

Luis Silva

Patrick Madden

Luis Silva lived in a cinder-block and whitewash government-housing shack up on the mesa near the outskirts of Durazno, Uruguay. From his doorway, looking west, you could look down into a vast pale-green horse pasture and further, kilometers away, a line of towering eucalyptus trees from the era of the Spanish colonizers, who set out to bring some variety and shade to the monotonous landscape. There was a puddle far away to the north, near the line of trees, that reflected the sunlight in silver flashes. Sometimes in the late morning, the cloud cover would break up and let the sunlight shine down on the shadowy field in shafts of moving beams. Turn around, and you faced a seemingly endless string of houses like Luis's, squat and white, rows and rows of the same. For variation, some had plaques of dedication to the Virgin nailed to the walls, and others had flower pots adorning their windows. Each house bore a simple black identification number just to the right of the door, a step forward for a town whose inhabitants rarely received mail and whose addresses, as a result, were generally *s/n: sin numero*.

Around in back of every home was a cemented-stone washbasin with a built-in scrubboard, and in the winter in every yard, you'd find lines and lines of clothes hanging between bamboo sticks and blowing in the chilling breeze. The clothes took their time drying then, and for all the effort the women gave to clean them, they just gathered dirt and dust from every passing horse cart or from the children playing and kicking the earth around so that it almost wasn't worth it to wash. I suspect that is why some didn't.

During the day, the complex was filled with the common sounds of small children laughing and dogs barking. The old women sat in the shade or in the sun, depending on the season, and shared stories with their neighbors. The unemployed men sat shirtless, sharing their *mate* gourds, sipping the addictive, teeth-rotting tea through ornate metal straws. Down in the pasture, when the horses were gone or could be chased away, the young men played soccer passionately until dark and then disappeared into the corner *boliche* to watch soccer on television and drink wine. Luis never played with them. He spent his days working, and come night time, he was home with his family and sometimes with us.

From far away, you might look up and see the clothes flapping like flags over the small, squarish dwellings and think of an army encampment

overlooking a great battlefield below. And in the evenings, when the dust in the air was just right, you might see brilliant purple-and-orange sunsets that lingered past dark, conjuring images of *Fantasia*'s rendition of "Night on Bald Mountain" so that you could almost hear the music and feel the strife.

Luis lived in *vivienda* 24 with his wife and her children, seven in all, including the youngest three, Laurita and the twins, who were his own. We met with them just inside the door in the kitchen, and they all slept somehow on a couple of dilapidated beds with straw-filled mattresses and threadbare sheets behind a homemade curtain that hung in place of a wall or a door. They pulled chairs from all parts inside and out and offered us soft drinks and freshly baked sweet rolls and cookies. We accepted their gifts with reverent humility, and Laurita confided that she liked having us around because they never drank soda otherwise. The gas stove in the corner served to heat corn cakes and sometimes cocoa. And on days when it was especially cold, they left it open, baking nothing, to heat the house.

Luis was a handsome man in his early thirties with stark features and a body formed by years of working in the fields. He had olive skin pulled taut over his cheeks and jaw and a wave of black hair that, along with his red *Members Only* jacket, made him look like *Thriller*-era Michael Jackson if you saw him from a distance or you squinted your eyes. His wife, Susana, a member of our church, was plump and quite a bit older and wasn't actually his wife. She had been married before to a cruel, irresponsible man, who would not grant her a divorce. So she and Luis lived happily committed to one another and with three children common to both of them but without the papers. Those three children were the ones we saw the most—tiny frail bodies and big brown eyes and olive skin like their father's, pocked by the normal scrapes and bruises common to active youth. When we visited, they sat patiently two at a time on their father's lap and stared with wide-eyed curiosity as we spoke.

Luis had studied with the Jehovah's Witnesses, and his questions always had a *Testigo* slant but without the vindictive, accusatory attitude others often communicated to us. He, like they, wanted to know about blood transfusions and holidays and the identity of Jehovah. But when we told him, he didn't fight. He showed us the passages he wondered about or that contradicted what we had said. In that way, we saw scriptures we couldn't explain away and peripherally learned about the sons of God who lay with the lovely daughters of men and produced a race of giants. For everything we were supposed to teach him, Luis flipped nimbly through his scriptures and taught us something back. We spent long hours immersed in an intellectual and spiritual excitement of discovery so thick that the children, oblivious to the profound searching their father was doing, noticed and laughed giddily at our conversation. I laughed with them in my heart. After weeks of long

meetings, contradictions, arguments, and epiphanies, we got somewhere with Luis the Jehovah's Witnesses never did. He wanted to be baptized.

Now there was a problem. The law of chastity requires that a man and woman be legally married as a precursor to having children. If that's not possible, then at least they should be married after the children come but always before baptism. In general, I agree with the commandment, but I felt Luis merited an exception. The Silvas were already soured on the idea of seeking out the derelict ex-husband and convincing him to grant a divorce, but we tried again anyway. It took several weeks to find him, chasing from one address to the next and talking with his drunk friends. When we finally talked to him, he seemed to take pleasure in causing such a problem. He liked the attention he was getting, and though we never fully explained why Susana needed the divorce, he could tell it was important. That was enough to make him plant his feet firmly and deny us. So it seemed as if Luis would have to wait until the man died or the divorce laws changed before he got baptized. But we had a very compelling reason to speed up the process: Luis was dying of cancer.

