

Patrick Madden

THE GREAT ESCAPE

In the Guinness Book, there are very few world records held by Uruguayans. One is the “Most important pencil collection,” numbered at 5,500 different designs, logotypes, and brands. Another is the “Largest mortadela,” a kind of boloney, which I saw myself in 1995 at the annual Rural Exposition in the Prado. It was big, for sure, but not that big. Maybe fifteen feet long and two feet in diameter, all wrapped in red-lettered Cativelli-brand plastic under bright lights and signs announcing its prominence and preeminence. If you had the wherewithal and the careatall, you could break that record easily. A third record, a bit older, is in the “Greatest jail breaks” category. Says the Guinness Book:

In September 1971 Raúl Sendic and 105 other Tupamaro guerillas, plus five nonpolitical prisoners, escaped from a Uruguayan prison through a tunnel 298 ft long.

This is the best kind of record, an incidental record; it is not sought, not dumb luck, and not without substantial effort. It is not “Tallest man” or “Oldest living person,” which you can’t get, no matter how hard you try, unless you’re meant (genetically, cosmically) for it. It’s also not “Biggest pizza” or “Radio DJ marathon,” which are relatively easy to break, given the will and some endurance, and which are set and broken (repeatedly) only by people seeking to break the record. And, finally, it’s not an accidental record, like the one that has haunted me since I first saw it back when I was in third grade: the kid who spent the most time underwater without dying. It was freezing cold water under ice, and his body effectively shut down. He ended up with permanent brain damage and very thick glasses that made his eyes cartoonish and empty. The Tupamaros’ prison break is the kind of record you get from having done something extraordi-

nary for some other purpose, worthy and worthwhile in itself.

This is also what makes the Tupamaros’ prison break much cooler and more legitimate than the 1979 escape from Gasre Prison in Tehran, Iran, by 11,000 prisoners who were accidentally freed from the outside by a commando unit sent in by Ross Perot to stir up a riot outside, attack the prison, and rescue two of his Electronic Data Systems employees. The rest of the escapees “took advantage of this and the Islamic Revolution” to hightail it out of there, according to the Guinness Book, which lists this escape alongside the Tupamaros’. I can certainly respect the planning and effort made by the commandos, and Ross Perot’s dedication to his workers, but for me, it’s not about numbers, it’s about intentionality and ingenuity. Any opportunist can run through an open door in the middle of the Islamic Revolution after the guards are subdued by an external mob. But to escape from the inside, through a tunnel, with all the dirt hidden under your beds for over half a month, after connecting together some fifty cells on three floors; to come out through somebody’s living room floor, grab a pouch of money and a gun from your compañeros, then burst through the backyard, then through the abutting house’s backyard, and then the other house, and into waiting trucks to be whisked away in the early morning hours while other compañeros make a diversion burning cars across town—to execute the escape including one-hundred-eleven men all in a few hours—that is, in the literal, etymologically correct sense of the word, awesome.

The escape has captivated me since I first learned about it, mostly because of the mystique and adventure of it, because of its metaphorical possibilities, because, as my father says, “There’s a part of everyone that wants to escape from prison,” and because I had never heard about it before then. In Uruguay, everybody knows what you mean if you mention “The Escape from Punta Carretas,” most people know what you mean if you call it simply “The Escape,” and many people know what you mean if you call it, cryptically, “The Abuse,” the Tupamaros’ code name for it. But nobody brags about it, except for the guy I met one day when I went with Arturo Dubra looking for the house on Solano García where the tunnel ended. A small man in greasy work clothes approached, excitedly offering to give us a tour of the area.

“This is where we broke out in the seventies,” he said.

Arturo smiled.

"Not me personally," said the small man, "the Tupamaros Tunnel went right under here." He pointed down to the street. "Greatest escape in history."

Arturo presented himself, never mentioning that he was a key organizer of the escape or that he worked eight hours a day for sixteen days digging the famed tunnel.

The small man got to talking about ages. He was nearing eighty, he said.

Arturo said, "I'm sixty, with sixteen years in the shade."

This was the first time Arturo Dubra had been back to Punta Carretas since he escaped on September 6, 1971. Of the 111 escapees, most are still living in Uruguay, though some have died and some never returned after their exile during the military dictatorship that began in 1973. Because Uruguay is relatively small, with about half of its three million people living in the capital city of Montevideo, I had no trouble finding friends of friends who had escaped and were willing to talk with me. Arturo, the friendliest, most willing, and most anecdotal of the men I met, was the first alternate for Eleutorio Fernández Huidobro, another escapee, in the Uruguayan National Senate. Two Tupamaros, Fernández Huidobro (whom everybody calls "Ñato" or "Flatnose,") and José Mujica (called "Pepe") were elected to the Senate in 1999 after a term in the House of Representatives.

