

Patrick Madden

YBAR ROSSIMO, MAN OF LEGEND

Ybar Rossimo was the first guy I met who fit himself into a miracle story. He was a slight, sinewy man, slightly balding, who almost never wore a shirt and who sipped his *mate* all afternoon in the shade east of the brick home he had built himself and which he continued to build little by little. I was a new Mormon missionary in Uruguay, shining with optimism, assigned to work in northeast Paysandú alongside a wise redheaded former skaterat from East Saint Louis who had been in Uruguay for over a year and who knew Spanish well. Ybar worked when he needed money, fixing motorcycles mostly, and his backyard was strewn with rusting parts; frames and tools hung from tree branches and oily rags lay crumpled everywhere. He spoke slowly and deliberately, his tongue caressing the back of his teeth, visible through the gaps, as he talked of his great interest in the world's religions. He listened intently to our stories about Jesus in the ancient Americas and Joseph Smith's prophetic calling.

Elder Howell and I found Ybar some time during my first month in Uruguay. We didn't say we *met* Ybar; we *found* him. *We* because we always worked in pairs. *Found* because he listened to us. *Found* like Columbus found America. Others who turned us away were not found. Something in the rhetoric is distasteful to me now. I don't think I felt it then. Without much thought about it I used the lingo handed down by generations of missionaries. In any case, Ybar was immediately enthusiastic about our message. He took a Book of Mormon with some passages marked in it, and we visited him again a few days later.

I know that's what happened because that's what always happened with people who accepted the book, and many people accepted the book, between ten and twenty a day. But nothing was so vivid for me about Ybar in particular in the first few days after I met him. The days were long and hot, my calves were not yet used to constant pedaling and walking, the food or the water wreaked constant havoc on my intestines, I fell into bed every night and dreamed of missionary work, not because I longed for it, but because my mind continued

racing after I took off my tie in the evenings. I had learned enough Spanish in my two-month pre-mission training to say the things I most needed to say, and my vocabulary was rife with religious terms, but sparse in terms for many everyday things. And no matter how accurate my pronunciation, my ear was not yet trained to pick up the rat-a-tat-tating machine gun sounds of Uruguayan Spanish. I never before believed that language determines memory—I'm not sure I believe it completely now—but I believe my struggle to understand the language around me contributed to the hazy memory I have of my first few months in Paysandú.

Because Ybar spoke slowly, I was able to understand him more than I could most other people. Because he was patient, he coached me through difficult words and phrases. He gave me basic definitions for the words he was using, and he interpreted my gestures and simplistic words into new vocabulary for me. In our afternoon conversations I noticed I was picking up more and more of the language, and I was remembering more and more of what was going on. Our meetings were typical of missionary discussions: we presented a lesson, allowed for questions, scripture study, and interpretation, and Ybar followed agreeably along.

Ybar became legendary one afternoon in January. Elder Howell had gone to Montevideo, and Elder Solomon had taken his place. Ybar wanted to be baptized and join the church, he said, but before that he had something important to tell us.

"That first day you and Howell came to visit me," he said, "I remembered a dream. In my dream I was lost and lonely. I was hurt and filthy, with no rest, no place to go. When I tell you I cannot tell you what it was like. It was a long time; I was searching. Then I saw two angels, and they came to me. They were dressed in white, resplendent like the sun. I could not see their faces. One of them took me by the hand, and I knew I had to follow. I knew everything would be right. When you came to me, when Howell took me by the hand, it was the same thing. That is why I listened."

I doubted my ear because I doubted what I thought he had said. But I knew *angeles*, and I knew *sueño* and *blanco* and *resplendiente como el sol*. This was religious vocabulary. Almost immediately I remembered the stories I had heard just like this one of heavenly messengers who prepared people to listen to missionaries. Some people had seen exact faces, known names beforehand, been told in

audible voices to listen to what the missionaries had to say. Sometimes visions came moments before; sometimes the visits seemed to be real people in the middle of the day; sometimes people were called back from despair and filled with joy at the sight of the white shirts and ties. I wanted to ask Solomon to make sure I had understood, but he was talking to Ybar, asking him about the experience, and I couldn't understand either of them very well. I tried to think back and see Howell shaking Ybar's hand. I wondered what part I played in all this. It was Howell's handshake that spurred the memory of the dream; the angels in the dream were faceless, not dressed like missionaries. Was one of them at least taller than the other? I do not know.

I have to reconstruct that first meeting, as I tried to do that day when Ybar shared with us his dream, when the meeting first took on a significance greater than that of the thousands of first meetings I have since forgotten or melded into the common experience. In memory, then, it was midmorning, middle of December, the middle of the geographical bounds of our assigned quadrant of Paysandú, a mid-sized city midway up the western Uruguayan river-coast, at a house midway up (I look at the map I have folded away in a file) the upper half of Proyectada 22, a two-block street connecting Argentó with Solano García. Ybar's house is brick-red brick; window frames mortared into wooden rectangles, half bricks aside and above; rusted bars on windows, half-rusted corrugated tin roof, thin rusting black metal door on rusted hinges; tree-framed patio around back under clipped, leafy branches still green but drying, dying. The air is filled with the retching of hidden cicadas; a neighbor is burning compost, smoke wafting visibly upward then dispersing with the wind, and its acrid smell fills the neighborhood. Ybar sits on the eastern side of the house in the shade, drinking *mate*, when he hears clapping outside his front gate. He gets up, removes the loop of wire between shoulder-high hedges, invites us in. Howell takes his hand firmly. *Good afternoon, brother. We are missionaries.*

Then Ybar was baptized and, for as long as I remained in Paysandú, faithful in his church attendance and service, leaving behind old habits and radiating a happiness and confidence that he attributed to his conversion.

Which would be a good ending to the story. Generally, missionary folklore never goes much past this point, and so I am almost hesitant to mention the part where he never got paid for a few jobs he had done and had to move to Montevideo looking for work. The part where even when he came back to

Paysandú, people later told me, he stayed home on Sundays and began smoking again, and drinking. Where the few times I returned to Paysandú to visit I stopped by his house and never found anyone home and left him notes to let him know I had been there, but, as far as I know, he never went back to church. And I want to tell him that it doesn't matter, that my friendship and respect aren't conditioned on his church attendance, that I'd like to hear from him anyway, that if I knew he'd be there I'd go to Paysandú next time I'm in Uruguay just to see him and to talk with him and introduce him to my wife and my children and to thank him and to tell him it's okay. We still recount the story of David's glorious defeat of Goliath, even though we know the future infamy of the faithful boy who was too small for armor.

But it is hot and there's not much time and the bike I've borrowed is wobbly and the seat's too low and my knees bang on the handlebars when I forget to pay attention, and Ybar's hedge is overgrown and there is nothing hanging from the branches and the low wall seems lower, as does the door, which is locked with a chain and padlock, but I knock anyway, peering through the frosted glass between bars looking for the Book of Mormon he always kept on the small table in the entranceway, but, of course, it isn't there.

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