

Down on Batlle's Farm

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THERE'S AN EXERCISE IN CONTRASTS a few blocks east of Belloni up among the Pacheco streets north of Danubio in the barrio of Piedras Blancas. Former President of the Republic Jose Batlle had a farm there with an immense gray stucco plantation home. His fields once flowed with vegetables and cattle, but like anything I guess, his time came and went, and through the intervention of the military dictatorship in the 1970s, the property ended up in the hands of the Uruguayan government. People said that during the 1980s it had been a museum and a nice place for a Sunday afternoon picnic, but by the time Elder Hubble and I got there, the museum was gone and the building had fallen into disrepair. Meanwhile, several abandoned apartments and stores in the Ciudad Vieja had been condemned by the inspectors, and the ejected squatters who had occupied the dilapidated downtown buildings sought out another homestead. They made their way to Batlle's fields and set up camp—government land was free as long as the government didn't care—and they erected stick and corrugated metal structures, which they never bothered to improve. Maybe their recent experience had taught them not to invest much because it might all be taken again.

That was the attitude of the *gente de mal vivir*: the people of the bad way of life. It showed in their dirty, sun-callused faces when they peeked out of their shacks or when we encountered them wandering aimlessly outside. They were almost never working except to wash clothes in dented tin buckets of dirty water they brought from the spigot on the corner. The water always flowed on the corner, and we often stopped to watch some of their young children splashing in the muddy street. Once we saw a blonde-haired boy, probably only three years old, who plopped himself down in a pothole. People walked by and hardly noticed him, and when an odd car, generally a sputtering 1940s Ford, rolled by, it had to drive slowly around him. He wasn't about to move. We smiled at his determined innocence but grimaced at his certain future as a child of the *cantegriles*.

I'm not sure I ever asked about the origin or meaning of that word, *cantegril*. I learned it by seeing a run-down settlement on the outskirts of town and being told its name. But I always imagined that the word was

formed from two words it almost contains: the verb *cantar*, to sing, and *grillo*, cricket. Thus, for me, the *cantegriles*, with their tall grass on the banks of filthy canals and their dilapidated shacks, brought to mind a more pleasant scene: "Where the crickets sing."

The first time we stumbled across the mansion with its backdrop of unimproved huts, Hubble took one look at the rows and rows of shacks and said, "What would your physics degree mean out here?" The silence that followed was as good an answer as "nothing" would have been. It was near sundown, and the shanties, silhouetted against the sun's orange flame, sprawled out like sucking vines, burned an unforgettable image in my brain. We spent the rest of that day and the next talking about our find, inventing scenarios and explanations for the current state of the fallen farm.

If we hadn't been warned ahead of time by local "good" people, we might have thought this was like any other settlement of the poor. We'd worked in the *cantegriles* before and found we often had success teaching religion among the down-and-out. But the *gente de mal vivir* weren't living badly just because of their rundown shantytown and lack of sanitation. Just as they assumed rights to lands that weren't theirs, rumor had it they made their meager livings as thieves. From the look of things, they didn't steal anything they could use to live better.

After passing by the settlement several times in a week and making short reconnaissance runs to the borders and looking in, we decided to talk to the people there. On the way, we warily locked up our bikes several blocks away.

When we arrived at the southern gate, a thin, rusty wire looped over the jagged tops of two sticks in the mud, the women and children just inside stirred. They were dressed in thin, stained floral skirts and plain white tank-top shirts, and we were wearing the prescribed mission dress—button-down white shirts, ties, slacks, and dress shoes. They weren't wearing shoes for the most part. We came from another country, the great and imperialistic *Estados Unidos*, and they had lived their whole lives between here and downtown. A little girl looked at us shyly and ran away into her hut yelling, "*Mamá! Los Mo'mones!*" We weren't the only ones wary of contact.

In Uruguay, knocking at someone's door usually means clapping your hands loudly outside their front gate. When it was clear that no one was going to come talk to us of their own accord, we timidly slapped our hands together, careful not to make too much noise or seem too urgent. All the women looked up from what they were doing, and one brave representative came closer and asked, "What do you want?"

It was actually said a lot nicer than it sounds on paper, somewhere short of "May I help you?"

"We wanted to come and talk with you," I answered. "We're missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."

The woman looked to the sky in what seemed like frustration, or bother, then sighed, "I suppose you can come in."

We walked right in, saying, "Great! Thank you very much!"

The woman quickly turned away, and we were left on our own to investigate. After asking around we found out that there was a sort of chief of the whole place, an older man with nicer clothes than the rest, and after speaking to him and explaining our mission, we were granted free reign to knock on all the doors we wanted. He said he thought it would be good for the people to have some religion, but he wasn't personally interested in what we had to say.

