

# **“What are you doing here?”**

*Of the decision made by one US citizen to continue living  
in a crisis-stricken, unstable Argentina.*

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Icho Cruz, Province of Cordoba, Argentina

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“What are you doing here?”  
Argentina asks me everyday.  
“We’re all trying to leave and you come to live here?”  
They ask, and ask again.  
“But why would you ever want to live here?”  
Sometimes I respond, sometimes I invent, sometimes I ask back.  
“What are you doing here, in the middle of all this mess?”  
Sometimes I really have no answer at all.

The morning before President De La Rúa, the last elected president, was overthrown and left the pink house in a helicopter, I turned on the radio. Usually I abhor the morning programs for their tinny, low-level news and commentary. However, as the day started on December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2001, I tuned in. For over a month there had been a spark of hopeful doom in the air. No one wants change. Everyone wanted change. Economically, socially, spiritually, something was about to give in Argentina. A palpable bursting of the seams. A week had gone by since every single bank account in Argentina was frozen. From one day to the next, no one any longer had access to their deposits, to their private property. So while Citibank, Bank Boston, ScotiaBank, HSBC (among others) still advertised confidence and service on the TV and in the newspapers, they were transferring assets out of the country faster than the headlines could be printed—faster than their clients could grasp that a fraud of such international proportions had robbed them of their deposits.

The radio was not its usual self on this morning. No jingles and no tedious jokes in the morning news. Correspondents reported live from downtown Cordoba, in front of the municipal building, where employees demonstrated against the monstrously corrupt mayor—a mayor, who in less than two years, not only extorted all the money the city of Cordoba had in the bank, but also ran the citizens into over 300,000 dollars of debt. None of this was new—not the mobs, not the police, not the news. Good versus bad, with the vultures circling overhead. At least in the face of blatant power abuse, it was easy to identify and hate the enemy, even if you could not halt the cycle of his or the next mafia’s actions.

The radio blared on, and I kept working in my studio, putting a new set of books together. A message from the health commission warned of sun exposure between 10 AM and 4 PM due to the hole in the ozone. The correspondent came back on the air. He was in the parking garage under the municipal building where a police leader was holding back a squadron in riot gear about to take on the demonstrators.

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“Will you use bullets?” the correspondent asked.

“Only if we have to.” Moments later the police stormed the plaza, with their dogs, clubs, tear gas, and bullets. The correspondent gave a play by play of the outbreak in front of town hall in disbelieving, resigned spurts. While the police attacked, the demonstrators burned town hall. They broke all the glass, threw computers to the floor. Not a particularly effective approach, but it does depict just how fed up the employees had become in the face of carelessly corrupt leadership and a population that was not quick enough to respond nor demand a change. A break in the radio went to an ad for the national lottery. Throughout the year there had been a couple of town halls burned in other provinces in the country. I wondered how much it was going to continue catching on.

On her lunch break, my sister-in-law came across the mob scene in downtown Cordoba on December 19<sup>th</sup>. Like all Cordobeses, she is accustomed to coming upon police-demonstrator confrontation. She sees them, draws them. Witnessing is as important a social responsibility as any other. But this day, she was not steps away when the first gun shots were heard. “I pulled a muscle in my stomach just from the take off!” she laughed a couple of days later. By the time I heard these same gun shots on the radio, I had stopped trying to accomplish anything in my studio. My husband was on errands in the city, and it had become impossible to predict how much all of this was going to escalate in one afternoon.

