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East of the River of Birds

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I'll See if I Can Make It

Paysandú/Solomon/Feb.94

NOT everyone Elder Solomon and I taught had a spiritual experience. After several failed attempts at a second visit to teach the baptismal *charla*, we were finally able to sit down and talk with Veronica Dos Santos about her reading in 3 Nephi and Moroni's promise. We arrived at the gate of the house where she lived and I clapped my hands loudly to call the attention of the people we saw sitting quietly in the shade, but who were making an effort to ignore us. After some silent mumbling, which I guess was their debate to elect a representative to talk with us, they didn't tell us she wasn't there, like they usually did, but instead motioned for us to enter and a rough, middle-aged man called out "*Pasen*, come in." Soon Veronica came through the plastic beads hanging in place of a door, book in hand, and invited us to sit with her a few meters from the others. We sat in frayed folding chairs under the strands of a sort of willow tree. The ground was worn down to hard dirt by the women in sandals who hung clothes on the line over head and by the patchy dogs who kept us with our hands always in the air and our books protected in our laps. They got their licks in every now and then anyway. The sun was hanging low in the sky as we said our opening

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prayer; then we leaned forward, elbows on knees, with that look that meant we were getting down to business, and we were sincere about it. I guess at the time Solomon was feeling a combination of laziness and inspiration, because he had me start out the discussion, which meant I'd be making the baptismal invitation in principle seven.

Things went as well as they could with a daydreaming investigator whose answers to our memorized questions were seldom more than a few words of agreement. I was straining to send the Spirit her way. In fact, I was straining to send the Spirit Elder Solomon's way too, but maybe he just realized what I was naively unwilling to accept: that Veronica, with her wandering eyes and startled looks whenever we talked directly to her, just wasn't very interested in our message. When it came near to my time to invite Veronica to be baptized, I started fidgeting with my shoes, standing one foot on its side and landing the other on top of it, molding the instep curve in one sole with the forefoot of the other like Africa to South America in Pangaean days (and wondering about the time long ago when I could have walked, or swam, from Montevideo to West Africa, and why, until 1978, had these formerly neighboring peoples been so different in the eyes of the Church). I started paying more attention to the dogs chasing each other than to what Solomon was saying about the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Then Elder Solomon's voice broke my lethargic trance. "*Elder Madden va a explicarle como estos principios y ordenanzas deben hacer una diferencia en su vida.* Elder Madden is going to explain to you how these principles and ordinances should make a difference in your life." I looked intently at Elder Solomon, who nodded his approval or his encouragement or maybe his relief at being done; I always had trouble reading him. I shifted to Veronica, flipped the page in my discussion booklet, took a quick glance at the page, and began to repeat, with all the emotion and accent I could muster, the words to the last principle. By the time I was on page two, I was really on a roll, so that I didn't even flinch when I got to the powerful baptismal invitation. My MTC practice was coming through for me, and I could feel the emotion of this important moment. I asked Veronica, in good commitment pattern form, "Will you be baptized on Sunday, the twenty-seventh, at one o'clock in the afternoon, by someone having the proper authority?" Then I looked up with a slight tight-lipped smile and bright encouraging eyes.

She paused briefly to look at her dogs, who by now were rolling in the dirt, then at Elder Solomon with a puzzled look in her eyes as if to say, "what is he saying?" But she didn't say that. She asked him, "When is it?"

He glanced at me with an I-told-you-so smirk and answered her, "Sunday, the twenty-seventh, at one o'clock in the afternoon."

"Oh. Okay," she said. "I'll see if I can make it."

Gimme the Goats

Belloni/Haynie&Davis/Feb.95

One night, two missionaries, Elders Haynie and Davis, were riding home through El Boro, one of the toughest parts of town. This is the same area where Elder Gray and his companion waited hours for a re-routed bus that never came and saw the local mob flip and burn a car whose driver wouldn't pay at their makeshift toll booth. Minutes later a police car drove up a hill, turned a corner, then immediately came flying out, wheels screaming, amidst gunshots and threatening shouts. "The Boro" borders on our area, just west of Avenida Belloni. As for Haynie and Davis, they were riding home one night on Casavalle, probably the second worst street in Montevideo. It was past time to be home in bed, but either their need for numbers or a true desire to save souls made them stop when a scraggly man without a shirt appeared from out of the shadows and waved them down yelling, "Stop! I want to talk to you."

