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Congratulations on Mandela!

ELDER is the title given to all male Mormon missionaries, though sometimes it is translated to *Anziano* or *Vanhin* or what have you. In Spanish it is not translated. Simply soften the *d* with a slight *th* sound and pronounce the *er* "air": *El*their. Female missionaries are called Sister, and in Spanish that *is* translated: *Hermana.* In any case, the title is followed by the missionary's last name, and so for the two years I spent in Uruguay from October 1993 to October 1995 I was known as Elder Madden.

I fit the standard mold of a Mormon missionary – tall, blonde, athletic build – and I often lost my sense of self in a country where many of the people saw me only for what I represented. I was just another gringo in a white shirt and tie riding his bike down the street, looking for converts. In most cases, missionaries are interchangeable, and mission leaders take advantage of that to unify their young charges and inspire in them selfless service. It also means that during a two-year stint a missionary will work in anywhere from four to eight different areas and with eight to sixteen different companions. Not long after I arrived in Uruguay I was sent to work in Durazno, near the geographic center of the country. My companion there was the biggest anomaly in a homogenous force of nearly two hundred. Elder Kalu was from Nigeria.

BEING the only black missionary in Uruguay put Elder Kalu in a position of celebrity and scrutiny. Though most people we met were well-meaning and courteous, a few were not, and I was witness to racial outbursts on a few occasions. Elder Kalu's most persistent critic was a feeble, half-blind old woman named Grandma Garcia.

"*Grand*ma," said her grandson Jovany loudly and slowly the first time we met her, "these are the *mis*sionaries, Madden and *Ka*lu."

"I hate the Negroes!" she shouted back in reproach.

"But *Grand*ma, these are *mis*sionaries. They're from the *church.*"

"What does that matter to me? Get that Negro away from me!"

She sat rigid in her rocking chair in the half-shade of the laundry yard where her

family had put her, probably hoping she'd stay entertained and out of the way. We were struck silent, waiting for Jovany to calm her or explain. She stared at the broken bricks of the back-door frame as if to avoid visual contamination, or to show her disdain. Her eyes were glossed over and clammy. Purple veins bulged from her skeletal hands as she gripped the chair's armrests in anger. Her lips moved, muttering inaudible complaints, and she furrowed her wrinkles deeper in a demonstrative scowl. She stayed like that until we left.

From then we kept our visits with the Garcia family brief, usually during the time when their grandmother was sleeping. But every now and then she was sick, or cranky, and got up from her nap to make her demands and nag her grandchildren. She couldn't smell my companion, but she acted like it. From inside her room she heard his deep, melodious voice and shouted, "Get that Negro out of here!" Eventually, nobody paid attention to her. But it grinded on me. Offense by proxy, that's what I'd call it now. Kalu didn't seem to notice.

One lazy afternoon Elder Kalu and I were walking near the narrow sycamore-lined road to Santa Bernadina, the next town over, and I was worrying about his ego. Continuing my thoughts out loud I asked him, "How do you deal with it?" He looked up from the road for a second, then quickly sidestepped to shuffle-kick a small rock between my legs.

"Deal with what?"

"With Grandma Garcia's comments about hating the Negroes."

He laughed silently to himself and shook his head. When he looked at me he was smiling.

"Man," he drew out the word through his smile, "I don't care what she thinks about me, and I don't think about whether she cares for me."

That was that in Elder Kalu's mind. He turned his eyes back to the road, searching for a small stone, and when he quickly found one, shot it just under my heel as I stepped. He looked brightly, squinting in the sun as he turned to me and shouted with glee. "Go-o-o-o-al!" With his laugh the word crescendoed and ebbed as it faded among the trees.

ASIDE from Grandma Garcia, Uruguayans are generally very tolerant of blacks. Slavery was never very extensive or profitable in the country, and there hasn't been more than a handful of immigrants to Uruguay from Africa, so that blacks make up a very small percentage of the population. There are no black ghettos, for instance, and the Spanish- and Italian-descended Uruguayans excitedly anticipate the only regular congregation of blacks: the *Llamadas*, a frantic festival of drums and *candombe* music that kicks off *Carnaval* in late February. Ruben Rada, a black jazz/*candombe* singer and national hero, is affectionately known as "*El Negro*"; and husbands and wives everywhere sweet talk each other as "*mi negrito*" or "*mi negrita*." I've wondered if the reference hails back to other places and other times when blacks were patronized and oppressed, but even if it does, Uruguayans today

don't seem to know that, and they harbor none of the prejudicial overtones of calling each other "little Negroes."