My husband is a musician from Cordoba, the second largest city in Argentina. He is the son of a socially conscious doctor and a schoolteacher, survivors of the military dictatorship. We lived together in the city of Cordoba for nearly two years before traveling outside of Argentina for another four. We returned to Argentina two-and-a-half years ago, but this time to live in a small tourist town in the sierras 50 kms. west of the city of Cordoba. The circumstances of our decision to come back had mostly to do with a charmed morning in San Jose, Costa Rica, when we went to a travel agent to investigate plane tickets to Ecuador. And, to our own surprise, we came out with two even cheaper tickets to Buenos Aires. Eight months into an overland journey, it turned out we were ready to arrive in Argentina. The price was right anyway. We never imagined that the decision to return here was a long-term one. Neither my husband nor I have an umbilical tie to Argentina. We knew that returning to this country meant we would have to be prepared to leave it. History is history and it tends to repeat itself, which, in Argentina, is particularly bad news. By knowing to avoid most of the fines and financial traps that make living here unbearable, we have been able to enjoy the best Argentina has to offer. This little corner of the planet has allowed us a home we can work in, with a garden out back. Had we planned it beforehand, it never would have worked out so well. The affordable, creative days we have in Icho Cruz would be impossible for us in the first world, and lengthy to put together in other parts of Latin America. “What are we doing *here?*”, really has a coincidental answer. One solution led to another, and it turned out we could make books and music in Icho Cruz. And since this was our goal, for the time being, we stayed.

Up until December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2001, my husband and I had lived in an Argentina freefalling towards an inevitable economic and social climax that was mused about in conversation, but that was not named on TV or on the radio, except in the most alternative news programs. And even to say it was mused about in conversation depended very much on the day, and with whom one was conversing. I say “inevitable” in regards to the economic and social climax because the stability imposed on Argentina in the 90s was not based on a sound economic

foundation, but on a corrupt political matrix that borrowed money from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank at exorbitant interest rates, at the same time that it privatized to foreign owners all the major money-making assets within the country. The sense of prosperity in Argentina in the 90s was just that, a sense. Not a reality. It was foreseeable that what Argentina spent as a nation would crash against what it actually earned. It was foreseeable that it would be the people who paid the price, and not the politicians who profited from, sustained, and made promises in the name of such a dangerous, corrupt economic model. There were sectors of Argentina that understood the perils of this economic model: the retired, employees of utilities about to be privatized, students, doctors, teachers, professors, union members, and people left unemployed because of privatizations. Throughout all of the 90s these groups and others, from Jujuy to Buenos Aires and beyond, were in the streets marching, yelling slogans, trying to make their warnings and their experiences heard. Nonetheless, the overriding tendency in the population as a whole was to leave well enough alone. Not enough people wanted to rock the boat, at least not together, even if it was in their best interest in the long run. By the same token, rocking the boat in Argentina has been historically life threatening. This threat, this memory, so deeply rooted in Argentina's daily life, is the omnipotent legacy of the military dictatorship's terror.

It surprises, the amount of humanity that refuses to measure, much less name, what truly menaces their society and their livelihood on a macro level. Moreover, this refusal to caution or to discuss dangerous tendencies that govern a town or a nation is a survival tactic that the media encourages and manipulates shamelessly. In Argentina, before the The Crisis, the news concentrated on the dark skinned, poor thieves, but not nearly so much on the corporate white collar thieves who sold out the country and all of its holdings. That has changed somewhat in the past year, but insufficiently. And now, instead of focusing on the creativity of people who are finding solutions and inventing possibility to provide for their families under insurmountable economic conditions, despite crippling taxation and an inept judicial system, the news concentrates on frivolous internal political treaties and starving children in Tucuman. Children have always been starving in Tucuman. What is tragic is that it is only now in the news. Still, the news does not depict how it is possible for children to be starving in a country as rich in natural resources, professional training, and with as much agricultural infrastructure as Argentina. Because to explain such truths massively would capacitate the population with the knowledge that what happens in their name on a macro level is a threat to their livelihood, and only they can put an end to it. Only they can rock the boat.