They'd come a long way since the early 1960s when Raúl Sendic (nicknamed "El Bebe" or "Baby" for his childish face and soft voice) quit law school in Montevideo, traveled north to Bella Union, on the Brazilian border, and organized sugar cane workers into a union to demand higher wages and safer working conditions. Despite decades of prosperity buoyed by a surplus of agrarian exports through two world wars and the Korean conflict, pockets of manual laborers had remained untouched by Uruguay's social and educational reforms. The *cañeros*, led by Sendic, marched twice on Montevideo from their faraway, forgotten fields, but their protests came to nothing. Worse, the "welfare state" established by previous Uruguayan presidents was becoming too top-heavy with over twenty-five percent of the work force employed by the state. With technological advances the world over, and without other countries' war machines to feed and outfit, Uruguay lost the advantages it had previously enjoyed. Inspired by the success of the Cuban Revolution (yet deaf to Che Guevara's 1962 praise of Uruguay as the model for the rest of

Latin America, given in a speech at Montevideo's Universidad de la Republica), Sendic, Fernández Huidobro, Mujica, and a slew of other students, laborers, unionists, and socialists proposed to spark one of Che's "two, three, many Vietnams" in Uruguay.

They began simply, stealing arms and money as the need arose, perpetrating vandalism and distributing anti-government fliers, in a war of propaganda. In those days they were more likely to rob a bank of its financial records than of its money, and when such thefts went unreported, they would publish their findings (of fraud, illegal laundering, hidden accounts) in the local papers. Their guns were mostly for show then, enough to convince a grocery store truck driver to step out of his vehicle so the Tupamaros could distribute staples to poor neighborhoods in northern Montevideo. Thus the Tupamaros continued, publishing their propaganda, Robin-Hooding their way into the hearts of the common people, growing in number and in strength as inspired students half-mentioned their interest in crowded cafes, were contacted, and joined up. Their urban war had begun. But where would it lead?

Arturo Dubra was a tall thin man with a thinning gray beard and sunken blue eyes. He wore worn dress pants and always an open-collared button-down cotton shirt, or flannel in the cold. When he smiled, his cheeks puffed out and his eyes brightened and he looked very much like an older, wizened Wallace from *Wallace and Gromit* by clay animator Nick Park. I offer this description qualitatively, with no disrespect intended. Arturo was in many ways a typical tranquil Uruguayan old man, chain smoking hand-rolled cigarettes that left his fingertips callused and yellowed, speaking softly in a gruff voice, pausing occasionally to think as he stares into nothing in his Senate office or in the front room of the Tupamaros' headquarters on Tristan Narvaja under the gaze of Uruguayan father of independence José Artigas, Tupamaro founder Raúl Sendic, and Argentine mercenary Che Guevara, as he tells me about the early preparations for the escape, but his mind wanders:

We were always planning to escape, ever since our first *compañero* was arrested. We first studied the possibility of taking over the prison, for example, but that would have been very bloody. We would have had to come in shooting. In addition to the guards inside, there were platoons of sixty or eighty soldiers guarding

the outer walls. The place was gigantic, and there was no way to capture it by surprise, without violence. We always tried to avoid violence at all costs and in all our actions. Some of our compañeros lost their lives because they wouldn't kill.

In general, people weren't afraid of us. They were afraid of the government repression, but not us. One day we broke into a military officer's house, and his wife left their children in the care of one of our compañeras and came to talk with the rest of us. She discussed where she thought we were right and where we were wrong, what her husband had told her, what he hadn't told her.

We got delayed on our way out because she wanted to give us a jar of pickled hot peppers, because one compañero had seen them and said "Ooh, hot peppers! I haven't had them for so long!"

"My husband told me that you don't eat very well. You can take it."

"No, because you're not giving it from your heart."

"Yes I am. Take it."

And there they were, back and forth, take it, no I can't, and I was sitting in the car with the engine running yelling, "Man, let's go!" and in the end he had to take the peppers.

Arturo and I talked several times about the escape, about the '60s, about politics and economics, and he was always amiable and interesting. For one, he didn't always talk in first-person plural, like a lot of other Tupamaros I met. I think it was because he had actually done some pretty amazing stuff, while a lot of others had minor roles. One man I talked to, for instance, found out about the escape only the day before, when everything was already in place, and he went along for the ride. Others, those with light sentences who would be released shortly, were left behind on the other side of the jail, and most didn't find out about the escape until the guards did. On the outside, most active Tupamaros knew nothing, though a few were charged with stealing prison plans, which were passed off to inmates in kisses during visits by female Tupamaras. The plans were torn in small pieces and stuffed inside small "pills" made of nylon, to be reconnected on the inside, sometimes after a passage through a prisoner's intestinal tract. On the night of the escape many clandestine

Tupamaros participated in a disturbance in La Teja, across town from the prison, to draw police forces away. They had no idea what their purpose might be, though some suspected an escape, given that thirty-nine female Tupamaras had escaped from their prison a little over a month earlier. (Their tunnel was dug from the outside, connecting their dormitory floor with the city sewer system.) But Arturo was directly involved in the planning and execution of the Punta Carretas escape. Because he was skinny and flexible and not claustrophobic, because he had lived for a time in the city's sewers mapping them out, he was down in the tunnel digging every day.