It was a lonely, dusty day, and we felt uncomfortable walking from house to seemingly empty house, knowing that somewhere behind the burlap curtains and corrugated wall scraps, women were watching.

Eventually a woman opened her door to greet us. She was young and beautiful and thin and dark, and she wore a tight sleeveless shirt that, in light of mission restrictions against interaction with members of the opposite sex, made me fidgety and kept my eyes averted and darting around the dim interior of the hut behind her. I saw the silhouette of a cast iron bed frame butted up against the back wall where a light breeze blew the greasy curtains through an open window. The mattress was thin and lumpy, but the bed was made up with gray sheets and a blanket, tucked in tight, with a pale green pillow thrown against the headrest. I heard the sound of trumpets and maracas with a high-frequency whine from an unseen television in front of the bed. She had been sitting on the bed watching a variety show when we knocked on her door, I imagined. I was the one always assigned to speak at doorsteps, and as I explained to her who we were and why we were there, I began, cautiously, to notice the dignity of her slender face. Her hair was disheveled, her cheeks were thin, and she stared at me directly and squinted her eyes ever so slightly whenever I mentioned anything new or different. She was paying attention.

She invited us to sit down outside in some 1960s-style plastic kitchen chairs, and we talked a short while with her. Meanwhile she tended to two young children, a boy and a girl, who scampered around her. She said her name was Paola, and she expressed her interest in learning more about God. We, having learned not to split up families, asked when her husband would be home, so we could talk to him also. She looked startled and laughed, "Husband? Well, whatever you want to call him." She paused for a second then continued, "He should be home soon."

When I met her lover, my stomach knotted. He was only a boy, younger than I. He was thin and short and had a mat of wild hair that stood on end and was the color of dirt. He smiled with his upper lip jutting out under his pug nose, and I hated him for sleeping with her.

He strode past us and into the shack with a grunt that caused Paola to jump up, excuse herself, and follow him inside. When they appeared again, she sat down quietly and he stood in the doorway, shirtless and

grinning like a lunatic, with a newspaper in his hand. "Come here," he whispered, as if his newspaper were some dark secret. "Come take a look at this." He was obviously excited, and very possibly unstable, so we stood up to see what he wanted to show us.

He held out the rumpled mess of papers and pointed to an article, which I quickly scanned. The night before there had been a shootout with police after a robbery gone bad. One policeman was shot and in serious condition in the hospital. Of the three robbers, two escaped, but the one who was caught had apparently spilled the beans, and the police were looking for H. M. and R. C. The article only used their initials. I have no idea why.

I summarized the article to Hubble, whose Spanish reading comprehension after only a few months in Uruguay still wasn't very good, then looked at the kid lunatic. "And?" I asked.

"That's me," he said, grinning and pointing to the initials R. C.

"What's your name?" I asked dubiously, as if he couldn't make up a name with the correct initials on the spot.

"Richard Cruz," he said triumphantly. "Just ask her," he added, pointing to Paola.

I turned to look at her, and before I could say anything, she nodded and said, "It's him." The look on her face said, "Oh, brother."

For the moment, despite his wild-man hair and twitching grin, he seemed quite civil, so I delved further into the story. "You mean *you* were in the shootout with the police?"

"Of course," he replied. "Can't you read?"

"But, how did you get away?" I added, incredulously.

"Cops are stupid," he said. "They shot my friend, but I got one of them too."

"But they know who you are?" I asked, and frowned my brow in skeptical doubt.

"Yeah."

"Why don't they just come get you?"

"Don't know where I am, man!" he laughed, a bit too long, relishing his cleverness. He was untouchable, I imagine now, convinced of his own immortality. His difficult life had worn away any shyness or fear, and the police weren't a threat to him; they were part of his game. The rush of a robbery was cheaper than wine, and with the money he stole he could buy cigarettes and alcohol anyway. I imagine him breaking those fine things he couldn't sell and spitting on the floors of the houses he robbed, just for spite. He was Robin Hood, man.

He showed off his initials in the newspaper as if he had scored the winning goal in the last seconds of the city soccer championship. If he had had a refrigerator, I'm sure he would have clipped the article and stuck it on the door with a magnet. But a refrigerator was probably much

too heavy to cart all the way back here from his job sites. I hoped he'd never find out where we lived.

"Well," I started, searching for words under his steady gaze, "that's very interesting. Have you spoken to missionaries like us before?"