They put on the brakes and straddled their bikes in order to take a look around, but before they could even present themselves, the man slammed a gun into Elder Haynie's neck. I wasn't there, so I can't tell you exactly how it went from there, but I can tell you what eventually got out, when missionaries bragged about the incident afterward. When the thief yelled "*dame la chiva!*"—slang for "give me the bike!" (*chiva* really means "goat," and I don't know why it came to mean bike)—they, unfamiliar with street-tough lingo, shyly took off and offered their backpacks, their "*mochilas.*" From there I can only imagine the hood's astonishment and nervous doubt: had they misunderstood? were they trying to be funny? And I can picture him and his loose band of hyenic accomplices almost worrying enough to take the backpacks and leave without the bikes. But eventually, with the

help of signs and more high-pitched, frantic yelling, he made his point clear (I doubt they got a language lesson and an explanation, "No, actually I wanted your *bicicletas*. *Chiva* is only a slang term we use here in the ghetto.") and made off with their bikes and their backpacks full of scriptures and color pictures of Joseph Smith and Jesus.

We always talked optimistically about how even a stolen Book of Mormon might change a thief's heart and do some good. And I believe Elder Gene R. Cook, who also served his mission in Uruguay, even tells a story where that did actually happen. But I never heard that story come true for the scriptures Haynie and Davis mistakenly gave away to the thieves that night.

The Willow Tree Gang

Danubio/Hubble/Feb.95

One day, I was carrying Elder Kalu's video camera in my backpack as Elder Hubble and I rode from one visit to another, filming Danubio scenes, very near the Batlle encampment. We passed a group of shirtless youths sitting under a sickly willow tree in the shade, and one of them motioned and called for us to stop. After reading about Haynie and Davis's misfortune, you might expect I would think twice about stopping, but it was daytime and I wasn't thinking about being robbed. Still, I could have known from all the other fabled robberies that it wasn't a good idea.

I told Hubble, "Here, let's stop and see what they want. That's a lot of *charlas*." This was shortly after the weekly required number of street-contact "discussions" was changed to include every person who listened, whereas before that, a street meeting with hundreds of people present would have counted as only one *charla*. And you had to get at least thirty per week. We were always getting our goals and this opportunity was too good to pass up. We slowed down and cautiously stayed with our bikes. I made a quick pass with my eyes to count our good fortune. There were fourteen young men. I smiled as I asked the apparent leader, the one who had flagged us down, "How are you doing? How can we help you?"

"You guys are from the religion, right?" he asked. His question was as awkward in Spanish as it seems in English. He was a twenty-year-old vagabond with no shirt and torn blue jeans that were faded

on the thighs. Here he was loitering with his friends, playing jokes and cursing, but his interest seemed sincere.

"Yes," I answered, "We're missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." I paused and looked at Hubble, who smiled and said, "We have a message about Jesus Christ. Could we share it with you?" He was getting much better with the language and his boldness was always a great asset. He stared them down hard from behind his wire-rimmed glasses when he asked.

The leader turned for a second as if to consult with his gang, but they only shrugged, a few of them, and he didn't say a word. When he turned back to look at us, he answered, "Sit down."

His invitation seemed friendly enough, so we kicked back our pedals to stand our bikes against the curb and had a seat at one end of the crowd. All eyes were on us, and I suddenly remembered the stories about thieves in Maroñas and the fact that I had an expensive video camera in my backpack. I made myself think hard so that I would remember, *don't open your backpack no matter what*.

Cars and lawnmowers nowadays have this problem worked out, but it's still difficult to start a conversation right up without some sort of primer. Especially when the conversation is so one-sided and directed as are the *charlas*. I started off with the standard questions to determine the depth of the water we were wading in. First the harmless questions to get to know them, "Are you from around here?" Yes. "How old are you all?" Ranging from seventeen to twenty-five. "I'm twenty-three, and he's nineteen." I figured that was probably enough, so I continued on to the ubicating questions, "Have you ever talked to missionaries before?" No. "Have you heard anything about our Church?" Not much. Okay, simpler, "Do you believe in God?" Some yes, some unsure, some no and looking the other way or rolling their eyes. It's difficult to cover all the bases, so I went with the right answer, which is, "yes, I do believe in God." That makes it much easier. I nodded to Hubble and he began, "We also believe in God. He is our Father. He is all powerful, knows everything . . ."

The discussion continued more or less along the lines prescribed in the booklet. Hubble taught the first principle about God the Father, then asked, "What do you think about God?" The leader answered that he pretty much agreed with what Hubble said, and some of the others nodded in agreement. Others got up and left. Still others made sly comments about the Virgin and why they'd like to

meet her more than they'd like to meet God. Those who were attentive shouted back threats at the hecklers, threatening to shoot them in the face and in other sensitive areas. Ignoring the opposition, I plunged forward with a brief description of our Heavenly Father's plan, and as it became obvious that we were planning to preach and not just chat, the camp became more divided into those who listened, those who left, and those who jeered. One bold detractor shouted out from the back, "You come from the United States, all rich and handsome. What's God's plan for me, living in this hellhole?" I told him, "He wants you to be happy and to return to live with him." He mumbled something to a friend and they laughed. I thought about my answer and felt disappointed in myself.