In spite of the relative prosperity of the 90s, getting by was difficult for many families in Argentina. The middle class diminished as the cost of living rose. Finding work, actually getting paid, making the minimum of ends meet was tough, but many people created options or alternatives. Relatively speaking, the 90s allowed Argentines to believe they were cloaked in enough stability to invent an option or an alternative. The plastic promise of democracy, of globalization, of privatization. Some of Argentina watched, many didn't, as their natural resources and utilities were privatized to foreign companies. The water in Cordoba and the telephone in the northern half of the country belong to companies based in France. Aerolineas Argentinas, the petroleum reserves, and the telephone in the southern half of the country belong to companies based in Spain. In Argentina, the mail, public transport, toll booths, natural gas, electricity, retirement funds are nearly all privatized, mostly to foreign conglomerates. All of these earnings go out of the country, and if there is any regulation at all, it is enforced (or not) by easily bribed politicians. Add to this the unethical economic model

imposed on Argentina (and most third world countries) by the IMF and the World Bank who, through willing, unscrupulous politicians, obligate populations to pay back billions of dollars borrowed in their name, even though they never experience the benefit of a single cent. Not only do all earnings in Argentina return to the IMF, but the IMF gets to step into Congress, to the President's office, and impose budget standards on the meager amount of change that is left in Argentina once the regular payments on the interest of the national debt are fulfilled. Recovering some semblance of sovereignty will be a goal here for generations.

All of this translated into the immediate meant fewer jobs, lower wages, degenerated working conditions, fewer resources, fewer social institutions, increased poverty, swelling insecurity. That was before The Crisis. On December 19<sup>th</sup>, the floor began to fall from the false stability Argentina had been willing to believe in for nearly a decade, and the country rammed nose first into the true ramifications of the economic model that governed them. The inevitability that lurked in the shadows. When it came into the daylight, it was, and is, far more cruel than anyone dared to predict.

But as my Argentine neighbors are quick to comment, all of this commotion has happened before; sometimes worse, sometimes less so, sometimes only in stages: military dictatorships, puppet presidents, coup d'états, hyper inflation, assets frozen in the banks, shortage of food staples, and so on. I'm referring to just the last two generations or so. Argentina has offered these joys to its population since long before it was ever declared a nation. Thus, having the option to leave, it is no wonder they ask me, "What are you doing here?"

In this upheaval, as in all the others, once the dust settles, even a little, the jokes begin. "You remember in '62 when the armed forces split in half and attacked itself?" commented my father-in-law with a crooked grin not long ago. In 1962 he was serving his then obligatory year of military duty.

"How did you know who to take orders from, then?" I asked, imagining a split in the armed forces to be something like a cyclops punching itself first with its right fist, and then counter-attacking itself with its left.

Of course, around December 19<sup>th</sup>, when the saqueos[1] came to a head, nobody was making jokes. The saqueos began a few days before in different locations throughout Argentina. We ingested the news reports with certain reserve: saqueos are easy enough for politicians or counter-politicians (mafias in power or mafias who want to be in power) to pay a few folks to start. Then the wave catches on, and mobs are hard to stop. The fact that the news was reporting them with such fervor revealed more than whatever the media sources had to say in particular. In Argentina, one must decipher not the mobs themselves, but instead which mobs get air time (teachers? retirees? unemployed? students? police? cheated bank clients? rioting thieves?) on any given day, by any given news source, with any given political mafia in power.

So, home alone on December 19<sup>th</sup> with the radio on, I was only vaguely aware that perhaps the definitive climax we knew would erupt someday, now actually was at hand. The reports of the confrontations in downtown Cordoba were interspersed with increasing news flashes of saqueos around Argentina, and of crowds forming in the Plaza de Mayo in front of the President's pink house in downtown Buenos Aires—also not an uncommon occurrence. This day, a whole round of not uncommon occurrences were taking place at once. The

Cordoba uproar was a local dispute, but very much a part of a national circumstance. Some kind of a spoke in a wheel that, suddenly and without a leader, began spontaneously rolling all over the country.