We spent the next half hour entertained by his opinions on God and religion. Along with his trade, he had learned to be his own best audience, and he spoke to make himself laugh. The clock dragged, and I started beginning all my sentences with, "We have to get going now, but. . ." And then, just as the opportunity came—one of the children complained of being hungry, and Paola told Richard they should get something to eat—a friend, whom they called "*El Chino*" (the Chinese Guy), appeared and Richard announced, "Hey, these guys want to take you to their church."

El Chino was a thin, thinly bearded man with a hawk-like nose and perpetual smirk. His straight black hair was receding and looked like some sort of spiked helmet. He wasn't Oriental, but his black eyes were shaped by tight eyelids into a slant that seemed Oriental; thus, his nickname.

He answered his friend, "Oh yeah?" without taking much notice of us and stood lazily behind the chairs in the shade of the hut's roof. He was wearing only torn denim shorts, and the olive skin from his neck to his ankles bore the raised marks of savage cuts, each about two inches long and scattered at odd angles. One day, a month later, after I had been transferred to Colón, Hubble found out where they came from. He returned to visit Paola and the children and found Richard and El Chino sitting outside smoking hand-made cigarettes while El Chino hacked away methodically at his arms with a razor blade. He was collecting the blood in a rusty beer can. But that day I imagined he had been caught in a mess of barbed wire running to escape the police or had been tortured by some malicious gang. Turns out he was tortured by a voice in his head.

He showed less interest in our message than his friend had. He ignored our startup questions and started his own conversation with Richard. They quickly became engrossed in their plans and bragging, and we took advantage of their disinterest to say goodbye to Paola and make our escape. We agreed to come by on Sunday to bring Paola and the children to church.

As we finally stood to leave, Richard, apparently not oblivious to us, jumped up, ran inside his shack and reappeared with something in his hands. He called us over to him, and we approached him suspiciously. "What do you want?" I asked, slightly agitated.

Without answering, he raised his left arm to the sky with his hand knotted and held his right arm tightly to his chest. A small red fist carved out of wood protruded from his own right fist. He looked fixedly at the sky above us, then slowly and painstakingly lowered his furious gaze and his left arm, all the while spouting gibberish.

I elbowed Hubble, who in turn asked me, in English, "What's this guy's problem?" I hadn't a clue, but figured if I asked it might interrupt the strange incantations. "What are you doing?" I asked finally. No answer. He continued his frantic speech. I asked again and loudly, "Hey, what are you doing?" But he continued, engrossed in his rite.

As we made to leave, he suddenly stopped. "Hey," he said, "have a *really good day*."

"What were you doing?" I asked.

"Macumba," he said, naming the African-born spiritualist religion. "I cursed you."

Whether he did or not, we could never tell. But from then on whenever anything bad happened we blamed it on the curse. When Hubble slipped and almost fell, Macumba. When I lost control of my bike and crashed into a barbed-wire fence, tearing up my shoulder, Macumba. I saw Richard months later in another part of town, walking through the *feria*, a weekly street market. He smiled when he saw me, shook my hand as if we were the best of friends, and asked about Elder Hubble. I explained that I had been transferred and that Hubble was in Tacuarembó. Richard seemed genuinely interested. He was as civil as a gentleman, as courteous as an ambassador. Then he disappeared into the crowd, and I never saw him again.

The day after we visited Paola and Richard and El Chino, we told our local church leader, Branch President Espindola, about the *gente de mal vivir*. His face lit up immediately and he said, "Elders, we have to go there. There must be hundreds of people, humble and ready to hear the gospel." We tried to explain that we had tried that already, but he was excited for the work and no doubt infected by the same stories we'd heard about missionaries baptizing whole cities. There was no way to dissuade him. We set off at once.

We made it to the Farm after fifteen minutes of slow walking and fantasizing about the missionary opportunities in the *cantegriles*. Presidente Espindola wasted no time in finding someone to talk to. He walked through the front gate, shouted out an "*hola!*" to no one in particular, and took a young woman firmly by the hand. She jumped and made a move to pull away before she realized what was happening. "How are you, little one?" he said. She stared and swallowed before saying, "Fine. And you?"

"I'm doing great today!"

"Okay. . ." Her voice trailed off uncertainly.

Still holding tightly to her hand, he turned to introduce us. "These are my friends the missionaries. And boy do we have an important message for you!" The young woman smiled at us sheepishly and looked back at a friend who had also stopped to see how this would all play out. I worried about the woman. I would have been startled too if he'd had a hold of my hand for that long. Presidente Espindola soon noticed the

other young woman waiting and moved to shake her hand with lightning speed. "Let me tell you about our church," he said excitedly. He gathered them both in front of him and started to talk. Hubble and I took a step back to observe.

