



Sounds of Uruguay

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ON SUNDAY AFTERNOONS in summer all was quiet in Montevideo and the streets were deserted. Lunch was over and most people were ready for a nap. Most adults that is, because the children were wide awake and listening—straining to hear a particular sound—listening. There it was! Off in the distance but getting louder by the minute: “¡Cooooo-na-prole!” It was the cry of the ice cream vendor, who walked the streets pushing his yellow cart, bringing joy to the children of Pocitos, the neighborhood where I lived.

The vendor’s brand of ice cream was *Conaprole*, but he’d stretch out the first syllable for maximum effect. In the second, more complicated part of his cry, he serenaded the street with a litany of his wares: “¡vasito, barrita, bombón helado!” Every Sunday I had to make an agonizing choice: ice cream in a cup? Dipped in chocolate? On a stick? Oh, delectable dilemma!

During the week, another sound drifted through the streets of Pocitos: the knife grinder’s whistle. It was actually a little panpipe—just like the one Pan played—but made of tin. The *afilador* rode a bicycle, and slid his whistle back and forth along his lips as he blew into the little holes, playing up and down the scales from low notes to high notes and back to low again. He carried his grinding stone mounted on a rack over the back wheel. When people heard his whistle and came out of their houses and waved, he’d stop and pull his bike up onto a stand, then sit on the seat facing backwards, pushing the pedals with his feet. The backward pedaling made the grinding stone spin, and he’d lean over it to sharpen dull blades of all kinds, adding a dash of mineral oil now and then, and exchanging news and gossip with housewives and maids as he worked.

Montevideo is a coastal city blessed with a string of beaches that stretch for miles, hugging the northern shore of the Río de la Plata until it meets the deep, salty blue waters of the Atlantic. Pocitos beach, barely a stone’s throw from my home, was a summer playground for us all, young and old. Throngs of people lounged on the sand on weekends, in bathing attire of varying degrees of modesty and taste, working hard at acquiring the savage tan we all craved. Some brought brightly colored beach umbrellas and volley balls and radios with the volume stuck on loud; some just a towel to lie on. Some had no time for food; others brought a picnic. The rest of us waited for the hot dog man. We could hear him coming from a long way off, singing out his signature call: “¡Frrrran-frrrute!” They were still called frankfurters at that time, though the beach vendors tended to butcher the word almost beyond recognition. They wore a white shirt and slacks, with a pair of *alpargatas* (locally-made rope-soled espadrilles) to protect their feet from the hot sand, and carried a large metal box on a strap over their shoulder. When

hailed by a customer, they’d put the box on a folding stand and go to work. The box had a compartment where the dogs floated in hot water, which was in turn kept hot by built-in burners. There were separate compartments for the buns, already sliced, in paper wrappers, and plastic bottles full of mustard. The vendors used metal tongs to pull a dog from the water and settle it into a bun. “¿Mostaza?” they’d ask, and if you said yes the dog would come with a squirt of bright yellow mustard. Then the man would shoulder his box—which was both hot and heavy—and be on his way again. No hot dog tasted better than the ones sold on the beach. And nobody had a better tan than those vendors.

The beaches weren’t quite as crowded when a soccer game was being played, especially if it was between *Peñarol* and *Nacional*—the two top local teams. Then the fans would fill the *Estadio Centenario* and their roars could be heard for miles around. When they weren’t yelling and screaming—at their teams or at each other—you could hear the sing-song sound of the coffee vendors: “¡Sorocabana café!” These strong, agile men carried a large metal tank full of coffee strapped to their backs, and had all the accoutrements hooked onto their belts. They’d pull a cup out of a sort of scabbard and fill it from a hose attached to the tank, then sprinkle a little sugar into it. Aaah! Hot coffee, sweet and strong—just the ticket for getting through a long afternoon of *fútbol*.

This stadium, crowned by its dramatic winged tower, was built in 1930 to commemorate the centennial of Uruguay’s Constitution. The very first World Cup tournament was played there that year and when Uruguay won, the whole country reverberated with ecstatic cheers of victory—one of the sweetest sounds of all. ★