In our town of 1,000, was the gas station owner concerned about saqueos? His father-in-law has been the town mayor since the “democracy” began, buying votes with boxes of food like the best of them. This mayor was jailed recently for extortion, misuse of funds, the usual. The gas station is one of the biggest businesses in town. Was the mayor’s son-in-law, the owner, eyeing us differently as we eyed him differently that day? In small towns, marches are unheard of and saqueos even more so. The momentum of opinion in the city streets could mean that perhaps on our dirt roads, opinions that usually fermented behind closed doors might finally get up the gumption to leak out into public. What would that mean?

No longer able to measure the context of the reports on the radio, I went out to the road to see what looks my neighbors had on their faces. All the merchants were on the sidewalk. Luis, the vegetable stand man; the butcher who is known by all as The Closet; Paula who works the Laundromat; Sergio, her husband, who runs the other half of their business selling propane and fire wood. They were all standing together, wordless, shuffling their toes in the dust. A bad sign. When Argentineans are worried after generations of this stuff, one knows things have escalated further than the usual daily rock n’ roll. Sergio wandered inside, peered at his TV a few moments, and came back out.

“The President has declared a state of siege,” he said. The Closet crossed his arms and stuck his chin out in a deep brood. Luis sighed and wandered away. Paula was about to say something, but wrung her hands instead. Sergio shook his head. Nobody said a word. I went back home.

I called my mother-in-law, a survivor of many a tumultuous time. She tells of hiding from flying bullets inside their apartment in ’69 when there was open warfare in downtown Cordoba between the students and union members, and the police and national guard.

“What does ‘state of siege’ mean exactly today?” I asked her over the phone. My mother-in-law, who never cries, burst into tears.

It was confirmed. This was bad. And my husband was in the city and he had to get home on the bus and a state of siege had been declared and no one knew where he was exactly and all hell was rolling, rolling, rolling in a momentum no one could weigh.

That day, “What are you doing here?” began to elicit a different sort of answer.

My husband walked through the door soon after and my relief at this crumb of normalcy was monumental. That night, with the rest of the country that was not in the street, we watched events unroll on TV. One of my favorite images from these two days in December, 2001 was when people were just beginning to speckle the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires on the 19<sup>th</sup>: A middle-aged man, dressed for work, left his car next to the Plaza where traffic usually hums and whirrs uninterrupted. He got out and with a small hand trumpet used for making noise in soccer stadiums, he began to blow his frustration in all directions. He was virtually alone, there were no crowds yet. But where is a man, fed up by corruption, injustice, and uncertainty, to go? Why, to the main plaza to toot his horn, of course. I applauded him from my little bedroom 700 kms. to the north, where we were all equally as fed up by the unjust and downright ridiculous

circumstances imposed on our daily lives by a scheming, unscrupulous, elite.

Not hours later, that man with his horn was accompanied by thousands of individuals who filled the Plaza de Mayo to toot their frustrated horns and bang their pots and pans. Ceaseless crowds rolled in from every direction to fill the Plaza, peacefully but insistently, throughout the night. What made this demonstration distinct from others in the history of this Plaza was the fact that there was not one political banner or slogan floating above the multitudes. The night of December 19<sup>th</sup>, in Buenos Aires and in all of the major cities across the country, the people spontaneously poured into the streets without slogans, to stand up and say Enough! That night, for the first time ever, I wished I had been in the city of Cordoba, part of the multitude that made themselves heard.

The marches of December 19<sup>th</sup>, while they had no slogan, already had a name: El Cacerolazo. An accurate translation is difficult, but it would be something like: The Great Banging of the Pots and Pans. Basta! Enough! We're still here, we're still Argentinean, and we've had it! While cacerolazos began under President Menem (in power from 1989 to 1999), the one that occurred on December 19<sup>th</sup> was by far the largest in history.