Long years of neglect after the escape eventually left Punta Carretas unsuitable for holding prisoners (some might say that it was never suitable, but that's another story). In the 1980s, the shell of the building was salvaged, but its insides were gutted and redesigned into a chic European-style shopping mall. I thought it would be interesting to go back to Punta Carretas with Arturo. I wish I could say I thought of it myself, but I had seen it done in a German documentary that interviewed Fernández Huidobro and Mujica, the two senators. I decided to try it myself, but without the weight of celebrity lent by the two best-known living Tupamaros. I liked the idea of getting the story from a relatively unknown contributor. Karina, my wife, and I met Arturo at his Senate office, then took a taxi to the site of the former prison. Arturo paid the fare.

Among so many Tupamaros with families in two generations, Arturo and his wife, Rosario, are an anomaly. Many Tupamaros had children before their incarceration, lost their families when their wives and children were forced to flee the country, then remarried and started again fifteen or so years later when they were amnestied along with Uruguay's return to democracy. Rosario and Arturo met in high school, one day before the teacher came in, while she was chatting with a friend, sitting backwards on her chair, and Arturo's booming voice made her think the teacher had arrived and she was in trouble. They have been together ever since. His paternal grandfather was a military man; his father was a lawyer and a national representative for the Socialist party. His maternal grandfather was a businessman whose company built Uruguay's highways. Until he was nine, Arturo lived in what Uruguayans call a palace and what we would

call a mansion. It had tennis courts, a pool, and room enough for three families inside. After that house, his father moved the family to a smaller, but by no means modest, home. Arturo was a poor student, completely distracted, while Rosario was diligent. They began dating when he was fourteen and she was thirteen. As soon as he graduated from high school, Arturo bought a parcel of land in nearby Pando and began to farm. The shack he built for himself had no windows and a doorway but no door, and it was infested by mice. He bathed in a nearby stream and relieved himself in a latrine he had dug. He was a true bohemian, says his wife, the first boy to wear a white T-shirt and jeans in school, and a man who really did not care at all for material things, in spite of, or perhaps because of, his upbringing. He only left behind his subsistence farm when Rosario refused to live there. If he wanted to marry her, he would have to take her to a normal apartment. On paper, a lot of things she said will look like clichés—"Once I met Arturo, there was nobody else." "When I heard that deep, resonant voice, I melted."—but somehow when she says them, they sound like ante-clichés, or anti-clichés. She remained faithful to him through all his years of clandestinity and prison.

She talks about Arturo's first arrest, after the Tupamaros occupied the city of Pando to commemorate Che's death, when she knew that he was in this for good. She talks about visiting Arturo at the police battalion with Arturo's father. They brought him out, so bloodied and beaten that Rosario shuddered in horror, and then shuddered again when she recognized him by his voice saying, "What are you doing here?" She talks about the times she was taken by police and questioned, sometimes tortured, beaten, blindfolded and led in circles and up stairs and hung over a high ledge, threatened. She never left Uruguay, and she visited Arturo every chance she got.

Conditions in Punta Carretas were more relaxed than what I usually imagine when I think of a prison. The Tupamaros, who were for the most part educated and highly organized, quickly established their order inside the prison and exercised pressure on the prison guards and warden. Because of the country's struggling economy, and because of corruption among the guards, who once even stole the sausages a politician had sent the inmates for a holiday meal, prison food was terribly inadequate. Thus were prisoners allowed to receive food from their families,

which they could cook inside their cells over kerosene stoves. Most food was shared communally, even with non-Tupamaros, and was dispensed from a commissary cell. Family members also brought books, which were collected and distributed in a library cell. Those Tupamaros with medical training attended to sick inmates in an infirmary/pharmacy cell using medicines and supplies brought by families and sympathizers from the outside. Although soldiers patrolled the outer wall, the guards on the inside were contracted non-military men with families to feed who had chosen their profession for its good pay and job security. They allowed prisoners to bet on horse races and purchase lottery tickets. For the right price, they would bring in newspapers or alcohol. Prisoners had classes in woodwork and other crafts, and they played daily soccer games in the field behind the cellblock.

