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Port Market, New Year's Eve

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Having been told that the Port Market in Montevideo, Uruguay, would be interesting at noon on New Year's Eve, I went to the place just before the appointed hour to observe the festivities, which would include, I had been forewarned, plenty of drinking and daily-desk-calendar page-tearing-and-tossing from high office windows in the surrounding business district. Nobody warned me about the water balloons. But inside the Market, things were relatively calm. Too calm, in fact, so after I took a quick look around, I left to reconnoiter the area.

Travel writers are inveterate journal scribblers, catching their observations and impulses as they happen, shorthand, for later translation into literature. Often writers do such a good job with their journals that they quote themselves in their books and essays, as if the effort of recasting were too much, or the original phrasing too perfect. I'm being too harsh, of course, because the traveler's journal also lends authenticity and immediacy to a finished piece. But I rarely appreciate the hackneyed phrase "in my journal I wrote," and I rarely use it, have never used it. No doubt there is jealousy hidden beneath my contempt, a jealousy born of my own difficulty and inconsistency in keeping even a horrendously inadequate journal. I overburden my memory and write from my false memories, my imaginings, my approximations. Or I stick to things I know, possibly missing out on a succulent detail I'd have access to if I'd only written it down. Always there to back me up in a time of doubt, Eduardo Galeano writes, "My memory knows me better than I do, and she doesn't lose what deserves to be saved." But I still sincerely dislike the disruption that a cited journal entry brings.

In my journal that day I wrote:

> Everything about the port says *bygone*—the hunched-over shirtless fat man walking across the street, the plastic rags hanging from streetlamps, the abandoned ornate apartment building . . . the bright yellow and blue and red cranes in the distance. Thousands of containers littering the freight yard: Hamburg Süd, Cosco, Maersk, Mol (with its alligator mascot) or Mitsui O.S.K.L. The bum slumped in the sun, warmly dressed; the bums sleeping in the shade of the trees; the shit rotting on the side walks. Around the corner, with a view uphill toward down town, calendar leaves fluttering down then stuck in puddles. Neat, meaningless red-on-tan political graffiti from years past—AFP Lista 3 / 333 CLEVAS / El 1 es Paulino. A hollow metallic thumping on a container somewhere amidst the multitude. Everything is stagnant, except the gray and white clouds and the leaves on the trees.

I sat writing for a while against the old apartment building in the sliver of shade on the south side. Not a single car passed.

On my way back I passed an empty playground, a group of people waiting for a bus, an outdated, unparallel, unheeded call for change:

> Without bread, without work, without everyone, there is no peace, no dreams, no history.

More calendar leaves caught in an updraft, shining in reflected light. Bar Los Beatles, a woman mopping the entrance, a shy little girl hiding behind wrought-iron bars, an antique clothes shop, a man dragging a plastic milk crate filled with junk. The air smelled like grilled chicken and diesel, sounded like plastic scraping and trucks grumbling and tiny dogs yipping and, underneath, the silent "For Sale" signs calling out. Just next to the Market, the

remains of De Comisus, painted dark red with thirty golden arrows pointing to its rusted door, left, right, and above, and a sign:

> Fantasies, Electricity, Stationery, Toys, Umbrellas, Batteries, Watches!

Up from the storefront, the broken windows, the balcony plants, a single DirectTV satellite dish, dark clouds moving fast, portending.

When I returned to the Market the people had arrived and sat smilingly talking in groups at tables and at bars, leaning their eyes out of the sunbeams shooting in from above. Although it was once a market proper where merchants sold fruits and vegetables and fish fresh from the merchant ships and fishing boats moored nearby, the Port Market is now a cultural center, a touristy conglomeration of restaurants and crafts shops, each its own locale under the high ceiling of the old Market, under the watch of a giant tower clock's four faces, still keeping correct time, which is rare in Montevideo. The air was buzzing with conversations and the spitting of meats on giant grills, the air was acrid with the smoke from open fires that kept the grills supplied with hot coals, the air was hazy and arrayed with shafts of light shining through the high windows, dancing on the rough concrete floor.

