LETTER FROM PATAGONIA

THE FIRST SOCIAL NETWORK

In rural Argentina, isolated residents exchange messages over AM radio.

By Jordan Salama

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José Simón Molina, eighty-two, has lived alone for decades. He never misses a broadcast. Photographs by Sebastián López Brach for The New Yorker

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One evening in March, 2020, a gaucho named Jorge Elías Pereyra was preparing dinner inside a stone sheepherding outpost when he remembered that it was time to turn on the radio. It was almost seven, and the light of late summer was growing long across the Patagonian steppe. He turned on his receiver—the program he wanted to catch lasted just a few minutes. His black radio was plugged into a small solar panel, which also powered the outpost's sole light bulb. Pereyra, who was

twenty-seven, lived alone on the coast of the Península Valdés, an egg-shaped landmass in southern Argentina which juts out into the Atlantic Ocean. His outpost was fifty miles from the nearest village—to get there, he had to navigate a rough dirt road across a desert—and more than a hundred miles from the nearest small cities with radio stations, Trelew and Puerto Madryn. He spent his days repairing wells and tending to flocks of sheep owned by one of the area's leading wool-producing families. He had no internet access or cellphone service. Even the AM-radio reception was unstable. He had to whack his receiver a few times before it stopped crackling.

The program about to start was called "Mensajes al Poblador Rural," or "Messages to the Rural Settler." Several times each day, major AM-radio stations in Argentina broadcast short personal messages intended for residents of its remote and sparsely populated regions, most of them pastoralists who otherwise have little or no way of communicating with one another, or with the outside world. As long as a message can reach the nearest radio station—whether via phone call, WhatsApp, or a scrawled note delivered by hand—it is read aloud during that day's programming. Every night, Pereyra listened at the same time, hoping to receive a brief update from his family members, most of whom worked on ranches scattered across thousands of square miles.

At the time, I was travelling around Argentina and had found my way to the peninsula, which is famous for its wildlife. Elsewhere, the COVID pandemic was just taking hold, and would soon make extended isolation a strange new experience for billions of people. It was eerie to be in a place where communal solitude had always been the norm. The messages I remember listening to with Pereyra that night were surprisingly mundane. One family communicated to a relative that everyone was "doing fine," and sent regards. Another message announced that a wallet had been lost, and shared a number to call should someone find it.

The host read the messages in the third person. ("For Armando Nahuelquir—his wife, Casilda, communicates to him that she is travelling to the campo and will arrive

today.") The whole thing couldn't have lasted more than ten minutes. There was no message that evening for Pereyra, and as the station moved on to the regular news I caught a crestfallen look on his face. He quietly prepared a stew of fresh lamb, potatoes, and onions, then played the guitar until it was time to turn in.

A few years later, I came across a book by an Argentinean photographer, Jorge Piccini, who had set out to create a visual archive of so-called Mensajero Rural programs, with a focus on the handwritten notes submitted to the stations. The messages, scribbled on whatever scrap of paper a sender could find, often featured misspellings and shaky penmanship; many older residents of rural areas did not know how to read or write well, if at all. Such a note would be handed to the next person travelling to a city, who would deposit it in a mailbox outside the radio station.

In the book, which was published in 2022, Piccini included a long list of stations in Argentina that have historically aired these "radio letters"; some of them are still active. In our era of incessant texting, the concept of these radio missives struck me as both archaic and romantic. Argentina, the world's eighth-largest country, has a low population density: about a third of its forty-five million residents live in the Buenos Aires area, and huge expanses of the countryside are very sparsely inhabited. In these areas, some people live fifty miles from their nearest neighbor. These were lives of extreme independence, yet multiple times a day they all engaged in the same ritual: sitting in silence, hoping for a few seconds of information about people they'd left behind.

In the Chubut region of Argentina, settlements are few and far between. The village of El Mirasol has about forty residents.