The cells in Punta Carretas were not all bars for walls; they didn't even have bars for doors. Their walls were a foot-and-a-half thick and made of field brick, a brick somewhat bigger than I'm used to, but not as tall and certainly not as hollow as a cinder block. The cells had thick wood-and-metal doors with a small metal grate and opening for food and conversation. There was a toilet in one corner, bunk beds on one wall, and sometimes a desk. Not even the visitation room had bars until after July 17, 1971, when Raúl Bidegain, a Tupamaro leader, walked out of prison while his younger brother, who had come to visit him, remained in his place.

From their woodwork classes, the Tupamaros collected metal wires and shims. These they used to scrape away the mortar between the field bricks in their cell walls. Originally, their purpose was to break off the back side of a brick so they could hide censored newspapers and magazines, but once everybody started doing it, they realized that if they could perforate a small hole through to the next cell, then men on both sides could hold the ends of a twisted wire, which they would pull back and forth, eating away the mortar between a group of several bricks, until they could remove a section of wall and pass from one cell to the next. They disposed of the mortar dust in their toilets or on the soccer field, and they covered the evidence of their work by stuffing paper in the cracks between the bricks and plastering and painting the surface, or sometimes strategically placing a poster. They got the plaster from their families in bags marked

“flour.” And though it was more complicated, they were also able to connect the cells at the far end of the corridor top-to-bottom by perforating the floor/ceiling and creating a removable camouflaged hatch.

They didn’t get caught because they had negotiated with the warden an end to surprise cell inspections, claiming that it made them nervous. Given the schedule of cell inspections, they knew they had a little over half a month to complete their escape tunnel. They had also, through negotiations and pretensions, managed to get cell transfers for all the *compañeros* who would participate in the escape. The Tupamaros were on the second and third floors of the four-story prison. By early September, all the escapees were on one side of the hallway, while the other side was filled with men who would be released soon. They had bargained with the common prisoners in the ground-floor corner to use their cell as the beginning of the tunnel.

There remained the question of what to do with all the dirt they would be bringing up. Said Arturo:

All of a sudden we got very pulchritudinous, wanting privacy on the john and room freshener. We got permission to put curtains around our toilets and bed skirts on our beds. We kept our cells smelling fresh to cover the sweat and dirt. We were doing this pantomime of wanting our cells to look pretty. We asked for posters and paint. Our families brought us linens, which we sewed into bags to hold all the dirt we were excavating. We stacked them under our beds and inside our curtained toilets. By the time we were done, we had one toilet for every two cells. Every second toilet was completely covered in bags of dirt.

The tunnel was dug over the course of sixteen days, beginning in mid-August. Men were digging constantly, day and night, using tools made from soap dishes and bed frames. The lead digger would scrape away, passing along the dirt and rocks he loosened. This would be collected by another man in the tunnel and pulled back to the surface in a small cart. Then the dirt was stuffed in bags and stepped on to compress it. For air, they used a giant bellows at the tunnel mouth that pumped through meters of taped-together cardboard tubes and rolled up magazines, but the flow was minimal, and diggers often grew light-headed, until the tunnel crossed a sewer line, which was perforated to allow in a steady stream of (less-than-fresh) air. (The sewers were patrolled

by the police, and a previous attempt to escape through the sewers had been foiled.) The tunnel was only big enough to crawl through, with a few wider sections so diggers could turn around and get back out. Arturo, skinny and flexible, could turn himself around without a turnaround by performing a sort of somersault. Diggers were given the best food and were assured undisturbed sleep, and lies about their health were fabricated to explain their absence from the soccer field and other activities.

There were sometimes close calls, like the time when Arturo’s father, who was also his lawyer, came to visit. The news came while Arturo was at the front of the tunnel, already past the prison wall, but because of the complex system of vigilance the Tupamaros had set up, and thanks to a couple of key diversions, he was able to quickly get out of the tunnel, up through the ceiling, and through one wall into his cell, put a poster in place to cover the hatch, change his clothes, wash his face, and receive his father’s visit, still breathing heavily and smelling of dirt. But the digging continued basically undisturbed and completely undetected down fifteen feet under the prison wall, through rich dirt, heavy rocks, and loose sand, under the street Solano García, and very close to the living-room floor of the Rial Castillos family home.

On the night of Sunday, September 5th, the last night before cell inspections would resume, the call went out—“*Abuso!*”—and the escapees made their way to the end cells on their floor to await. Earlier in the day, two groups of Tupamaros had occupied the house across the street and another house diagonally behind it. By nightfall, a large group of Tupamaros was stirring up the people of La Teja, across town, overturning cars, and burning tires in the street.

Not everything went smoothly. At eleven o’clock, about an hour after lights out, all the hatches were open and everyone was gathered in the end cells and around the mouth of the tunnel waiting silently for word to start their flight. A common prisoner from the first floor began kicking his door and yelling about a toothache, wanting medical attention, possibly because he knew about the escape and wanted to cause problems. A Tupamaro doctor quickly scrambled back to his cell, knowing that the guards would ask him for medicine. He was right. By keeping his face close to his door and immediately handing the guard a couple of pills, he prevented the guard from seeing into the cell.