One afternoon Elder Kalu and I were wandering the streets just south of the Garcias' house and talking with anyone who crossed our path, when we came across a hunched old woman with gray skin and a flowery, silky dress and a headscarf which she wore to protect her wiry hair from the sun. She was sweeping the dirt from her front walk into the street and into the atmosphere in great clouds of dust. She looked up curiously when we saluted, but didn't answer back. "Hello, how are you today?" I repeated.

"Well," she said slowly, her voice hanging in the air like a question. It wasn't clear if she meant "good" or if she meant to continue. We stalled silently for a second, then spoke again.

"We're missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," said Kalu. "My name is Elder Kalu. I'm from Nigeria. He's Elder Madden, from the United States." She stared back at him silently, pursing her lips, but she didn't say anything. "We have a message about Jesus Christ that we share with the people –"

"Where in the United States?" she interrupted. It took me a second to understand her question.

"I'm from New Jersey," I said.

"I have relatives in New Jersey," she said, and then smiled contentedly, as if she'd known I would be from New Jersey.

"Where in New Jersey?" I asked.

"New Jersey."

"But what city?"

"New Jersey," she said with an air of finality, as if I were the one who didn't know his geography.

"Oh," I said, not wanting to argue. "It's very nice there. Have you ever been to visit?"

"No," she said sadly. "My husband is black." She stood unsteadily and looked at me slowly, waiting for my nod of understanding. But I didn't understand.

"Why can't you go if your husband is black?" I said.

She sighed and smiled kindly at me, "A few years ago my relatives invited us to go visit them in New Jersey," she began. "They have good jobs and a big house and a car. They come to Uruguay sometimes and they wear the nicest clothes and they can speak English. They were going to pay for our tickets and let us stay with them. They said we could see New York from their window. We wanted to go, but we couldn't because my husband is black." She looked at me again as if I should know why that was an obstacle.

"Why not? What does it matter if your husband is black?" I grabbed at straws of reasons, wondering if Uruguayan passports were restricted to whites, or if the U.S. embassy discriminated against blacks for visas. Nothing I could think of seemed

plausible.

"Because in the United States they kill all the black people," she said calmly, as if it were common knowledge.

"What?" I asked incredulously. "Why do you think they kill all the black people? Who told you that?"

"Everybody knows it," she said.

"But they don't kill all the black people," I said. By now I was feeling defensive. "I grew up with black people. I know lots of black people, and they're just as happy as everybody else. How can you think we kill them?" It was an oversimplification, but I needed to counterbalance her incorrect notion.

"I didn't say *you* killed them," she said. "But I saw on the television that they were killing all the black people."

I first thought of South Africa, then of documentaries on the slave trade. No matter how I tried, I couldn't figure out what she was talking about. She was obviously mistaken, I reasoned, and I could have left it at that, but my deep-set need to be right and to correct her kept me going. "When did you see that?" I asked.

"Not long ago," she said. "Right when my relatives invited us to visit."

"But what year?" She was getting impatient with my questions, and Elder Kalu looked at me sternly and notched his thumb between his long, bony fingers in the *k* sign. He meant "kill it." Shut up, man, she's not listening.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe five years ago." She scratched her nose with the broom handle.

"Was it something that happened then? Or was it a documentary?"

"It was the *news*," she said, annoyed. "They were showing it all over the world."

"But where was it from?"

"The United States, I told you already," she said. Then, "Los Angeles."

It clicked. She was talking about the riots following the Rodney King trial. One black man beaten by police and random riot coverage equals all black people being killed in the entire country. It obviously wasn't a logical conclusion, but I tried logic on her anyway.

"You mean the riots in Los Angeles? That was only one city, and they weren't killing black people. Black people were robbing Korean people. And besides, Los Angeles is across the country from New Jersey." She didn't get it. I continued, "Would you be afraid here if the Venezuelans started killing black people?" She stared curiously, unable to connect my question to the conversation. "California is as far from New Jersey as Uruguay is from Venezuela. What happened in Los Angeles has nothing to do with New Jersey. Black people are safe in New Jersey." I was wrong, of course, or at least not completely right, and I fear I would be again if backed into the same defensive corner. For all the show of tolerance and brotherly love of a missionary, when it came to a misinformed woman provoking my deep-set patriotism, I, too, oversimplified my argument and took it to an extreme. And though I had seen almost daily examples of Kalu's patience with people who misunderstood

Africa, when it was my turn to confront the same sort of misunderstanding I fought as if it were a battle. I suppose, also, that I really wanted to convince her to visit her relatives.