From my home, in New York City, I began tuning in to these broadcasts via online streaming sites. Listening to the messages felt a bit like eavesdropping. Residents across Argentina notified one another of planned visits, and of delays. ("He begs that you wait for him.") People passed along birthday wishes, condolences, and general *saludos*. There were many notices about animals that had wandered off—horses, dogs, cows—and it was not unusual to hear, later, that those creatures had been found. I learned from LRA9 Radio Nacional, a station in the southern mountain town of

Esquel, of a local hilltop nicknamed La Señal—the Signal—where people know that they can catch cellphone reception in order to submit, or respond to, radio messages. In northern Argentina, people sent radio messages asking their relatives to use an improvised pulley system to hoist their phones, in tin cans, to the tops of trees, in order to get enough wireless connection for a text to go through.

Pereyra had told me that it was not uncommon for gauchos living in outposts like his to hear on the radio that their wives had given birth, or that relatives had fallen seriously ill. I heard messages like these, too. From LU20 Radio Chubut, the largest radio station in the Patagonian province of the same name, I heard, "Inosencio Belisle, in Chubut, is advised that his brother Baldobino is sick and hospitalized in General Roca"—a twelve-hour drive away. A number was provided "if he would like to communicate . . . with his niece Malvina." I began to recognize certain names that were regularly mentioned on the broadcasts. I listened for "Jorge Pereyra," but the name never came up.

Since the popularization of broadcast radio, in the nineteen-twenties, people have been experimenting with ways to use the far-reaching signal to send personal messages back and forth. "Radio is one-sided," Bertolt Brecht lamented in a 1932 essay, "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication." "The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life," he went on, "if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him." Brecht's vision, of course, never fully came to pass; the rise of the telephone, among other technologies, basically obviated the need for radio messaging.

Argentina's Mensajero Rural tradition has few analogues in the modern world, but it has many precursors. Such experiments have tended to thrive in contexts where landline-telephone use was impossible, for reasons of cost, infrastructure, or circumstance. In the seventies, the writer John McPhee, while travelling across Alaska for this magazine, heard of a radio program called "Tundra Topics," which was basically a Mensajero Rural for isolated Alaskans. The show was, in theory, illegal—

the Federal Communications Commission has long defined radio broadcasting as "intended to be received by the public," rather than by individual listeners.

The Argentinean countryside had the right combination of factors for "radio letters" to take root and persist. Although the Andes form the country's western border, much of Argentina is flat, particularly in large swaths of Patagonia and the Gran Chaco, allowing AM signals to travel hundreds of miles without obstruction. By the end of the Second World War, half of Argentinean households had a radio—more per capita than some European countries. The practice of airing private messages on broadcast stations in Argentina is believed to have begun in Patagonia, in the late thirties and early forties. Based in the southern cities of Comodoro Rivadavia, Río Gallegos, and Bariloche, these AM stations were controlled by some of the region's largest landowning families, who, in addition to broadcasting talk shows, news, and music, used the new technology to communicate with their workers out in the fields. The progression to ordinary individuals sharing personal messages seems to have happened by chance. Juan Ignacio Revestido, a professor of communication studies at the University of Patagonia in Esquel and the author of a study about his local station's Mensajero Rural, told me, "One day, the story goes, a woman delivering a work-related message on behalf of her boss also had a relative she needed to reach, and she asked the operator to slip her personal message into the broadcast." When others heard it, they wanted to do the same.

"Watch out. He's in one of his moods."

Cartoon by Mick Stevens

Open cartoon gallery

As more radio stations opened across the countryside, they established Mensajeros from the beginning, because they were a sure way to create a devoted audience. The format has always been the same: a message is shared with the radio station, and then the host reads it out for all to hear. The service is usually free.