The plan was for *compañeros* occupying the house across the

street to wait for the sign, listening with a stethoscope for tapping from below, and dig through the living room floor to connect with the tunnel. But after months of planning even the smallest details, the end was comedic. The plans had forgotten the slight incline from the street level to the house's front door, and were thus one meter short. While the prisoners' vanguard rapped on the tunnel's ceiling, their compañeros in the living room above searched in vain for the source of the muffled tapping, which was dispersed by the meter of dirt between them. By the time they met up with the tunnel, they had dug up half the living-room floor, and their aim was slightly off, leaving a slight jog between upper and lower sections. Because of the extra depth, the prisoners had to hold up both arms and be pulled out. And thus, after an excruciating five-hour delay, the first prisoners started filing out. First came the men with the longest sentences and the Tupamaro leadership.

"There was a compañero we called 'One Arm,'" Arturo told me:

He had a small arm with a deformed hand. When he gets to the end of the tunnel, they tell him, "Lift up your arms," and he lifts one. "The other one, the other one!" "I don't have another one." "Come on, we're not joking. This is no time to be screwing around." "Really, I don't have another arm." So they pulled on his one arm and he got stuck in the jog. And when they saw him they apologized, "We thought you were messing with us."

Arturo, who had grown up in the neighborhood of the prison, knew the Rial Castillos family, whose house the tunnel ended in. When Grandma Rial understood what was going on, said Arturo, she told her captors:

"Tell Arturito to come give me a kiss."

"But, Ma'am, can't you see that...?"

And every few minutes: "Are they out yet?"

"No, not yet, Ma'am, there's a complication."

And she saw that they were tearing up her living room, but "Oh well, but when Arturito comes out, tell him to come and give me a kiss."

She was wearing them out, and when I was getting near the

tunnel exit, I heard, "Are you Arturito?" "No." "Are you Arturito?" "No." They made you put your arms up, then they pulled you out, and, "Are you Arturito?" And when I said, "Yes," they stopped me. "Go give a kiss to that old bat. She's been driving us crazy."

"And did you?" I asked him.

"Yeah. I went and I gave her a kiss."

Each escapee took off his prison jumpsuit, left it in a pile, and received a bag containing a false ID, a revolver, and about ten dollars. Once the prisoners had all passed through the backyard and into the house on the next street, they were sent off in vans and large trucks to be distributed to waiting vehicles around the city and then to predetermined hiding places. Because of the delay, one truckload missed all their contacts, and their driver took them to his home just across the Montevideo border, in Shangri-La, one of the country's beachfront towns. A few hours later, after he had made the necessary calls and set up the necessary contacts, he drove them back into Montevideo, right past a police roadblock that was searching all the vehicles leaving the city.

After the last of the Tupamaros had left and his family was unbound, Billy Rial called the police to report the escape.

"The Tupamaros from the prison escaped through my house," he said.

"That can't be. Are you sure?" came the reply.

He repeated what he had said.

"Okay. We'll make a note of it."

After a few minutes, he called again and was told, "We've called the prison and they said everything is fine."

Undaunted and unbelieving, he walked out his front door and shouted to the soldiers on the wall, "The Tupamaros escaped!"

There was no answer.

Ten minutes later, about five A.M., a police truck came to verify Billy's initial phone call. Inside the prison, the guards finally checked the Tupamaros' cells, finding all the walls perforated, all that dirt under the beds and around the toilets, a few dummies under the covers, and a number of signs: "This room for rent. Good references required." "Through the earth with Sendic" (a double meaning of the *cañero* motto "*Por la tierra con Sendic*": "For the land with Sendic").

Two weeks later, the first escapees were recaptured, ratted out by one of the common prisoners who had escaped with them. He had robbed a bar, was arrested, and quickly sang what he knew about his conspirators. Arturo was recaptured seven months after the escape, while washing dishes in the back of a home in downtown Montevideo. He spent the next thirteen years in prison, until the country's return to democracy in 1985 included amnesty for political prisoners. Because most of the escapees returned to active duty in Montevideo, they were almost all recaptured within a year and suffered similar fates.

The escape was an embarrassment for Uruguayan President Jorge Pacheco, whose illegal re-election campaign that year (he hoped to amend the Constitution, which prohibited presidential re-election, but he failed) was run on the platform of zero tolerance for the terrorists and a promise of swift action to return the country to normalcy. But the escape was also, as Don Henley says, "the end of the innocence" for the Tupamaros. Where they once raided banks, carting out ledgers in order to publish illegal activities, where they once stole groceries and distributed them to the poor, where they once carried on most of their propaganda with spray paint and mimeographs, they now began the Revolution in earnest. They targeted mostly torturers and members of death squads, but their blood lust turned the once-intrigued populace against them.