"When you come to our church, you'll learn about Jesus and the plan he has for us and how we can all return to live with him and God when we die." The women shuffled uneasily in the sun, squinting and shading their eyes with cupped hands. They listened politely, but without any sign of comprehension. "But we don't all go to the same place," he continued. "And it's not only heaven and hell like they tell you in the Catholic Church. Are you Catholic?" He didn't wait for an answer, and they didn't seem to notice the question. "There are three levels of glory reserved for the faithful. The Celestial, the Terrestrial, and the Telestial. Celestial is the highest, like the glory of the sun, for the most holy and faithful people. You have to be married to get there. Paul mentions it in the Bible, so it's not just a Mormon thing." I think that was the first mention of what church we were from. The women stood patiently in their faded blue tank tops, cut-off jeans, and flip flops, shifting their weight from one hip to another every now and then. ". . .it's called the new and everlasting covenant. Jose Smith received the revelation in section 132." Hubble jabbed me in the ribs with an elbow. I looked at him in a mock squint with raised eyebrows. "What the. . .?" We laughed silently and let Presidente Espindola keep going.

The force of his urgency and excitement was enough to keep the women still, almost spellbound. "Now, you'll have to give up smoking and drinking if you want to come to our church," he was saying. Presidente Espindola forgot himself and chattered on about the deeper doctrines of Mormonism, thinking perhaps that somehow the Spirit would come and grab hold of these two women and convince them. They were probably thinking about what they would eat that night. Espindola was thinking it would be a good idea to explain baptisms for the dead. A young girl came and tugged on her mother's shorts. It could have been the woman's chance to escape, but she shushed her child, too polite to interrupt Espindola's sermon.

"*Hola*, little girl!" he interrupted himself just before he got to outer darkness. The girl hid behind her mother's legs. "When you go to church, she'll go to the Primary, with all the other children, and you two will go to the Relief Society. It's so nice in the Primary. The children learn about Jesus and they sing and play games." He was bending over to see the little girl at her level. She peeked around her mother's thighs, but darted back quickly.

Since "okay" the women hadn't said a word. Finally Espindola asked them their names. They were Silvia and Susan. He kept on for another few minutes, then politely excused himself, invited them to church the following Sunday (they agreed), and called us to follow him to the next set of unsuspecting women.

After a couple of hours observing Espindola's homilies and their trance-inducing effects, we told him we had to go. He had signed us up with the people as a sort of taxi service to come get the women and children the next Sunday before church and walk them down to the chapel. Fine, we thought. We walked slowly home in the twilight. Espindola was beaming. We were skeptical.

We showed up anyway the following Sunday afternoon about an hour before church services. The encampment was especially quiet, and there were very few clothes hanging on the lines. We went first to visit Paola. She opened the door slowly and slipped outside, closing it behind her. She was wearing the same clothes she'd had on two days before. "I can't go," she whispered.

We whispered back, "Why?"

"Richard doesn't want me to go."

"But. . . what would happen if you just went?"

"It's just. . . No, I can't go."

"Oh, we understand."

"Besides," she wanted to explain, "I really can't go looking like this."

She was right, really. Sort of. I considered trying to convince her that it didn't matter how she dressed. How God didn't look on outward appearances. But I didn't. Instead, I invited the children. Paola liked the idea and went back in her house to get them ready.

Meanwhile we went searching for the houses Silvia and Susan had described. They lived next to each other, and they both told us the same thing that Paola had. "How about your children?" I asked. "Can they go?" Yes, they said, they'd like that very much. It was time to teach the kids about God and maybe get them out of the *cantegriles*.

Soon enough we were standing in the dust near the front gate in the middle of a group of thirteen kids. Some were so small they could barely form complete sentences and still waddled when they walked. They stood with their older sisters, their black hair still shiny-wet from a paramedic combing. They looked up into the sun, squinting to see us, then looked back towards home to make sure it was okay. The older children were confident. They seemed to sense the adventure and didn't care about their dirty clothes. Many mothers had washed their children's faces, but whether they thought we weren't going to come or they simply didn't have other clothes, they hadn't dressed the children very well. I was glad that even though *they* would have felt embarrassed to go to church without a clean dress and fine shoes, the mothers let their children go dressed as they were.