Doctors in Uruguay have strange customs, and they never actually told Luis what was wrong with him. But he must have suspected, with his frequent visits to the hospital in Montevideo and the constant tests, that he was very sick and probably dying. Despite all the pain he must have suffered, he bore it remarkably well. Sometimes he winced for no apparent reason, and then his eyes radiated a wisdom and resignation I have seldom seen. Although Luis didn't know the name of his disease, we, and seemingly all the neighbors, did. We never got much in the way of details about his cancer, but we heard about it often enough from shifty-eyed informers speaking in hushed whispers and with a mock-concerned tone that suggested more interest in gossip than sympathy.

We researched frantically to find a way around the law of chastity stipulation, but there seemed to be no allowance for exceptions. We called the mission president and asked for a special dispensation because of the extreme circumstances, and he was open to the idea, but Luis was unexpectedly in the hospital on the day of his scheduled interview. It was very doubtful that he would be baptized without getting married. His visits to the hospital became more frequent, and we often found him too sick to receive visitors in the evenings.

In the midst of all the prayers and plans and preparations, I was transferred cross-country to Carmelo. Though I said my goodbyes and kept a strong hope in my heart, I didn't hear anything more about Luis Silva until a year and a half later when I visited Durazno one last time. I rode a borrowed bicycle out of town up the familiar path to the mesa and arrived unexpected at the bishop's house. There I was greeted with surprised

cheers of “Ma-then!” and the expected barrage of questions. We sat down in the shade of the front bushes with glasses of Coke to catch up on each other’s lives and talk with the neighborhood kids. Eventually the giddiness and small talk subsided, and I asked the bishop, “Whatever happened with Luis Silva? Did he ever get baptized?”

He glanced at his wife, then looked at me compassionately and said, “They never got married, but the mission president had an interview with him and decided to let him be baptized. He was baptized last May.”

“That’s great,” I responded. “And how’s he doing?”

The bishop paused, and I suddenly understood his tender look of pity. “He died a few weeks later,” he explained. Then, trying to break the somber hush, “Not a bad time to die, if you think about it.” He laughed uneasily, and I forced a smile.

“Yeah,” I said quietly, looking at the dirt. “Not a bad time to die.”

As I rode away from the *viviendas*, I stopped where the dirt path to Luis’s home turned to pavement and the road downtown. I looked back to see the silhouettes of the government houses against a backdrop of swirling purple and gray on flames of red-and-orange sky, and I squinted to change my focus from the people and the huts to the trees behind and then to the heavens.

Until then, I had lived a life sheltered from the pain of proximate death. My progenitors were not long-lived, and my friends have been fortunate. Two of my grandparents died before I had memory. My grandmother, my mother’s mother, died when I was a small boy, and though I remember crying for her, I cannot remember any of the pain. Today I see the events in my memory as an observer: there is a small boy crying in his mother’s lap on the way to a nursing home or a funeral parlor. But I can’t get back inside the small boy’s head or feel my feelings then. The last to go was my father’s father, but Alzheimer’s disease killed him gradually and, long before he finally died, left his aged body empty of the mind that had been my grandfather. When he died, he was far away, and we never thought much more of his passing than “His suffering is finally over.”

Before Luis Silva died, it had been easy to accept, even to go along with and say the standard condolences for lost loved ones in the Church. People said, “He’s been called to work on the other side,” and I imagined that it might be comforting to think of God needing people we loved more than we needed them. Missionaries joked that the best time to die would be right after baptism, and we believed it, in theory. But like so many things, the theory misses out on emotion. When it came time to check my beliefs against the pain of loss, I was confused and angry, wanting Luis back for his sake and his family’s and for my own sake too, I guess.

I rode away from the bishop's house that day profoundly disturbed by the purposeful detachment we permit ourselves in order to not be bothered by our mortality or the things we don't understand. It seems that we might never make it unless we ignore the parts that don't fit our faith or our worldview, but that day, sad at the loss of my friend, I didn't want to detach. I stayed close. I learned that I don't like everything that goes on here and that I can still believe in God without bowing to the clichés of others who believe in him. Neil Peart made the observation, playing on words and astronomy, that "gravity and distance" not only change the color of light, but also "change the color of right." In my mind, I took his metaphor further. Gravity and distance change our understanding and work our momentary loss of faith into a new comprehension.

I have a videotape of Durazno that I watch every now and then. Somewhere in the middle of it, the picture fades into a bright-red curtain backdrop against a whitewashed cinder-block wall. Luis and his wife are smiling, and Laurita and the twins are swaying shyly in front of them, hands clasped together, with nervous giggles and angel smiles. The children are dressed in sweaters and fresh from the bath. Laurita's teddy bear is named Elder Madden, she says. Elder Kalu is filming, and I'm behind the family in a heavy, black overcoat and a maroon checked scarf. It's cold, even inside. I'm directing and encouraging, hoping for an enduring memory captured on tape. They present themselves to the camera, to the future Elder Madden and his family. A white plastic clock dodges in and out of the scene from behind my head. It's 9:10. They're uncomfortable talking into the void, to an unsure future, and to a person who is, at the moment, standing behind them. "I'm thankful for the clarity of your answers," says Luis. I can barely hear him. He had just returned from a trip to see the doctors in Montevideo. He whispers, "Because I could tell you all my uncertainties and you've answered me very well. I know that we're on the correct path."

They want Gabriela to sing her favorite hymn, but she's too shy. "*Dále, Gabriela, you know, 'Oh, está todo bien.'*" The rest of us end up singing to coax her, and Elder Kalu's melodious voice shines from behind the camera lens, but Gabriela just smiles and turns to look at her father. The camera fades then. I don't know if it's only in my mind, but I think I can hear Luis's voice, slight and wispy but loud enough under the others. I wonder if he's thinking of the rest of the song when the camera cuts out and I hear him singing, "All is well, all is well."