By the seventies, radio letters had become deeply entrenched in rural Argentinean life and culture, especially in Patagonia. During this era, Mario Novack began his career as a radio broadcaster in Río Gallegos, a city just north of the island of Tierra del

Fuego. On May 3, 1982, he was starting his morning shift when he received a message to read aloud: "Attention Gómez Roca—we're waiting for you in Puerto Deseado." Novack repeated it on the air several times that day. The message was far more significant than he realized. A few days earlier, the war between Argentina and the United Kingdom over control of the Falkland Islands (which Argentina calls the Malvinas) had begun. Early that morning, an Argentinean naval tug had been bombed by the British, destroying its communications systems. The Argentinean military, unsure of the condition of the ship and its crew, assumed that someone on board would have a battery-powered radio, and used a Mensajero Rural to relay a message to the captain, Sergio Gómez Roca, advising him to go to the port town of Puerto Deseado. It turned out that Gómez Roca had been killed in the attack, along with seven crew members. But a surviving shipmate heard the message and passed it on to Gómez Roca's deputy, Lieutenant Commander Sergio Bazán, who headed toward Puerto Deseado. The boat was rescued. "It gave us tremendous hope," Bazán later told the press. "At least those on shore knew that we were still afloat."

Because messages on the radio can be heard by anybody—strangers, neighbors, friends, family members—they are often composed in ways that blur the line between private and public. Details are spared—"*Están todos bien*," or "Everyone is fine," is common. Phrases that sound vague, such as "*el lugar de siempre*" ("the same place as always") and "*estar en esa*" ("to take care of it"), are used deliberately, particularly when discussing matters of money. It is not unusual for people to establish code words in advance. Over time, a standard lingo has developed, and the formal, third-person structure of the messages is now unmistakable:

> For Jorge Sepúlveda in Cajón de Ginebra: Paternoster asks that he get in touch today as soon as possible, at the same number as always.
>
> For Jorge Crespo: Ricardo says that tomorrow, Tuesday, he will pass by his house.
>
> For Emmanuel Ortega, wherever he is: his sister María wishes him a very happy birthday. She cares about him very much.

The sender decides how much to reveal, but the radio host must make sure that each message, if lightly edited, conveys precisely what the sender intended. In such inhospitable landscapes, mistakes can be catastrophic. David Ricardo Jaquez, a radio host in Malargüe, a small city in the arid, volcanic foothills of the central Andes, told me, "If you're not knowledgeable about the area and misread the name of a person or place, you can cause huge problems for people—and even put lives in danger." Several hosts mentioned the importance of the Mensajero Rural during natural disasters such as floods and snowstorms, when people trapped in already isolated dwellings may be stuck for several days. In such instances, radio messages ask individual residents to put out flags or towels of certain colors to indicate if they are freezing, hungry, or injured, so that rescue crews might see them from the air.

Jaquez recalled a dramatic incident involving his station's Mensajero Rural. In the summer of 2013, a local public-health official named Cristóbal Villar sent out a message on Radio Nacional Malargüe directed to a handful of pastoralist families scattered across the upper reaches of the Barrancas River. Villar's message announced dates when he and a group of colleagues, including a physician, would head out to various remote outposts for medical checkups. The team would be making camp at the confluence of the Barrancas and one of its tributaries.

Karina López, a radio host in the Chubut region, dreamed of becoming an announcer when she listened to Mensajero Rural broadcasts as a child.

The day before Villar and his colleagues began their trip, Brigida Vasquez and Felix Arteaga—a couple who had been tending their livestock in the mountains overlooking the Barrancas—were growing concerned about their six-year-old son, Gastón, who was suffering from a fever and severe stomach pain. Horses were their only mode of transport. Not knowing where they could seek help, Felix put a pair of dying batteries in their portable radio and tuned to Malargüe's "Hora de los Comunicados"—"Message Time"—to see if someone with a vehicle might be coming anywhere within horse-riding distance. They heard Villar's message, and realized that they could catch the medical team when they arrived at the campsite the following afternoon.

By the time Arteaga and Vasquez saddled up their horses early the next morning, Gastón's condition had worsened. With Arteaga holding his ailing son across his lap, they set off across the mountain—a journey of more than six miles down sinuous

trails, around narrow cliff ledges, and through icy, rushing waters. When the family showed up at the campsite, Villar and his team were already there. Villar soon drove the exhausted family eighty-five miles, on washboard roads, to a highway where an ambulance was waiting. Gastón was admitted to a hospital and underwent a successful appendectomy. Afterward, through the radio, Arteaga and Vasquez reassured the rest of their family that all had gone well.