We led the rag-tag bunch through the streets, weaving to avoid mud puddles, and singing the only Spanish songs we knew. The kids all sang along with shrill voices and laughs. "*Arroz con leche. Me quiero casar con una señorita de San Nicolás, que sepa cocer, que sepa bordar. . .*" Something about wanting to marry a woman who knows how to cook and sew. We

were enforcing macho stereotypes and loving it. "*La cucaracha! La cucaracha! ya no quiere caminar. . .*" What exactly the cockroach is missing that dissuades him from walking has never been clear to me. My seventh-grade Spanish teacher told us it was because he wanted to drink some hot chocolate. Most of the kids that day seemed to think it was because one of his legs got ripped off. Some of the older kids I've met (none in this group, thankfully) like to think the poor cockroach needed a joint to feel up to the task. Anyway, what is clear is that he didn't feel like walking. Neither did some of the children after a little while, and so Hubble and I each picked up and carried the two smallest.

Church that day was hot, crowded, and entertaining. There was no piano in the building, and Hermana Vecchio mixed up the sacrament song music and lyrics, as usual, singing the words from one hymn to the music of another. We ended up confused and stuttering at the end of a line of music when there were still more words to fit in somehow. Hubble and I started to laugh silently, and the kids, watching us for cues, took that as an excuse to laugh also. After sacrament meeting the members mostly worked hard to make the Batlle Farm children feel welcome, but it was almost too hard. "*Hola!*" they sang. "How are you, little ones?"

"Fine," the kids answered, looking around shyly and shifting their feet. "Children!" Presidente Espindola came to greet them. "How would you like to learn about Jesus?"

"Okay," they answered.

None of the well-dressed children in the congregation came to greet them. Only grinning adults.

I squatted to talk to the group at their level. "Kids," I said, "now we have a special class for you to learn more about Jesus. Go with the nice lady, and she'll introduce you to the other children, and you can all have fun and learn."

"Okay." This time it was only one girl, tall and thin, with deep green eyes, who answered. They all followed her to their class, and we went upstairs to the loft for ours. I had wanted to help them feel comfortable, not just then, but in general, but I settled for convincing them to go off to class.

The experience comes back to me often, and I think about it much more now than I did then, but even at that moment, when the kids went off to Primary, I started to realize that it wasn't only about the gospel. I liked to believe that the difficulties posed by social class and nationality and language were easily overcome. I would like it to be that way, but it's not. Although I have seen the Spirit work miracles, I think sharing the gospel with others often requires more effort than most of us are willing to give. Who could really believe that we would welcome those children fully into the church? That they would feel comfortable and return week after week? We are not only members of a church, we are members

of a society that actively seeks division and classification at the expense of its weak or unfortunate members.

I wonder about those kids, imagining that the older ones were already learning that their adventure was little more than a confused confrontation with another class of people. These were the kind of people their fathers stole from. They were the people who had everything. Sure, they treated you nicely, but when the three hours were up, they went back to their nice homes where they didn't have to think about you. Back to their individual beds and their televisions and soda pop. The cliché says that the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

When the meetings were over, we found a group of the children huddled outside the building talking. I asked them, "What's wrong? Why aren't you inside?" Nobody answered. I counted only ten of them. "Where are the other three?" Hubble bent down and set a small girl on his knee.

"Went home," said a boy sullenly.

"How long have you been out here?"

"Who knows?"

They were somber. We had interrupted their conversation. Hubble whispered patiently to the little girl on his knee. A brown-haired boy stared at the ground and mumbled, "Just wanna go home." I looked quickly and saw ten tousled children staring with confused eyes. I knew they were feeling shame, some of them perhaps for the first time in their lives. And I wondered then, as I do now, about our role in all of this—strangers from far away, tall, rich, blonde guys with nice clothes who took them to church and would take them back home again and maybe never give them a second thought or, if we did think about them again, it would be this: writing and reflecting in comfort far away, hoping that the "seeds" we planted might, in some unsure future, "bear fruit," convinced of the impossibility of actually returning and doing anything now, sure they wouldn't remember us or care if we did return.

"Let's go then." I tried to sound upbeat as I started walking.

The children gathered themselves up and filed in behind. Hubble carried the little girl, and I took two older kids by the hand. "It's not you," they seemed to be saying as they held on tightly and skipped alongside me. "It's just, we don't fit in. We can't be comfortable there."

"I know," I whispered to myself, staring forward, biting hard, unsure about where *I* fit in. What to do. Whether to feel good about being genuine and interested in these kids and their parents, or. . .of course I couldn't feel good.

We walked silently for a few minutes into the ragged parts of town. Past the warehouses and witches' hovels. Within yards of drunken, shirtless men passed out on the side of the road. Over flattened toads and dog excrement. A few blocks east of Belloni, up among the Pacheco streets. To that exercise in contrasts. It wasn't just their parents who felt it now.