"All I know is what they told me," she said, picking up her broom and turning to go back to her sweeping. "They kill all the black people in the United States." She completed her pirouette, pushed open her front gate, and slowly shuffled back into the security of her front yard. Behind her we stared for a while, then shrugged at each other and walked away. Kalu punctuated the conversation with his only contribution to the debate: "I told you, man."

Jesus warned that before we attempt to take the mote out of our brother's eye, we ought to remove the beam from our own. But I guess deep down I've always thought he wasn't talking to me. It's a flaw, I suppose, that I felt the need to show her the truth about my country. I grew frustrated with her denials and illogic, as she turned further from me because of my over-excitement. All things considered, though, people's misconceptions about the United States were small in comparison with their lack of knowledge about Africa. Their strange notions sometimes drove Elder Kalu crazy. And he decided that his mission in Durazno, besides that of winning converts to Mormonism, was to educate the people about Africa.

It would be too much of an exaggeration to say *always*, but I can tell you that nearly every person we ever talked to in Durazno after Elder Kalu had been there for a week had already heard about him.

"Ah, yes. You're the *Africano*," they'd say, and he'd smile. "That's right. I'm Elder Kalu, without an accent." Lots of people mispronounced his name *Kaloo* and he hated that. He taught the kids how to say his name with a little trick exercise. He'd sound off his name five times as he touched his right index finger to each fingertip on his left hand. "Kalu, Kalu, Kalu, Kalu, Ka-a-a-lu." The first four were short bursts, the last, performed as he slid his finger down the slide between index finger and thumb, was drawn out in an exaggerated emphasis on the first syllable. "You try it," he'd tell the kids, and they'd copy what he did. "Nope," he'd say. "Try it again." And no matter how well they did it, it was never right, and they had to keep practicing. Everywhere we went kids would stop us and ask, "Is this right now? Kalu, Kalu, Kalu, Kalu, Ka-a-a-lu." But it never was. I actually felt pretty good when, after two weeks of trying, I finally "got it" and I'd help him show the kids. "Look, he can do it," he'd say. "See?"

"I'm from Nigeria, the ones who are going to win the World Cup," he taunted in the doorsteps. Uruguay hadn't qualified, and the Uruguayan men were heartbroken. Their glory years had ended with Uruguay's last win in the *Mundial* in 1950. Still, they were fiercely proud that such a small country had won two World Cups, and equally humbled that their team this year was sitting at home. Then he'd introduce me. "This is Elder Madden from the United States, where they're playing the *Mundial*."

Anyone else would have caused a big stir with his boasting and ridicule of the most sacred of Uruguayan traditions. But the people loved Elder Kalu the Nigeriano even before they ever met him. They seemed proud to have him, a real live African, in their little unknown town. Some church members who got to know him personally claimed to have had dreams that he would come to their town. Once he was there, word about him spread quickly. He told me that in every area he'd been in he heard the same story.

Even the people who didn't know him noticed. One afternoon a kid from across town bicycled over to drop off a political cartoon from the Sunday paper. It showed Elder Kalu, helmet-on-head and backpack-on-back, watching a soccer game in a bar with an assortment of locals. One of them says, "Wow! Those Africans sure play well!" Another responds, "Look at the Nigerians run!" And above them all, Elder Kalu chides, in ungrammatical Spanish, "Ha ha ha. We're in the *Mundial*, and you all are stuck at home!" We never found out who drew the picture.

He was famous. Though his celebrity didn't help much with opening doors to teach the gospel, we had many lively doorway conversations about politics and *futbol*. The common people were excited to have this novelty in their midst and eager to make a good impression. Most common of their show-off comments was "Congratulations on Mandela!" Nelson Mandela had just been elected President of South Africa. It was a trying time for Elder Kalu's nerves.

Depending on his mood, Kalu might ignore the compliment and get down to business or, more likely, give a geography lesson. "*¿¡Qué Mandela!?*" His tone meant "What are you talking about!?"

"Mandela's not from my country. South Africa is as far from Nigeria as Venezuela is from Uruguay. You don't hear me congratulating you on Venezuela's president, do you?" They cowered. We were fond of Venezuela as a distant reference point.