What was worse, with the escape, Pacheco breached the Constitution further than he had yet dared. The Tupamaro hunt was turned over to the military, who went after suspects with relentless disregard for civil or human rights, torturing and terrorizing even those flimsily connected to the Tupamaros, to the point where about one in fifty Uruguayans had been tortured, a percentage reportedly higher than anywhere else in the world. By the end of 1972, the entire Tupamaro leadership was in prison, with nine of the most important men held hostage by the government. They were kept in wells or dungeons and transferred regularly from one part of the country to another under the threat that if their *compañeros* acted again, the hostages would be killed. Said Sentic, principal among the hostages, "So you kill me. The Revolution will go on." But it didn't. Not in Uruguay. Not in that way. Although you might say that after twelve years of military dictatorship, and less than twenty years into a new constitutional democracy, with two national senators and a large voice in the

Frente Amplio, the leftist coalition that assumed the Uruguayan presidency in 2005, the Tupamaros' Revolution has taken a more practical turn.

That day when we went to Punta Carretas Shopping Mall, Arturo tried to show me where the cellblock was, where he might have lived, where, more or less, the tunnel may have begun, maybe somewhere there in the beauty salon or the CD Warehouse. He was gracious, but seemed uncomfortable with the gaud and glitz and the quick steps of Punta Carretas's new inmates. We wanted to get information on the building's conversion, so Arturo pressed a button on a life-size, plastic, black-suit-and-tie information butler. "Hello, Mr. Mannequin," he joked. "I'd like to find the mall office." A voice, unfazed, directed us to the second floor down a hallway next to the Swatch store. There, a man offered us a full-color booklet called *Punta Carretas: Before and After*.

"Perfect," I said.

It wasn't until I got home and looked inside that I understood that the "before" meant before the new Sheraton five-star hotel that's integrated into the mall.

Before we parted ways, I gave Arturo my email address: pc madden3@yahoo.com. He saw the number three and asked about it.

"It's because I'm the third," I said. "Named after my father and grandfather. My son is Patrick the fourth."

"That's like me then," he said. "Arturo Dubra is my name, my father's name, and my grandfather's."

"Do you have any children?" I asked. I had been wanting to ask. "Any Arturo the fourth?"

"Only my nephew," he said.

Arturo Dubra died at eight A.M. on Friday, June 6, 2003, from complications related to his cancer. That afternoon, his brother-in-law, Gonzalo Moyano, called to tell me that there was a wake at the Tupamaro headquarters on Tristan Narvaja, and a funeral the next morning. I got on my coat and left.

At the wake, and then at the funeral service the next day, I was the oddball, though I tried to match the Tupamaro dress code: button-down shirt, no tie, jeans or dark work pants, waist-length winter jacket, but no overcoat. But I was too tall, and clean shaven, and younger than almost anybody there. At the

wake, I talked with Gonzalo, tried hard not to ask "How are you doing?" or to say "Good evening" to anybody, shook hands with people I didn't know, met friends of the few people I did know, got a surprise kiss on the cheek from an old bearded Tupamaro whom I'd seen a lot but had never met, approached the closed casket and its Uruguayan flag, sky blue and white stripes, a half-smiling sun in the corner, introduced myself to Arturo's wife, whom I'd not yet met but who had talked to me on the phone several times, and who looked much younger than I expected, with her red hair and smooth, pale skin. She was sitting under the rusted remains of the first weapons stolen by the Tupamaros and flanked by two friends and three flags to one side: the flag of Uruguay, the flag of Artigas, and the flag of the Thirty-Three Orientales—Uruguay's early-nineteenth-century freedom fighters—with its slogan "Liberty or Death." She, also, thought I looked younger than she expected, and smiled and thanked me for coming. "Arturo was a great man," I said. After a minute of talking, I prefaced "It was nice to meet you," with "I'm sorry it's such a sad time."

At the funeral early the next morning I stood halfway back in the crowd with Teresa, the sweet white-haired Tupamara secretary, and tried to blend in, tried to keep my feet warm, tried to count the people in the crowd, which eventually grew to over 500 easily. Teresa and I talked intermittently, alternating between serious and frivolous subjects, never making the leap from exchange to conversation. The men who milled nearby were bearded or mustached or clean-shaven or unshaven, with long gray hair or short gray hair or hair only on the sides and back of their heads. Their faces were lined with deep wrinkles or lined with scars or rough with sun and wind. Their eyes were dark and stern or blue and smiling or enlarged behind thick lenses or half-closed or closed with tears streaming slowly. I thought that there was nothing to distinguish this group from any other, except that to a man they refused to wear ties. I imagined their suffering and determination, tortures and exiles, loss and grace and belief in ideals.