All night long there were constant reports of people in the streets throughout the entire country. Again, no banners, no unions, no associations of any kind. Just an unprompted national expression of the masses, walking the streets, banging pots and pans. Citizens yelling and protesting in Argentina is as much a part of living here as beef, Maradona, and Che Guevara. While the particulars of so many marches differ, I allocate them a wider context. The outbreaks are daily, are important, but life goes on around them, despite them. Kids go to school. Folks flag down taxis. Women dye the gray out of their hair. The streets are the democracy in this false democracy. The streets are the population's vote, committee, planning commission, and drawing board. Excluded by corruption from participating in local or national government, the streets are their voice.

Towards the end of this monumental Cacerolazo, my husband and I finally slept. And when we woke up, it was December 20<sup>th</sup>. Who could predict where the momentum would take us this day? The breaking point had come in Argentina. But what would that mean as far as our daily needs and responsibilities were concerned? The most traumatic, the most unpredictable, is when the climax first ignites. Everyone, absolutely everyone, fears the worst. And defining "the worst", either in conversation or in one's own thoughts, lends itself to many horrifying images and ideas. Unstoppable spiraling into extreme poverty and hunger? Will homes be lost to the banks (the very same ones who will not return deposits)? Invasion by the countries money is owed to? Another military dictatorship? A police state? Already the constitution in Argentina had been effectively turned into toilet paper. Re-written time and time again in favor of the multi-nationals and the politicians, and never in favor of the people, the constitution leaves humans within Argentina's borders exposed to any consequence imaginable. And in moments of extreme social unrest, like the one that swarmed the country in the end of 2001, every consequence is collectively imagined. Given that, I repeatedly have been reassured by the inherent peacefulness of the Argentine population. What has occurred here in the past year has been more than enough to instill armed uprisings, revolutions, or secessions in other moments of history, in other countries.

The morning of December 20<sup>th</sup>, the Plaza de Mayo began to fill once again. Our eyes, as all eyes in the country, were focused on this stage. Buenos Aires, a city of over 12 million in

a country of some 30 million, is at once loathed and admired as the pacesetter in Argentina.

Around noon, with the Plaza filled to overflowing, the Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo<sup>[2]</sup> were rushed by mounted policemen. Crowds indignantly stood their ground as the police began to assault them. The faces were faces we all knew: mothers, fathers, professionals, students, retired people. People in suits. People in work clothes, in summer clothes. People on motor scooters. Barricades were set up. Then the police attacked with tear gas, rubber bullets, fire hoses, dogs. And with real bullets.

From our little home in the sierras, this mayhem was very, very near. And very, very far away. What were we doing here? The images overwhelmed. I gaped at the unarmed people who held their ground, who looked the police in the eye and said No! I imagine I would be too afraid to do so. But perhaps no, perhaps the indignation of the moment would be so strong, that I, too, would be brave enough to stand up anonymously and insist, That's it! A row of 5 or 6 men, shirts off, one with a fabricated cross raised in his hand, kneeled down in front of the police barricades. They maintained their position, arms raised, as they were laid into with tear gas and fire hoses. Photographers buzzed around them, recording their act, dodging what the police had to throw. All over the Plaza photographers, journalists, reporters swarmed in to record how the police terrorized the defenseless public. As people were arrested, reporters followed with cameras and microphones to ask: what is your name? And the detained faced the cameras, urgently giving their names and ID numbers. After the military dictatorship, the need to ID oneself before being taken away by the police is an instinct Argentines know to follow.

And behind the journalists, came the doctors and paramedics. Horrified, going to work.