"Africa isn't all one country. Not all black people are the same. There are more countries in Africa than any other continent. . . ." They were losing interest, but smiling sheepishly. Usually by the time he was done they were casting sideways glances at me, shrugging as if to say, "I'm sorry." I usually smiled at them, basking in his didactic tirade and thinking, in a singsong, "They're not *lis*tening." Surprisingly, nobody was ever openly offended by his rebukes.

People were good natured about being taught African geography, and seemed to brush off his reproaches as easily as they forgot what he told them. So, after all, I don't know what effect Elder Kalu had on most of the people we met. They were too high in the clouds, excited to be graced by the presence of an exotic foreigner, to hear our real message – the one about eternal salvation – and they were too ingrained with their simplistic notions about the outside world to broaden their horizons even when a real live African came to teach them. Elder Kalu took it all in stride; his bright smile was a constant reminder that he was happy being who he was and doing what he was doing. I was happy he was doing it with me.

Several people we met were quick to note the irony of an African missionary serving the Americas. "We're the ones who usually send missionaries to you," they said laughing. Kalu quieted them, saying, "Yeah, but now is the dawn of the age of the black man. Soon everybody will do like the Africans." Their laughs became tinged with nervousness and they let the subject drop. Though missionaries from Uruguay to Africa were rare, many Uruguayans at the time were serving in U.N. peacekeeping forces in Mozambique and Rwanda and were bringing back news and souvenirs to fuel the local misunderstandings.

When he realized that he could never change certain people, Kalu started telling them, "In Africa, we have lions roaming the streets and eating the garbage just like the dogs do here." They'd become wide-eyed. "And we ride on elephants to go to work." C'mon, they'd say, you're joking. "No! And for us malaria is just like an *ataque de higado* for you all." The liver attack was painful, but nothing like malaria, they'd say. "It's true!" and he'd laugh and they'd know he was pulling their leg, or, in Spanish, pulling their hair. Then he'd whisper to me, "You tell them enough lies and maybe you wake them from their slumber."

We spent our days talking, laughing, singing old Catholic hymns as we rode down the street. We told the skeptical people we met that we had both been altar boys at one time and that the Mormons and the Catholics believed almost the same things. When people just wouldn't listen, Elder Kalu would tell me, "You can't fight with a bull." Then we'd leave. When we saw the sad results of drunkenness, abuse, and irresponsible and fighting parents, Kalu said, "When the elephants fight, the grass suffers." He talked about the members of his tribe, the Igbos, who had mysterious powers to control the weather, and he kept me rapt with accounts of the tribal wars and governmental uprisings in Nigeria during his lifetime.

One day like any other, as we left the house right on time, according to our prescribed schedule, I mused, like it was a revelation, "There's nobody here to tell us what to do. We could be doing whatever we want."

"Yeah," he completed my thought, "but we're doing the right thing anyway!"

THOUGH I don't think it had anything to do with being black, twice in the time I knew him Elder Kalu was called to be a district leader – head over a few other missionary companionships – and then a week later "demoted" because another missionary complained and was given the position. Both times it was because Elder Kalu had been on his mission less time than another missionary in the district. Usually callings to leadership positions weren't given on the basis of time in the mission, but in the two instances involving Elder Kalu, they eventually were. The second time it happened was in Durazno. Once again I felt offended on his behalf.

We were sitting on our beds one night in our long underwear and socks, with our electric heater boxes blowing in our faces. We were singing Lionel Richie's "Dancing on the Ceiling" because there was water dripping from ours, and we were talking. Finally I got up the courage to ask him, "What do you think about Gull and

Newton complaining and getting called as district leader over you? That's twice."

He always smiled when I asked him questions he had figured out long ago. He looked up beaming and said simply, "Hey, man, we're all missionaries here." I understood, and my love of Elder Kalu found a new hold. "Hey man, we're all missionaries here," and nothing more. I determined that I would emulate his humility and disinterested service – be a missionary like he was. Shortly after that conversation, we were separated. I went off to remote Carmelo, on the southwestern coast of Uruguay, across the Rio de la Plata from Buenos Aires, and Kalu stayed on for another month in Durazno to train a new missionary. I always remembered what he had taught me.

BECAUSE I kept up on the news from Durazno, I was the one who told Elder Kalu when Grandma Garcia finally died. It was the closest to vindictive I ever saw him. "Good," he said, nodding. I was surprised, having never seen him bitter. He continued, "I hope when she gets there they put her with all the Negroes that ever lived." Then he laughed, a great big hearty laugh, and I hoped God would listen to him.