



Downhill From Here

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When my family first came to Montevideo we lived in Punta Carretas. I had a group of friends I ran around with, *pibes* or kids like me who were all about nine or ten years old. We roamed the surrounding neighbourhoods as little boys are wont to do, always on the lookout for new adventures. What we really wanted, really longed for, was a vehicle of some kind, a set of wheels.

And one fine day we got them! One of the boys talked to his father, whose hobby was carpentry. This splendid man built us a makeshift toboggan, and our little gang couldn't wait to try it out. It was a simple thing but to us it was perfect. Made of a long slab of solid wood, a little bigger than a surfboard, it had four wheels that had been scavenged from an old cart he used in the garden. The two front wheels were screwed onto the ends of a wooden shaft that was attached to the underside of the board with a pivot screw. The ends of the shaft jutted out from the sides of the board a couple of feet from the prow. A length of rope was tied to each end of this shaft so that when either of these "reins" was pulled, the shaft would swivel on the pivot. This was the steering mechanism.

The brake system consisted of another wooden shaft that was slanted forward at a forty-five-degree angle and passed through a hole cut in the board near the stern. The lower end of the shaft was trimmed at a similar angle and shod with a rubber pad that had been cannibalized from an old tyre. The shaft was secured in the hole by an axle so that, when the brake shaft was pulled back, it swivelled on the axle and pressed the rubber pad onto the road, bringing the whole contraption to a stop. The carpenter-dad instructed us on the use of the brake, insisting that, when needed, the shaft must be pulled gently but firmly.

One day four of us took a test drive on a gently sloping road in a nearby neighbourhood. Each of us had a specific role: one was the driver, who would steer. One was the brakeman, who would stop the toboggan when necessary. The other

two were "observers." It was a great run. Everything worked perfectly and we were all extremely satisfied with our new toy. Someone suggested that a steeper hill would be more fun and everyone agreed, so we lugged our toboggan to a nearby street with a sharp incline that we all thought would be ideal. We climbed onboard and pushed off. We were all giddy with excitement as we picked up speed and there was much whooping and yelling as we plunged downhill. When we had gone a couple of blocks someone suddenly remembered that the road we were on dead-ended at the Rambla, the scenic coast road that bordered the city's beaches and carried heavy traffic. Our excitement turned to concern and then rapidly accelerated to panic. At that point the Rambla came into view and the driver screamed: "**BRAKE!**" The brakeman (it may have been me) grabbed the brake shaft and, in the heat of the moment, completely forgot that it should be pulled gently and firmly. It was in fact yanked furiously, with both hands, so that the shaft jammed the rubber pad onto the road, lifted the toboggan sideways, and flipped it over.

We were all thrown off and scattered every which way as our trusty vehicle rolled a couple of times then skidded downhill before coming to rest against the pavement. We picked ourselves up and stumbled over to inspect the damage. We had all sustained cuts and grazes and bruises but there were no broken bones or cracked heads. Our toboggan had fared far worse. The steering shaft had peeled off and snapped in two, the board was chipped and splintered down one side, and one of the back wheels was crushed. We limped home, rehearsing the stories we would tell our parents to explain our wounds and torn clothes. We knew, from past experience, that they would be horrified by our reckless behaviour. We understood that the chances of getting our wheels back on the road were virtually nil. It had been a spectacular ride, but we all realized that our tobogganing days were over.