The momentum of December 20<sup>th</sup> ended with more than 30 deaths due to police brutality, and with President De La Rúa's resignation. As inept as ever, he flew away from the pink house in a helicopter, and that was the end of that. Ops. Suddenly my husband and I lived in a country without a government. That, in itself, was not so much of a concern. The government, as it was, was useless in representing, much less defending, its population. What we wondered, however, is what sort of government would we have to put up with next? There was absolutely no hope that something better was going to come along. We could only pray that whoever took over the pink house would not be more dangerous for any of us in the immediate. In the week that followed, as one President after another was named, I no longer enjoyed living in Argentina. The calm of our days in Icho Cruz was not enough to counter-balance the killing, the police, the mafias, the corruption that reigned. On December 30<sup>th</sup>, when yet another President resigned, I packed the house. In the span of hours I had my possessions in piles: to donate, to take, to store, to throw away. No longer were my fellow Argentines trying to reassure me: This too shall pass. Just wait it out. You'll get used to it. As a matter of fact, on New Year's Eve, surrounded by friends, many with children and some even with jobs still, the conversation focused on how to escape the country overland in case the situation turned even more violent and unstable in the next few days. They were discussing routes into Bolivia, Paraguay, Chile,

I had a moment of surreal understanding. And I was ready to go. I enjoyed living in Argentina, but not enough to risk my life over. New police stops sprouted overnight on the highway between our home and the city. Also nothing new, of course, but the timing was disconcerting.

“Ah,” a friend sighed a few nights later, “the dream is over. It was bound to happen sometime. After 10 years, we’ve woken up, and here we are back in Argentina again.” A comment very related to a new graffiti that proclaims: “Enough with the promises! Give us back the lies!”

“What are you doing here?” I asked myself in those last days of 2001. I’m leaving. Said in that terse, frustrated, depressed voice used by the thousands of Argentineans who had left that past year. Those who could, obtained Spanish or Italian passports as grandchildren of immigrants from those nations. Others applied for scholarships in first world universities. Some found options in other Latin American countries. Working illegally in Los Angeles or Miami was a common decision.

Waves of emigration out of Argentina punctuate every political upheaval. It seems everyone, at some point, reaches their limit and leaves.

I’d reached mine. Or I’d reached the intersection of having to recognize in a personal sense that in such political instability, Argentina historically has killed people who think as openly as my husband and I do. If before December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001, living in the shadow of a certain climax in Argentina had been tenuous, its actual crest was of an overwhelming magnitude no one could categorize. Least of all, me. But my husband and I didn’t really want to un-do our home and start over someplace else. Argentina is a pain in the ass on its best days. But Icho Cruz, our small town in particular, is a dream to live in. Dirt roads, fresh water, perfect climate, great neighbors. The trick to living in Argentina is to not have your name on any official papers. A name on a piece of paper means a line to wait in, a fine or a tax to pay, a fraud to straighten out. Our names almost do not exist here and that keeps our lives very simple, the way we planned it. We own nothing; we owe nothing.

But were we in danger? Were we about to be in danger?

Sometimes having the option to leave is harder than not being able to go at all. Numbed, we put off our departure for a few days at first. We could not discern if any decision we contemplated was an over-reaction, or an under-reaction. Maybe Argentina was going to get very dangerous, very quickly. Maybe not. We went backpacking to give ourselves some distance. We came home, we waited a week. We waited another. The politicians and the power structure were too busy with their own scheming to notice the population, to notice us. And as long as that continued, we were safe and in some ways, freer. Where before to start a community project or a small business one had to get permission, wait in official lines, pay fees, have papers stamped by one office and then another, now in all the authoritative chaos, there was no one to approve or disapprove of anything. There was no one to enforce taxes, or fines. You could just do it, start it, create it.

Still, this advantage was, and is, not enough to keep us immune to the country disintegrating around us. The Argentine peso was devalued, more than doubling the price of staples like cooking oil, flour, sugar, and gasoline. Factory after factory, especially those with foreign owners, closed. Businesses went bankrupt by the dozens. To keep local economies stumbling along in the immediate, many provinces printed IOU money called “bonos” in order to pay their employees, the retired, their contractors. “We’ll have to see what happens,” became the definitive phrase of this uncertain year. In the first months of 2002 every undertaking, from the most personal to the most national, was put on hold, as the population

tried to grasp the ramifications of The Crisis. No one spent money, no one made long term commitments, no one signed a form. I was surprised the schools even opened.