Because of that realization, and because Hubble was excitedly varying his memorized message in a sincere attempt to actually teach and converse instead of preaching, I began to talk more freely. I let the group's misguided and sarcastic questions slip by with a chuckle, but when one of them asked, "Where do you think we go after we die?" I let it turn into a discussion. His friends did as much to answer him as we did, and we all considered the possibility of mere wishing and Pascal's wager for belief in God's existence as a way of convincing him to believe in the afterlife. Pascal's argument is all but forgotten nowadays, and he never had universal success with it anyway, but here, at least, was one kid who got it.

On the one side, things were going well. The leader kept up with a barrage of questions and somewhat managed to keep things settled down otherwise. I didn't notice exactly when they came back, but the crowd eventually grew back to its original size. I looked at their faces, some interested and looking back at me, and some smiling and whispering things to their companions. For a second, I worried how we could count the charla. We began with fourteen guys there, then it went down to ten, and now it was back up again. But as soon as the thought turned to me and my need to satisfy the number goal, I squelched it. The thought was immediately replaced by a memory of the old stories of how missionaries used to work—how the power of the Spirit worked miracles through missionaries' words and whole congregations and whole towns were baptized. I never really thought it was possible, but if it happened with entire towns, I imagined it might work out with just fourteen young men. My questions took on a new urgency, and I lit up with a smile whenever they seemed to be

getting closer to belief. When it came time to show them a copy of the Book of Mormon, I even almost forgot and opened my backpack to get it. Just in time, I remembered, then felt silly worrying about the video camera, but asked Hubble to get a book out of his pack anyway. As we were showing the pictures and explaining the history of the book I noticed a group in the back passing a shiny black object from hand to hand and laughing. When one of them, a dark young man with long curly hair tied back in a bandana, made a disparaging remark, a skinny, stubble-faced weaselly boy jumped up with a small black revolver in his hand and threatened, "Shut up or I'll put a bullet in your face." He had his finger on the trigger, and the gun aimed at the bandana kid, and his friends laughed like it was the regular routine.

I thought suddenly of the improbability of it all. The vision of our fourteen friends clean shaven and dressed in white faded with the crash of reality and the realization of the frailty of the human will to change or to get out of a self-spiting, self-destroying situation. We don't praise and honor great men because they do what everyone else can do. Their achievements are superior acts of will, made from conscious decisions and a directing force that comes from within. The fact that it's precious comes from its rarity. Ever since I was young and began paying a good deal of attention to the lyrics in Rush songs, my philosophy has been shaped by rational Ayn Rand objectivism. The reason her heroes shine and her ideal of man is so appealing is that nobody reaches the level of constancy and discipline demanded by it. But we all wish we could and it's easier to see the motes in others' eyes than the beam in our own. So a book like *The Fountainhead* is still a best seller among the very people it condemns. Peter Keating himself probably bought the book.

Later, though it still happened during the brief time the weasel boy held the gun to his friend's head, I worried about what they might do to us with the gun. In that moment of disheartening realization and fear, I lost my faith. Not all of it, but the child-like faith that our message could really get through, and these young men would make the difficult decision to better their lives—that faith was gone. I guess that's the problem with logic and rationality in the face of religion. And a nagging part of me wonders if it was me who caused our message to fail.

From then, my mind was only focused on leaving. I finished what I had to say, offered them a copy of the book, and Hubble invited them

to church on Sunday. We didn't close with a prayer in the open air, nor did we make an appointment to come back and see them. We didn't even ask if they wanted to hear more. I had been watching and thought I knew who had the gun, and I could almost be sure that half of the gang would protect us if anything erupted, but I didn't want to take the chance. I glanced back several times as we quickly rode away after hand shakes and good-byes. They sat down again together and leaned on a nearby wall and the interested leader and others who listened were once again lumped into one big group with their friends—discarded by the side of the road, under a scrawny willow tree, in the shade.

The Bidet Towel

Colon/Gray/Mar.95

One afternoon after our lunch break, Elder Gray and I were rushing to get out of the house, and for the first time, we shared the bathroom for teeth brushing and hand washing. The bathroom was typical of its kind in Uruguay. It was a small, dark, neglected room at the back of the house with a chipped and worn blue wooden door that hung askew on its hinges and stuck against its frame when it was closed. The room was lit from a small cantilever window high on the back wall and a naked light bulb, whose switch was placed temptingly outside the door in the hallway. The bulb shone dimly from above the stained mirror on the left wall.