Karina López, a host at LU20 Radio Chubut, has been the voice of her station's morning-shift Mensajero Rural for nearly twenty years. She understands the messages' importance from both sides of the broadcast. "My whole life has unfolded on the Mensajero Rural," López told me. The daughter of a ranch hand and a cook, she grew up moving from ranch to ranch as her parents searched for work across the Chubut meseta—a vast plateau that covers most of the province, which is in the center of Patagonia. In 1980, her father, Arsenio, was alone in the fields when he heard on LU20 that López had been born in a hospital in Trelew. Thirty-three years later, as a host at the station, López wrote a message announcing her father's death; when the time came, however, she couldn't bring herself to read it on the air. A colleague did it for her.

When López was nine, her father came down with a severe fever. An ambulance conveyed him to the hospital in Trelew—a very long drive. Her mother left a message at the radio station for López's elder siblings, who were already living in Trelew but still listened to the Mensajero Rural. They were able to meet their father at the hospital.

Because her family had relied on the radio, López knew from a young age that she wanted to become a *locutora*—an announcer. As a girl, she'd ride her bicycle and talk

to herself, pretending that she was on the air. She understood the value of batteries: she and her neighbors were careful not to waste precious energy on less important broadcasts. Sometimes they put batteries into their radios only for the Mensajero Rural.

López can still picture her father holding the radio up to the window on rainy or cloudy days and putting his ear close to its speakers, anxiously trying to catch the signal before the Mensajero Rural ended. On nicer days, he could relax: he'd sit at the same corner of the kitchen table, a kettle of hot water and a cup of mate tea beside him, staring at the landscape out the window while listening to the messages. "It's just the purest image of solitude," she said. "Who knows what he must have been thinking in those moments."

Residents of El Mirasol. Satellite internet has finally started to arrive in the region, but AM-radio broadcasts remain an essential means of communication.

In May, the height of autumn in the Southern Hemisphere, I travelled to Patagonia to meet López. She was waiting for me when I arrived at a small airport just outside Trelew, after a two-hour flight south from Buenos Aires. I was immediately struck by her voice: López, who is forty-six and breathlessly talkative, speaks with the same punchy, booming announcer's intonation that she uses on the radio. "It must be the training," she said, with a wry smile.

LU20 Radio Chubut airs six daily broadcasts of its Mensajero Rural program (four on Sundays). Its signal reaches up to ninety-five per cent of the province, which is the size of Minnesota, along with parts of two neighboring provinces. López and I had made a plan to drive deep into the meseta and listen to the radio messages with the people who relied on them. We hoped to cover a loop of about seven hundred miles in the course of a weekend. Even among the areas in Argentina where radio messaging is used, few are as remote as central Chubut. The landscape is dry and largely treeless, with canyons and volcanic monoliths periodically interrupting the otherwise unending steppe. The very few people who live there work on sheep ranches, and in some areas the population density is as low as one-tenth of an inhabitant per square mile. You can easily drive for many hours without seeing another soul.

Even Bruce Chatwin, the British writer who is best known for his book "In Patagonia," which chronicled his extensive travels through southern Argentina, treated the Chubut meseta as a place of little interest. He crossed all three hundred miles of steppe in the dark, after hitching a ride on Ruta Nacional 25, an east-west highway that links Trelew and the Atlantic coast with Esquel and the Andes Mountains. "A truck stopped with three men in the cab," Chatwin wrote. "All night I bounced in the back, and at dawn, covered in dust, I watched the sun strike the Ice-caps."

We started in Trelew and headed west on Ruta Nacional 25, retracing Chatwin's journey. But it was early morning, with the sun rising at our backs, and I could soon see shrub-dotted desert stretching in every direction. Wild guanacos—llama-like camelids with dark-red fur—darted across the road. We occasionally passed the

shrivelling carcass of one that had got caught on the barbed-wire cattle fences that subdivide the region's huge, privately owned ranches. After two hours, we turned onto a gravel road. Rheas (South American relatives of the ostrich) and maras (hare-like Patagonian rodents) sprinted through the brush. López shrieked as her stomach lurched on the curves. Our driver, Tony Martínez, who also grew up in this area, teased her: "You're a city girl now." He wasn't afraid of pushing his pickup to the limit on these rough back roads, which he could navigate almost by memory.