In the weeks following the Cacerolazo of December 20<sup>th</sup>, and throughout the year, cacerolazos were the people's reminder to those in power: We're here, and we're fed up, and we have enough pots and pans to overthrow presidents! And we won't shut up! I have a friend who lives in Buenos Aires who no longer leaves her home without a mini cacerolazo kit in her purse: a small, loud pot and a wooden spoon to bang it with.

A year later, after going through 5 presidents in the end of 2001, after innumerable cacerolazos, after even more demonstrators were assassinated by police in June, Argentina is left with Eduardo "The Thumb Tack" Duhalde as president in the pink house; a man nobody voted for. Duhalde resembles Danny Devito in his best mafia film and it is achingly apparent that while Argentineans with their cacerolazos were the actors in the days that De La Rúa was overthrown, it was Duhalde's mafia who orchestrated it. Now the momentum of the cacerolazos has diminished. Nationally, they have not been enough to bring about any real modifications, not even elections.

It took the culmination of December 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and the ensuing economic crisis to shake the people of Argentina into rocking the boat as a whole. Now the challenge is to channel that impetus into change. At the start of 2003, the same politicians are abusing and stealing with the same promises as always. They insist on sustaining the same economic model. They use the same police to repress their citizens. On a macro level, the crisis of The Crisis is that The Crisis hasn't changed much. The Crisis has meant that the unemployment levels are higher than anyone measures accurately. Duhalde's functionaries do come up with unemployment percentages, recently around 19 percent. These are numbers no one believes in because they count the underemployed (people who work less than 10 hours a week), the underpaid, and the illegally employed as part of the work force. Many claim that there are more thieves on the streets than professionals going to work. That may be farfetched, but it is undeniable that robberies and muggings have increased astronomically during 2002. And while the peso has been devalued, salaries, if folks are lucky enough to still have one, have not risen; in many cases, they have been lowered. Hospitals have to serve the public with non-existent budgets and despite extreme shortages of disposable medical supplies and medicine. Add to that the fact that considerably fewer among the population can afford private health care or education, compelling the public sector to fill the gap by attending more individuals than ever. Before The Crisis, the doctors of the Municipal Public Hospital in Cordoba were on a hunger strike to protest the economic abandonment the institution suffered. While The Crisis imposed an end to the hunger strike (so the doctors could keep up with the waiting room), for weeks there remained a banner above the entrance to the hospital that in enormous, tattered letters proclaimed: Hunger. Pharmaceuticals have become prohibitively expensive for the general public, especially for the retired. Generic medications are available, but the regulation of quality control is suspect and undocumented. The police have more guns and newer cars. The barter clubs, once a solution, have become infiltrated with rules, fines, stolen merchandise, hysteria, bureaucracy and crooked governing bodies. Luckily, not even the privatized military wants to take over Argentina in the state it is in. Although it is disheartening that the same corrupt politicians are still in power, more corrupt and more powerful than ever, at least they can't appear in public without an unavoidable crowd forming to chant, clap, and yell: "SON OF A BITCH! SON OF A BITCH! SON OF A BITCH!"

In contrast, on a micro level many positive changes have sprouted in the past year. Asambleas Barriales (“neighborhood assemblies”), now present in numerous urban centers, are direct democracy committees that provide, among other things, soup kitchens, day care, and training workshops. They are known for brainstorming and implementing very creative unemployment solutions. The politically independent Asambleas Barriales are creators of change by the people for the people. Employees of bankrupt factories have formed cooperatives that keep the factories producing, in spite of the legal and physical risks imposed upon them by the banks and the judicial system that insist they must remain closed. Enterprising individuals have found ways to provide indispensable goods or services at a lower cost. With the devaluation of the peso, imported items from clothing to diapers to bathroom articles have become outrageously expensive. This provides an opportunity for a new internal economy to redevelop itself and provide for the demand. Hoping to revive the national economy just a tad, Duhalde was even bold enough to lower the federal sales tax from 21 percent to 19 percent for a few months. (The IMF has since insisted it be raised back to 21 percent.)