I haven't yet been able to tap into the logic behind much of the architecture in the country, though I suspect bathrooms may be designed according to a money-saving refusal-to-advance mentality. Gray tile lined the floor and walls up to a height of about two meters as a protective barrier against the outbursts from the bent pipe sticking out of the wall which we used to bathe ourselves every morning. The shower drain was built directly into the floor but it didn't get any help from the floor's slant, and there was a long-handled squeegee at hand to nudge the water on its way down the drain and out to the street. The low-rider toilet sat directly in front of the shower pipe and if it weren't for the plastic electric water heater that capped the pipe and slowed down the water's flow to a peaceful cascade of drips while it heated, you could probably sit on the "water" (that's what

they called the toilet in Uruguay; imagine it pronounced “wah-tear”) and do your thing while you were washing your hair. I always wondered when I heard the Uruguayan word for “toilet” where it might have come from. Somebody once told me it was a shortening of “water closet,” from the English who developed much of Montevideo and whose railroad’s black-and-yellow bee colors still adorn the uniforms of half of Uruguay’s favorite professional fútbol team, Peñarol. I’m actually not even sure if “water closet” is a real British term, but it sounds like something I might have heard, and I can imagine the word in a British accent. Still, if the word for the john was somewhat of a mystery, its friend and companion, the bidet—same word in Spanish, English, and, of course, French—had obvious origins.

Where the bidet might suggest good hygiene and a high-class standard of living, most homes I checked out for this sort of thing had a bidet, but not many were very hygienic or luxurious. Their popularity, though, obviously had an adverse effect on the toilet paper industry in the country, and all we could usually find was raspy greenish-brown rolls that, we joked, must have been made from tree bark. I rarely used the bidet in the homes I lived in, preferring a good chafing to the unfamiliar. Mostly I had fiddled around with them just to see what it was like, and ended up using the toilet paper to dry my rear end after that anyway. I never questioned how other people might dry themselves off and never imagined they might not use the toilet paper.

When Elder Gray was done spitting his toothpaste lather into the sink, he graciously stepped aside and I began to wash my hands. Another of the architectural annoyances of Uruguay is that, possibly to save money on materials, all bathroom sink faucets are extremely short and barely extend past the sink’s edge, affording no room for your hands under the water. But by now, I had learned to contort my fingers and direct the stream outward from the edge, and I could wash quickly and enjoyably. I lathered up as best I could with the cold water and hard soap and decided to wash my face too. The soap nearly disappeared as my hands rubbed across my brow and cheeks, but the water was cool and refreshing, and at least it rinsed away some of the morning’s sweat. Then I threw meager handfuls of water on my face with my right hand while I held my tie in my left to keep it from slipping into the sink. When whatever soap I had gotten on me was rinsed off, I made a habitual grab for the landlady’s old green

towel that was always hanging across the room on a rack. I perfunctorily dried my hands and as I lifted the towel to my face I heard a gasp and a surprised, "No way!" I continued my motion and swept the towel quickly from forehead to chin then looked up to see what was the matter. Some delinquent water gathered on the tip of my nose and I tried to blow it off. Before I could ask "What?" Elder Gray mused, "You use that towel to dry your *face*?" with such an emphasis on the word "face" that I knew something was up. "Yeah," I answered casually. I couldn't guess what was wrong with me using the towel. He continued, with a tone of disbelief, "That's the towel for the bidet!"

I can't tell if most people figure that sort of thing out for themselves, or if somebody else tells them earlier on, but I froze and stared at the towel for a second, and for the first time noticed its grungy discolorations and its position right next to the bidet, and suddenly it all made sense. Elder Gray was telling the truth, and I felt so stupid for never having realized it before. My mind flew back to every house I had yet lived in in Uruguay. In every home the story was the same. There was a landlady, a traditional, old Uruguayan woman who I never saw buy toilet paper; there was a bidet next to the toilet in the bathroom; and there was only one towel hanging constantly in there—situated right next to the bidet. I cringed to think of all the times I had washed my face and dried it off.

But at the same time, I realized that this was another case of "what you don't know won't hurt you." Before the unfortunate realization, I never noticed any problems in my complexion and was never able to smell my own face. The knowledge of the towel's purpose had somehow worked retroactively and turned my stomach for all those times I had unwittingly contaminated my face. But I never knew it then. So, while I certainly stopped drying my face with the towel that was meant for my butt, I felt a little, in a petty way, like Bob Seger, running against the wind and singing "I wish I didn't know now what I didn't know then."