Just in time for the 11:30 A.M. broadcast of the Mensajero Rural, we reached El Mirasol, a cluster of fifteen or so homes along a single road—crowded, by Chubut standards. El Mirasol had sprung up around a rural school, where children of sheep ranchers from the surrounding countryside came to study for extended periods. (When López attended such a school, the Mensajero Rural was the only way she ever heard from her parents.) The school's presence had also brought public services to that tiny patch of steppe, including an on-site nurse and a few daily hours of electricity from a generator. But the wool industry that had once sustained the ranchers was in decline, in part because of overgrazing, and the countryside was emptying of young people, who were setting off for more populated areas. Today, most residents of El Mirasol are older gauchos—single men who spent their entire lives working on ranches, and now have government-sponsored housing in retirement. At the elementary school, more elderly students are enrolled than children.

"It's for you."

Cartoon by Michael Maslin

Open cartoon gallery

José Simón Molina, whose house was at the entrance to the village, was listening to LU20 when we stopped by. He was eighty-two and bow-legged, with short gray hair and kind eyes. They widened once López began to speak—he recognized her voice. "Come in," he said. He offered us mate, pouring water from an old kettle that he kept warm all day on a cast-iron woodstove. His home was small and rustic but tidy. In the hinterlands of Patagonia, ranching outposts tend to share a common set of features. They often have just two rooms, a bedroom and a kitchen. There is a woodstove, and sometimes also a gas stove, for more precise cooking. Every gaucho keeps his mate and his radio within close reach.

Molina's floors were tiled white, and the walls were painted teal. He'd hung up a banner for the Boca Juniors, a soccer club in Buenos Aires, nearly a thousand miles away. Next to it was a print calendar and a piece of paper where someone had written Molina's name, date of birth, and federal I.D. number. (He doesn't know how to read or write.)

Ever since he left his childhood home for the fields, at the age of twenty, Molina had lived alone, migrating from ranch to ranch. "I sheared sheep, built fences, dug wells," Molina told me. Seven years ago, he settled in El Mirasol. "I can't work anymore," he continued. "If I could, I wouldn't be here." He is only occasionally in contact with family and friends. Such arrangements are quite normal in this part of Patagonia, where gauchos often live in solitude until a very old age. Most years, Molina heard from his relatives only on his birthday, when they sent him their regards on the radio. Still, his daily schedule was defined by the Mensajero Rural. "I get up early, and at seven o'clock I'm already listening to the messages," Molina said. He'd never missed a broadcast; even at the school, where he was enrolled in first grade, the teacher timed the seniors' snack break to coincide with the four-thirty edition.

Each station has a distinct jingle to mark the start of its Mensajero Rural program, and LU20's begins with a sunny piano melody. At eleven-thirty, Molina sat down at his kitchen table and, like López's father, stared outside while listening. On this station, the order of the messages is always the same: first come blood-donation requests and news of missing animals, followed by person-to-person communications and regional announcements. The program ends with death notices.

> For Nicolás López, in Estancia La Elenita: his nephew Martín communicates that the four-wheel drive of the van is broken.
>
> For Enrique Vega, in Telsen: his mother wishes him a very happy birthday. Over here, everyone is well.

> Two years and five months since the irreparable physical loss of Fabio Ezequiel Leslie. His parents and siblings miss him and remember him with as much love as the first day. Praying for his eternal rest.

At 11:36 A.M., it was over. Unlike Pereyra, Molina didn't seem to mind that the Mensajero did not have a message for him. "I listen for anybody," he said. There were so few people living in this part of the country that, despite the distances separating them, many knew one another. The Mensajero was their way of keeping up socially—a collective form of gossip. Indeed, even long after people left the countryside behind for the world of constant contact and mobile phones, many continued tuning in. Life can get lonely no matter how many people you have around. "The radio is a companion that's always there," López said as we bade goodbye to Molina and returned to the gravel road.

