

AROUND THE CITY

Buenos Aires, take two

BY MAXINE SWANN
For the Herald

I was walking in the **Bosques de Palermo** (the Palermo Park), the vast stretch of green on the north side of Buenos Aires modelled after the Bois de Boulogne, in Paris. The light was arresting at this hour, golden brown through the curving *tupa* trees. This was also the hour when transvestites began to appear on the outer rim of the pedestrian walk in their incandescent outfits, while runners and families on the inner rim, continued their peregrinations, apparently unfazed. But now it seemed the transvestites were gone. Had I dreamed them up? Instead the Rosedale seemed clogged with people, middle-class families with children and babies. I recalled how I used to take this walk at the close of my writing day. As the light faded further, I would find myself thinking: "Do I have enough of my novel that it could be published even if something terrible happens to me?" Depending on how the work day had gone, sometimes I thought I did, sometimes I thought I didn't. If I decided I had enough, I would circle around once more, if not, I would reluctantly return home. Now that calculation rang delirious to me.

...
In August of 2010, my Argentine partner, Martín, and I moved back to Buenos Aires from Brooklyn, where we had been living for the past two years, and where our son, Camilo, had been born. It was an ambitious move, with a four-month-old baby, but I was eager to return. Between 2001 and 2008, I had spent seven happy years in Buenos Aires, during the course of which I had begun writing a novel that took place in the city. Buenos Aires has always been a place that surprised me, but I wasn't at all prepared for the disorientation I felt this time around. The city I returned to was not the city I remembered.

...
One of Borges' favourite quotes, from *Heraclitus*, is that you never step into the same river twice, because both you and the river have changed. For a place used to grand economic and political upheavals, Buenos Aires had not suffered any of these in my absence, but it had changed a bit. The construction boom had continued. Prices on staples and in restaurants were higher. The month before our arrival, in a surprising move, given the clout of the Catholic Church, gay marriage had been legalized, making Argentina the first Latin American country to do so.

In March, we'd gone to one of the key cultural events on the Buenos Aires calendar, writer and critic Daniel Link and photographer Sebastián Freire's red carpet wedding in the Imperial Room of the Spanish Club.

...
I had also changed. It dawned on me that I was seeing middle class families not only in the park but everywhere because I was now a member of one and gripped by the same concerns — how to save mon-



The Rosedal in Palermo, one of the neighbourhood's main attractions.

ey, how to assure that my child not only survives but thrives. The risk-taking I used to play with in my single days seemed juvenile to me now. Not only did I have to protect Camilo from the dangers of Buenos Aires and the world at large, but I had to protect myself, so that I could go on being Camilo's mother.

...
At around this time, an American friend of mine, Wendy Gosselin, a long-term expatriate in Buenos Aires, was beginning to feel that it was time to head home. "For years," she said, "Argentines have been looking at me in astonishment and saying, 'What the hell are you doing here?'" I always felt that they didn't understand, that my choice made me special. But suddenly now, it's like I'm seeing everything differently and asking myself exactly that: "What the hell am I doing here?" "Oh, no," I thought, "Is that happening to me?"

...
A year has now passed and, fortunately, I'm not asking myself what I'm doing here. On the contrary. But I have needed to develop a new relationship with the city.

Camilo himself has introduced me to a different side of Buenos Aires. Through him, I've become a member of a neighbourhood. As a person who has avoided small talk in the past like the plague, I'm suddenly discovering its pleasures. I'm now friends with neighbours I would probably never know had Camilo not befriended them first, like the seemingly gruff guy with a limp who works at the fruit stand and lives in the pension on the corner. He and Camilo, via his father, support rival soccer teams. "You're bitter," he says to Camilo, "I can see it on your face," the morning after Camilo's team has lost a match. The cast also includes the waiter in the café where Camilo and his father are morning regu-

lars, who turns on the ceiling fan in the heart of winter because Camilo likes to watch it whirl, every dog owner within an 8 kilometre radius and the owners of the "*chino*," as supermarkets are called here, since they are nearly all run by Chinese families, who have a boy Camilo's age.

...
When I was short on cash, I used to make a pot of lentils and eat them for a week. Now I make sure that the house is well-stocked. Accordingly, I'm much more aware of the vagaries of meat prices, diaper prices. The financial panorama we confront in Buenos Aires is different from the one we'd find in New York. Rents are cheaper, a scenario we avoid as Martín owns a house. On the other hand, most commodities are more expensive. This past year, returning from our vacation in the States, we joined ranks with the Argentine citizens of the world loaded down with shopping bags, clothes, bedding, electronic equipment, computers, all kinds of baby gear. But the crucial point for us is childcare, which is significantly more affordable in Buenos Aires. I love being a mother, yet I also know I don't have the profile of a full-time mother, and can easily picture myself heading into murky territory, as I'd seen American friends of mine who couldn't afford childcare do, sinking into depressions, hurling strollers against the wall.