People came to kiss Teresa, to talk briefly in hushed voices sometimes about Arturo, sometimes about the weather. Sometimes they shook my hand or offered a cheek; other times they ignored me, and I watched the faces, noted smiles and sad, distant, glazed looks, and I guarded my own face, tried to keep it stoic, eyes steady,

jaw tight. Teresa stayed with me, talking at intervals, then resting in the heavy silence, waiting for something to happen.

After an hour, the sun came up over the eastern rooftops and through the last leaves of tall sycamores shedding bark. It was not exactly then that the music started and two men stood on the building's balcony behind the microphones to read poetry and praises, but it was almost then, close enough for the believers to think it was significant, but coincidental enough for the jaded not to notice. I turned and saw under the sun the same wizened faces warmed, looking skyward, squinting, almost smiling. The poems were from anti-Franco Spaniards sixty years ago, full of fight and indignation, short on art but long on zeal.

When they brought out the coffin, held low by seven men, and the crowd parted to let pass the hearse, and they put Arturo in and stacked the wreaths on a trailer ahead, one of the seven pall bearers broke down and wept bitterly, holding his face in his hands. He was comforted by a woman nearby. Then we walked slowly behind two black motorcycles and their riders in white helmets and three black cars with flowers, Arturo, and his wife, in that order, and a yellow UCOT bus behind for the infirm, through busy streets past passersby and watcherson on sidewalks and in balconies through windows in cars waiting patiently with no recourse but to wait, probably wondering, but not enough to find out, Who? But this one, a fireman in a heavy poncho standing guard outside the barracks across from the Plaza de los Treinta-y-Tres, he knew, or suspected, and stood at attention saluting as the cars inched past, and no one turned to look at him. In front of me two women talked. "Oh, the times he'd go to work with el Bebe." A man behind me shouted, "There's enough homeland for everyone!"

Ahead I saw three kids spray painting graffiti on the side of a bank: shocking pink "Arturo, you live on in each—"; purple "He who dies fighti—"; red "Life overcoming—"; they were still writing, retracing their lines, as I passed. They kept it up the rest of the way, sometimes where I could see them, mostly before I got there, defacing mostly defaced walls, sometimes interrupted midway through a Tupamaro T-in-star, sometimes repeating, sometimes expressing the syrupy sentiments of loss and longing that live independent of language or culture: *you live on in your compañeros; he who dies fighting never dies; your memory will always be with us.*

David Cámpora, an old friend, tells of Arturo in his book *Manos en el Fuego* ("Hands in the Fire"):

After every session in the machine, you could hear him—"44, 45, 46,"—doing calisthenics under the admiring eyes of a big officer who ended up sharing his maté with him at night. Once Arturo called out:

"Captain!"

"Hey, what's up?" It was the captain who always sent him through the machine.

"I'll make you a deal, Captain," says Arturo.

"Yeah, what?"

"I'll trade you five submarines for a double brandy."

"Done," said the captain. "Tonight I'll come get you."

And Arturo gets prepared, working out all afternoon, he puts on his tightest, most ripped-up T-shirt—his torture uniform—and he waits.

And come nightfall the captain does come, he takes him out, he gives him the brandy, but not the machine.

"To your health," said Arturo.

"And to yours," said the captain.

It is a testament to Arturo's character, his humility, I think, that he never told me this story himself.

Hidden behind the crowd and branches, Eleutorio Fernández Huidobro delivered a eulogy, calling Arturo a Quixote-in-reverse, "so physically and morally similar, yet the opposite," and "one of the most tortured men on the planet." He began: "Yesterday morning, without asking our permission, Arturo died. He never left us before, nor could he go. This is the first time . . ."

Uruguay, such a small country, has many records. He who we bury today is one of them.

Only known case in which the commanders of an entire Infantry Battalion, torturing, recognized: he beat us.

Prisoners ourselves, one day we found him in the overflowing dungeons of the Florida Battalion. His head was destroyed, his face, unrecognizable. His nose had recently been sewn back together after they had split it open from bridge to nostrils.

So he could breathe and recuperate, they had him lying down with his feet elevated.

There was a corpulent private from the Interior who gave Arturo maté and fed him hand-to-mouth delicately, like a young girl. "I never saw so many people hit a Christian so much," he said. "And I've never seen such a courageous man."

But the worst of it was when, looking for information, they took him back to the torture room, and they offered, so as not to continue massacring such massacred flesh, that once and for all he just tell them what, for them, and compared to what they'd been looking for before, was a trifle.

Arturo, almost dead, proposed a deal: that they torture him again, but this time, if he lost, he'd talk; and if they lost because he didn't talk, they'd buy him, from their own pockets, and from the officials' cantina, a double brandy.