There were men on the roofs of the restaurants, in that middle ground between the Market roof and the floor, shouting down orders and lowering crates of beer and wine with pulleys. There were waiters bustling expertly through the crowds, shouting orders to the cooks in white aprons, sweating as they stoked their fires and turned their steaks. There were birds diving to the floor to peck some discarded crumb, then returning to the safety of the rafters above the unbelievable stacks of chopped wood near the back of the Market, wood that seemed to glow a light brown against the burnt grays of the brick walls.

As I watched all the human machinery oblivious to my presence, I felt as if I were visiting some distant past, before franchises, when meals were personal, individual, the result of many hands.

Most people I saw were with other people, talking, gesturing, ordering and eating, and I'm not the kind of person who feels comfortable wedging himself in among others, so I kept a safe distance, observing and jotting down notes. But one guy, Chinese by the looks of him, and with a mess of backpack and jacket and other assorted hanging paraphernalia, caught my eye. I followed him for a while, looking at the menus he looked at, visiting the booths he visited, screwing up the courage to talk with him. When he sat down at the Quinta Rosa, I noticed he was using a phrase book to order food, and I took the opportunity to offer my translation services. Perhaps it was ethnocentric of me to assume that he would know English, but I couldn't imagine a solitary foreign traveler would get along well without knowing some English, and I was sort of right.

I tried Spanish first, out of courtesy to the waitress behind the counter, but, as I suspected, the Chinese guy just stared and shook his head. So I tried English, he nodded, and we were on our way to a trying conversation. Despite his difficulties with English and my complete ignorance of Japanese (he was Japanese, I soon found out, not Chinese), I learned that his name was Kazunobu Kagohara (but only after he wrote it down) and he was traveling around the world in about two weeks, with symbolic stops in Thailand, Indonesia, Turkey, Germany, Argentina, Uruguay, and the United States, never more than a couple of days in any location, always on his own, with only a Japanese guidebook listing historical sites and local-language phonetic approximations of sayings like "Where is the hotel?" and "How much does this cost?"

I told him my story about writing a book, living in Uruguay long-term, being married to a Uruguayan, studying literature. He

told me he worked for some company (he didn't have much vocabulary to describe it), was on vacation, and liked traveling around the world.

He also liked, I learned, Microsoft (he used their software at work) and Harley Davidson motorcycles (his had been stolen recently, and he seemed to be asking me to help him get a new one) and Bon Jovi (he sang a very humorous few verses of "You Give Love a Bad Name"), and had visited the United States seven times, but had never been to Washington, D.C., which he would visit in a couple of days. He asked about the Aeronautic and Space Museum, which it took me a long time to understand, and I told him he'd have plenty of museums to visit in Washington, especially if he was going to be there less than two days.

I asked him, "Is it hard to travel by yourself?"

Smiles, shakes head.

"Is it difficult traveling alone?"

Smiles. "What?"

"Do you find it difficult to visit foreign countries without any friends with you?"

Smiles. "Ah. Yes."

I still wasn't sure he understood me, but I let it slide. He asked me a question, but it was noisy and I didn't catch his words.

"I'm sorry?"

He repeated it, something about living in Uruguay, but I couldn't pick out a question.

Pause. Think. Replay what I think I heard. Admit defeat: "I didn't understand what you asked."

He repeated it again, and even though I could hear him, his accent was thick, and I *still* couldn't make it out.

"Oh. Yeah. I mean, yes." Smile. Nod. Hope the question was yes/no. Move deftly to an easier subject with easier words. Think of my brother Dan's humorous mispronunciation of the band The Deftones: The Deft-Ones. Think of my family's game Mispronounciation, where *congratulations* is con•gra•too•la•tie•ons. Won-

der if my Japanese friend also realizes that we don't understand each other. Wonder where he lays the blame.