...
In my single days in Buenos Aires, I lived in an apartment with water running down the walls, due to the construction occurring above my head. Today, we live in Martín's solid, lovely house in the Palermo Hollywood neighbourhood, so-called because of all the film and television studios that have set up shop in recent years. Yet we, too, recently had a water damage problem — water issues are rampant in Buenos Aires

— which led us into negotiations with our next-door neighbour. Our neighbour is not a media person, but runs a brothel instead. A clean-cut, friendly man in his early thirties always accompanied by his white poodle, he fell over himself to repair the damaged wall as quickly as possible at his expense. His business is a low-profile operation, which he does his best to keep hush-hush, literally — the walls are corked — and in every other way. While incongruous in the neighbourhood, it offers a practical locale for the largely upscale clientele, who bow their heads sheepishly when I step out, more often than not with Camilo in tow, as they're standing at the front door ringing the bell.

A few months ago, returning from a walk, we found a gathering of policemen and news cameras on the sidewalk along our block. When they saw where we lived, they approached to question us. Did we know about the drug trade next door? No, we answered truthfully. We had never witnessed any drug-related activity. The police informed us that the place was being shut down. Two days later, the bell was ringing again, and business as usual continues to this day.

...
I would rather have a different neighbour, but maybe that's the cost of living in a place like Buenos Aires, where there's a conjunction of worlds and things are less compartmentalized. There certainly is more fluidity among age groups. A bit fed up with staying home night after night in those early baby months in Brooklyn, I realized when we got to Buenos Aires that we didn't have to. At parties, which go till 2-3-4 am, the generations mix. When I'm old, I'll surely have more insight as to how the city embraces the elderly, and I think it does, but for the moment my eye is trained elsewhere. A small parking lot of strollers greets you at

the entrance of the party-giver's house. Babies, milk bottles in hand, mingle with the guests or wiggle their way across the dance floor. When they get tired, they conk out on shoulders, on piles of coats, stretched out in their strollers side by side. On any night of the week, you can find babies trolling the streets long after dark. Some of them are just taking a stroll, but many are heading out to neighbourhood restaurants. Buenos Aires is a city that eats late, 9pm being the normal dinner hour. Argentines not only welcome babies in restaurants, but treat them like VIP customers, their entrance accompanied by fanfare, a mixed *purée* — potato and chestnut squash — immediately whisked to the table, while a waiter busily begins tying together a napkin chain to hook around the baby's waist, securing him to his high chair.

...
A restaurant has opened up in our neighbourhood, Perón-Perón, which we frequent primarily because they let Camilo crawl freely around on the floor. But it is also a peculiar place, where Peronism, traditionally the workers' party, has been refashioned as chic. A shrine, with flowers, figurines of saints and lit candles framing a burnished photograph of Evita, serves as the centrepiece. Antique sewing machines have been resignified as dining tables. Images of a pro-Peronist film, *Symphony of a Feeling*, flit across television screens while Evita's high, quavering voice can be heard addressing the masses. Members of cabinet mix with the fashion crowd, while curious tourists look on. A large violet-colored canvas in the back reads "*Fuerza Cristina, Gracias Néstor*" ("Come on Cristina, Thank you Néstor"), alluding to former president Néstor Kirchner's sudden death in November 2010 and his wife, Cristina's, present mandate, re-newed this past year. When we left in 2008, Kirchnerism was losing ground, but there has been a revival since, buoyed by a new generation who call themselves the "K" youth.

...
I have returned many times to the Bosques de Palermo since that first disorienting walk. The other afternoon, I was with Camilo in his stroller. The air was balmy with the first currents of spring. People were lounging on the grass, couples, families, drinking mate (one of my new enthusiasms), kicking around a soccer ball. We stopped to buy fresh-squeezed orange juice from a stand. As we were turning away, a gaggle of young, splendidly decked out transvestites appeared walking towards us along the path. "Ooooh, aaaaah," they exclaimed over Camilo, "look at those eyes," something they always say here. I had watched the transvestites in the park in the past, but never spoken to them. Again, Camilo was broadening my repertoire. "How old is he?" they asked. "What's his name?" "My little nephew has eyes like that." Con-junctive universes were colliding, but in a surprisingly gentle way.