This would be the first time they had to risk even fourteen pesos against a man's life. Until then, and for a long time afterward, with so many people, they didn't risk even that.

There was a long silence after that unexpected challenge, according to the officials, who later told the story to many, and Arturo won the battle. Nobody knows why even today, it was truly a miracle, but the officials ordered the brandy, which Arturo guzzled, and then they ordered that nobody touch that man in those barracks from that day on.

What is going on here? Two versions of the same story? Two different episodes? A conflation? An aggrandizement? A memory grown two different directions? The birth of a legend, pitted against graver odds and given a more improbable outcome?

I asked David Cámpora, author of the first version, who replied: "That version of the brandy story Arturo himself gave me. He occupied the cell next to mine in the Florida Battalion. He wasn't close to death. In fact, while he waited for them to take him to the hole, he started doing exercise, push-ups, to get warmed up."

But it doesn't matter, or it's interesting either way, or both ways, because the lesson is, for those present, and for those who hear the story or read it, that Arturo was a graceful, gruff hero, who once tunneled through dirt and stone to freedom, courageous, unyielding, able to withstand tremendous tortures with his soul intact, able to stand tall in the face of his oppressor, to see him as a fellowman, to reduce the machine to a game or a commodity for trade, to share a drink with his enemy, and to keep on fighting, perhaps hoping not to kill but to convince.

Then two municipal workers in navy jumpsuits got on a fork lift with the casket and rode it up a few feet to the second-level locker along the east wall that was to be Arturo's final resting place. Everybody started clapping, a slow, deliberate clap, with a rhythm, but also outliers, not applause exactly, not a cheer. I couldn't see the inside of the locker, but from the way the workers were maneuvering, I guessed there must be another casket in there already. This would not be uncommon. They jerked the coffin entirely too much, fiddling with angles, motioning for the forklift operator to raise them up or lower them down, pushing hard against the locker ceiling, shifting the casket from side to side, crushing the flowers that were stuck to the top, getting the coffin halfway in, then scratching their heads. I lamented the reality of the situation. I had hoped to write something more noble. The clapping had stopped, and there was a palpable hush. In a situation like this, one wants a smooth resolution, the coffin sliding easily into its sheath, the door closed, heads bowed in meditation or erect in pride, eyes glistening in sadness, memory, admiration. Nobody spoke, but I, realizing a meaning for this sad scene, wanted to laugh, wanted to say that in death, as in life, Arturo was causing problems for the authorities, bucking conventions, acting inappropriately, messing with your mind and emotions. That although he had gone, he had not gone gently, had raged, was still raging.

Then, a third worker got on the forklift to help take the coffin back out entirely and remove the flowers from the lid, and finally the three of them got the coffin, then the flowers, all the way in.

Then they closed the door of the locker and lowered the forklift blades, and Arturo was off to Avalon, or wherever it is that old Tupamaros go.

I walked alone from the cemetery, up Yaguarón to 18 de Julio, kicking brown leaves and broken branches. I couldn't stop thinking about earlier, at the MLN headquarters, when the ceremony began with the Uruguayan national anthem. I had heard the hymn before many times, had never consciously set out to memorize it, but was getting close to understanding all its lyric. Never before had it meant much to me, but here, with these men and women, in honor of this man, it *meant*. Everybody sang:

¡Orientales, la Patria o la tumba!
¡Libertad, o con gloria morir!
Es el voto que el alma pronuncia
y que heroicos sabremos cumplir

¡Libertad, libertad, Orientales!
Este Grito a la Patria salvó
Que a sus bravos en fieras batallas
De entusiasmo sublime inflamó.
De este don sacrosanto la gloria
Merecimos. ¡Tiranos temblad!

¡Libertad en la lid clamaremos
Y muriendo, también libertad!

Orientales, the nation or the tomb!
Liberty or a glorious death!
Is the oath that the soul pronounces
And which heroically we will fulfill.

Liberty, liberty, Orientales!
This shout saved our nation.
To her brave soldiers in fierce battles
Imparted a sublime enthusiasm.
From this sacrosanct gift, we earned
Glory. Tremble, tyrants!

We will demand liberty in the battle
And in death, also, liberty!

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Northwest Review is published three times yearly, in January, May, and September. Unsolicited manuscripts are considered year-round. All correspondence should be addressed to *Northwest Review*, 1286 University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. No simultaneous submission will be considered. The sole criterion for acceptance of material for publication in *Northwest Review* is that of excellence.

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Northwest Review is distributed by Bernhard DeBoer, Inc. 113 East Center Street, Nutley, NJ 07110. Phone (973) 667-9300; Fax (973) 667-0086.

Subscriptions: One year, \$22.00; two years, \$40.00; three years, \$58.00.

Student subscriptions: One year, \$20.00; two years, \$36.00.

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