Throughout our conversation I reflected on our differences and on my normal venom against the hummingbird traveler: a sort of tourist whose goal seems to be to collect places, as if only to say he's been there, here are some photographs as proof. I was impressed that my friend was independent enough to travel alone to faraway lands where he didn't know anybody and didn't speak the language. But I also thought he was missing a lot of what you could get to know about a place by staying longer (as I was doing, of course). Later I discovered Che Guevara's description of himself and Alberto Granado during their formative motorcycle journey around South America: "Always curious, investigating everything we set eyes on, sniffing into nooks and crannies; but always detached, not putting down roots anywhere, not staying long enough to discover what lay beneath things: the surface was enough." That made their mode of travel more acceptable, more romantic, even. We each had our motives, I guess, and putting a smiling Japanese face to the vilified abstraction tempered my disdain for the faceless place-collector.

When we had finished eating and paid our bills, I asked him how much time he had before his boat left and if he'd like me to show him around. He said he had a couple of hours, then pulled out his guidebook and pointed to the Legislative Palace. It was a ways away, I said, but I'd be willing to take him there. He hesitated, but followed along, and we talked some more about Bon Jovi, who went to high school with a friend of mine, which fact seemed to impress.

That's when we learned about the water balloons, splattering on the pavement only a foot in front of us followed by airy laughter from above. Well-dressed people on the street were running in spurts and ducking under doorways and outcroppings. Some women were carrying umbrellas. Well-dressed people framed

above us in office windows ducked in and out of view, smiling, hurtling, laughing. It was hard to navigate the street, and several people we saw got hit, once by a bucketful of water dumped from only one story up. But we were astute, timing our runs and watching the sky for warnings. I felt like I was in a video game.

Once we made it out of the danger zone and into a more peaceful area of the Old City (no more tall buildings), I asked if he had seen the Old City's landmarks. Only then did he tell me that he had arrived the night before, had stayed in a hostel, and had taken a walking tour of the area, guided by his guidebook. I started to feel useless, wondering if he was humoring me, following along only from a sense of obligation or because he didn't know how to politely refuse in English. I didn't think of Paul Theroux's exact words, but I had the sentiment (and a suspicion of it), and I looked them up later: "Travel is at its best a solitary experience: to see, to examine, to assess, you have to be alone and unencumbered. Other people can mislead you; they crowd your meandering impressions with their own; if they are companionable they obstruct your view, and if they are boring they corrupt the silence with non-sequiturs, shattering your concentration." His reasoning seems tight, but for the fact that it is not my experience at all. Also, it is followed almost immediately by "Traveling on your own . . . is not understood by Japanese who, coming across you smiling wistfully at an acre of Mexican buttercups, tend to say things like *Where is the rest of your team?*" The Legislative Palace was far enough away, and my thoroughly independent, individualistic Japanese friend hadn't been there yet, so we carried on, looking for a bus.

We found one soon enough, and I helped him count out his pesos for the fare. We passed the time in silence. I had run out of things to ask, or had decided I couldn't reduce my questions to English he would understand, or it wasn't worth the effort, but I was still thinking about whether I would have wanted a guy like me to take me around the city. It would have been much easier for him to simply ask directions, take a taxi, ride silently behind

the plexiglass barrier, pay his fare, and be done with human interaction and obligation. And yet here I was, taking him on the bus to save a few pesos, winding through streets blocks and blocks away from the direct route, and not even talking. Once the Palace was in view, I motioned for him to stand near the rear exit, mumbled that the building was completed in 1930, Uruguay's centennial, along with the stadium that that year hosted the first-ever soccer World Cup, which Uruguay won.

When we got to the Palace grounds, Kazu took a few pictures of us standing in front of the imposing architecture and statuary with his amazingly small camera set on a telescoping titanium tripod, which the wind knocked over, thus allowing him to show his camera's amazing durability. Because of the holiday, we couldn't get inside for a tour or to see the people I knew, so that was that. Five minutes after we arrived, he explained that he'd better get back to the port to catch his boat back to Buenos Aires. We hailed him a cab, I asked the cabbie how much it'd be (thirty-five pesos), we shook hands, and he was gone. As he closed the door he invited me to visit him in Japan.

On my way home, at the corner of Agraciada and Grito de Asencio, the bus driver hopped off to buy flowers. The bus and its passengers sat idling, uncomplaining, as the light went from red to green to yellow again and again and again.