was faking, how the family never dared question the experts, how Gonzalo loved music, how his father, a private, quiet man, who usually let his wife buy birthday and Christmas gifts, bought Gonzalo a Walkman when he was in the hospital in Montevideo, how they lied to him telling him it was just a matter of time before he could walk again, how one day, after nearly a year of shut-in depression, Gonzalo surprised his mother as she was leaving to go to a fair. "Let's go, Mom," he said, and he went with her.

The bus was due soon. We said goodbye. I rode off under a slight drizzle, a spotty sun shower that I escaped as I was still riding down the dirt path toward the road. I was alive, vibrant, observant, looking for meanings in the scene surrounding me, seeking a sign, finding nothing but the world staring back at me. The scene was this: wet streets, the dusty taste of dirt roads stirred up by a light rain, a cool breeze kissing my naked arms and naked knees, trees still and half shaded; a bright blue sky relaxed and sighing, a brilliant sun shining, illuminating a tranquil world going about its business without noticing me, the smell of tortas fritas from every doorway; a giant billowing cloud so big I can't fit it all in my scope of vision, and the passing day, and the passing time.