The internet has finally begun to reach some of these far-off places. At the end of 2023, the firebrand libertarian Javier Milei, in one of his first actions as Argentina's new President, began allowing competition from foreign internet providers. Some saw this as a move to curry favor with Elon Musk, whose satellite service, Starlink, Milei mentioned by name in his announcement. (Milei also slashed funding to Argentina's public-radio stations.) Others saw it as serving a vital need for communication. Since 2023, approximately two million Argentineans have acquired satellite-internet access, mostly in rural areas.

When I visited the meseta, the transformation was palpable. The school in El Mirasol had Wi-Fi whenever the village generator was running. And there was now satellite internet in impossibly remote places, such as Establecimiento La Victoria,

where Rodolfo and Ricardo Zapata, a pair of brothers in their sixties, lived in the large ranch house where they grew up. To get there from El Mirasol, we'd followed a two-track dirt path for a few hours.

The Zapata brothers, jovial and welcoming, both had thick, curly black hair with streaks of gray. Ricardo wore a sweater over a flannel button-down shirt and jeans; Rodolfo wore a parka over his work clothes. They were glad to have visitors, and had prepared a tray of broiled lamb in their woodstove, dressed with a garlicky brine called *salmuera*; we'd brought fresh vegetables for salad. As we ate, I noticed that Rodolfo periodically scrolled through Facebook on his phone. Despite their internet connection, LU20 was blaring on a gray radio in the kitchen when we walked in, and it stayed on all afternoon. The brothers said that they still listened to the Mensajero Rural in order to stay abreast of other people's business.

Much of Argentina is flat, allowing AM signals to travel hundreds of miles without obstruction.

Down the mountain from the Zapatas' home was another ranch, Establecimiento Los Cinco Hermanos, where an older man named Lirio Mendoza lived alone in the house in which he had grown up alongside four siblings. His sister Gladys Mendoza, who happened to be visiting from Trelew, told me that she still preferred to use the Mensajero Rural to send messages to her brother, even though he'd had Starlink for about a year. "It's something that we really identify with," Gladys told me, as her brother fidgeted with the tuner. "For us, the radio has always been the most important means of communication." She recalled a young aunt, Carmen, falling ill when Gladys and her siblings were children; nobody in the family could make the long trip to visit her in the hospital, so every day they awaited an update on her condition from the Mensajero Rural. Gladys said, "One day, we heard a message for my father that said, 'For Domingo Mendoza, his mother communicates that Carmen's prognosis is uncertain. Listen for the next message.' " Gladys and her sister were older, so they were allowed to listen to the broadcast that day; the younger children had to wait outside. "The atmosphere in the house was dreadful, an atmosphere of waiting anxiously for the next message to come," Gladys said. Eventually, the aunt died. The day her death notice was read out, the family listened to it on three consecutive broadcasts.

Satellite internet has become a luxury in the meseta, creating a new kind of communication hierarchy: people who don't have Wi-Fi now ask their connected neighbors to contact the Mensajero Rural on their behalf. Avelino Delgado, a sixty-eight-year-old rancher who lives alone on his land, without an internet connection or a phone, belongs to this cohort. He told me, "Just last month, I sent a message because one of my animals"—a bull—"got lost." He drove half an hour to El Escorial, a school village, and dictated his message to a man who runs a generator there; the man texted the message to LU20 via WhatsApp. It aired later that day: "Avelino

Delgado, of Establecimiento El Calafate, in the region of El Escorial, has lost a Hereford bull. If someone sees it, please notify him on this same channel."

Rural residents almost unanimously told me that they thought the Mensajero Rural would continue even if internet access became universal. The arrival of two-way radios, telephones, and cellphones all changed the way people communicated with one another in remote areas, they noted, but none of those things had made the Mensajero Rural obsolete. As access to satellite internet proliferates, individual messages sent via radio might become less urgent and more performative—birthday wishes, condolence notes, and the like. One-to-one "letters" might give way to notices meant for a wider public, similar to a Facebook or WhatsApp group. "The messages continue to play a very important role as a social organizer for the communities," Mauri Mateos, a host at the public-radio station in Esquel, told me. For people who often went days or even weeks without in-person social contact, he said, each broadcast of the Mensajero Rural brought the feeling, however brief, that everyone was gathered together and paying attention.