Argentines, known throughout the rest of Latin America for an inflated sense of pride, have embarked upon a deep self-evaluation. Much less arrogance inhibits especially the middle class from pounding the pavement in search of ways to put food on the table. Analyzing the concept of corruption is a regular subject of conversation, as many are willing to admit that politicians are Argentines, too; Argentines with power. So, they ask, where does corruption start? In the people, or in the people with power? Why is it so particularly prevalent in Argentina as a definitive social norm? How can it end? Or, at least be diluted? Speaking of corruption is to assume responsibility for it. In a lawless land, awareness is a solution worth having faith in. In the immediate, and despite the headlines and the daily reality of trying to feed a family, I have seen such creativity, kindness, honesty, bravery, spontaneity, and such a quantity of the arts in Argentina in this past year, that “What are you doing here?” has become easier to answer once again. I have seen a fair amount of jealousy, close-mindedness, and selfishness, too, but not enough to discourage. Humans are humans, after all, all over the world.

It is possible that if enough micro solutions solidify themselves into a cultural habit, this will eventually lead to a macro solution, to a different Argentina. “Que se vayan todos!”<sup>[3]</sup> is the chant of every march and cacerolazo in Argentina. There are those who criticize this chant in Argentina. They say it is the chant of anarchists, communists, and of lazy, dark-skinned people. There are those who want the military to come back, because at least there will be law and order again. There are those who want Menem to come back, because his mafia is powerful enough for him to negotiate on a par with the IMF and the World Bank. There are always those who want the deceased Eva and Juan Peron to come back. And there are those who want a new Argentina, who want to start over from scratch, who want to create a new macro solution through micro undertakings and examples. No solution to the overwhelming problems here will be absolute, because people are not absolute, and they rarely agree as a whole, especially when money and politics are concerned. I think all of these options are impossible, but those who dream of a new country have the most interesting proposals. And as long as the police stay away from my door, I’m willing to stick around and root for the notions that appeal to me most, no matter how outrageous they seem. Life in Argentina is outrageous. The solution, if there is one, must be outrageous. This is an opportunity. Meanwhile, for my husband and me, it makes for some great books and new music. We appreciate life here as a spontaneous daily

experience not purchased in a shopping mall, nor defined by the mass media.

If in Argentina I am asked “What are you doing here?”, then in the US I am asked with the same regularity, “Is there any hope things will improve down there?” No, not within the false democracy national and international politicians still insist on imposing upon the population. New options have to be invented and believed in by those who live here, little by little. Considering that since white man came to this continent the abusive cycle of history has not changed, instilling new options, new cultural norms, is a gargantuan hope. For a population, a family, an individual, the task of peacefully rebalancing a violent international power structure that for centuries has provided lavishly for a few rich and dominated multitudes of ignorant poor implies a lifetime of effort, dedication, and faith. But folks here still have these tools. That’s what they’re doing in the streets, in the Asambleas Barriales, in solidarity campaigns, at home. Most days, even if we can’t always see it, I’m pretty sure that’s what my husband and I are doing here, too.

[1] Saqueo: The ransacking and pillaging of supermarkets by mobs who run off with stolen merchandise.

[2] Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo are dedicated to finding children stolen from assassinated political prisoners during the last military dictatorship. Often these infants and young children of the illegally detained were sold off in adoption. Like the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, they have marched weekly in the Plaza de Mayo for over 20 years with white handkerchiefs covering their heads in order to call attention to their efforts as a peaceful activist group determined to bring justice and memory to the 30,000 Argentineans murdered between 1976-1983.

[3] “That they all go!” A ceaseless plea calling for all members of the political structure to go away, to leave.