I got the sense that López was a bit surprised by how fast internet access was expanding in Chubut. "As long as the older people are left out there—the ones who are eighty, ninety years old—I think that the Mensajero Rural will live on," she mused to me. Perhaps its schedule would be reduced until there was just one daily program, she said. I thought about how there are certain things we do for reasons of need, or want, and how there are other customs that we maintain even after they've stopped making sense, because we have never known another way.

"If 'Mensajes al Poblador Rural' does end, I want to be the voice that reads the last messages," López told me. "It's been forty-six years that I've been a part of this, from

the day I was born, and I have fifteen years left before I retire. I have faith that it will at least be around for that much longer."

All this time, I had been thinking about Pereyra, the sheepherder from Península Valdés. For obvious reasons, we couldn't keep in touch once I left his outpost, and in the six years that had passed I'd lost track of him. I heard from one of his employers that he'd left the area shortly after we met, but nobody seemed to know where he'd gone.

Still, I held out hope of reaching him. Some of the most striking stories I'd heard about the Mensajero Rural told of people who had successfully used the radio to reunite with relatives and friends. José Luis Munguía, a retired member of LU20's staff who spent decades organizing all incoming messages, told me about a woman who had long ago moved to northern Argentina and lost contact with her brother, who'd stayed in Chubut. Munguía aired a message for her brother, at varying times in the schedule, for several weeks. "I thought, If there hasn't been any news by now, surely he'd passed away, or he'd moved somewhere the radio didn't reach, and that was it," Munguía said. But after two months the message finally reached her brother, through intermediaries. "The woman at the station called me to say that he'd got in touch," Munguía told me. Later that year, they met for the first time in decades.

A week before I arrived in Chubut, López helped me compose a message for Pereyra. "For Jorge Pereyra, wherever he is: Jordan Salama, the American he met at Estancia La Adela, in Caleta Valdés, communicates that he wants to find him, if it's possible to get in touch with the radio station. Whoever hears this, please let him know."

Nolberto Salgado, seventy-two, is one of the last remaining goat herders in the Chubut region.

Nothing happened for days. But then Martínez, the driver from Chubut, heard my message and realized that he might know someone who once knew Pereyra. Martínez made some inquiries, and soon I had a phone number—and word that Pereyra wanted to see me. On my final night in Patagonia, Martínez and I ventured out to meet him.

Google Maps coördinates that Pereyra shared led us to Dolavon, a short drive outside Trelew. It was dark, around eight in the evening, and the street lights in his neighborhood—an informal urban settlement—weren't working. Families peered out at us suspiciously from curtainless windows in ramshackle brick dwellings. After we spent several minutes waiting at the appointed spot, a dark-haired man turned a corner and appeared in the path of our headlights. It was Pereyra. "Amigo," he said, giving me a hug before leading us to his home. "How crazy is this?"

Shortly after the pandemic began, Pereyra said, he'd traded the countryside—and the sheepherding life—for the city. "I wanted to study and build a family while I was still young, things you can't do in the campo," Pereyra said. Sitting at a table in his one-room home, we updated each other about our lives over mate and a bag of cookies. He hadn't been able to return to school yet—he was working in an industrial meatpacking plant—but he'd fulfilled his plan to start a family. He was now married, and had three children. He often told people the story of the night that I'd randomly passed by his outpost; he had not forgotten, and neither had I.

I asked Pereyra if he'd heard my messages for him on the Mensajero Rural. "No, amigo," he said, "I haven't had a radio since I left the campo." His neighborhood had a good cellular signal. "I mostly use WhatsApp and Facebook now," he said. He shared his Facebook account with me, and as he did so I realized that I'd almost stopped using the social network to stay in touch with people. We promised to stay connected as best we could. Walking out the door, I saw Pereyra's acoustic guitar gathering dust in the corner. ♦

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