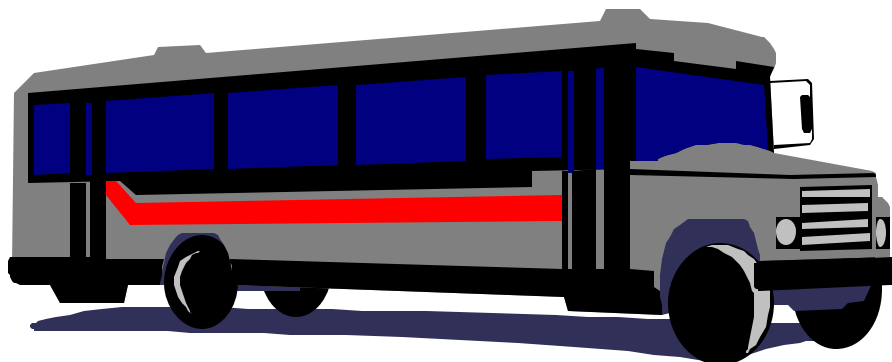


Riding the Buses



by Tony Beckwith © 1998

SUNDAY AFTERNOONS IN Montevideo were quiet. Especially on those dark, rainy ones when there weren't even any people standing in doorways. Sometimes, my brother and I joined forces with the Randall boys and the four of us spent hours riding city buses to the end of the line.

This was a bold and exciting adventure for Christopher and me. I was about eleven; he was a year older. We lived in a community of English-speaking foreigners and never strayed far from that world. But the Randalls had recently arrived from England and were much more street-wise than we local boys. They were also thousands of miles from their home, so another few kilometers on an empty bus wasn't a worry to them at all. I admired their worldliness: that's what I wanted more than anything.

Montevideo in the mid-fifties was a place where foreign boys could disappear into the belly of the city and return unharmed. We caught a bus in Pocitos by the beach, about twenty miles from downtown. During the week this was a busy commuter route, but on

Sundays our public transport ran almost empty. I loved the open-backed buses, those fabulous old wrecks with the engine in the nose jutting out in front. Battered and abused rattletaps, painted battleship gray with a red stripe along the side, endowed with nightmare exhausts. The conductors wore a gray uniform and a military-looking hat with a hard black visor. They weren't interested in watching over us. They stood with one foot on the bottom step in the well of the exit door, chatting to the driver through a window at the front of the bus.

We sat in all the seats, swung from the overhead handrails like monkeys, stood on the platform at the back of the bus, and sat facing each other in the "silly seats" just inside the open door. Our clothes smelled of the damp air. John's glasses fogged up. They were round, and seemed to be just wire and a couple of lenses. They were too

small for him. "Issued by the National Health," said Ian contemptuously. I wished I could have said that.

Sometimes, when it was just us on the bus, the driver turned off the inside lights. The gray afternoon

came spilling in through the windows, surrounding us like floodwaters as we trundled through the empty streets, unprotected by our cocoon of light. We peered out at the wet walls and shiny

black cobblestones, the mysterious streets and the tram rails glistening into the distance.

At one stage, jumping on and off the bus while it was still moving was a rite of passage for our little band of boys. During the week we watched the *canillitas*—newsboys carrying huge bundles of newspapers under their arms—swinging gracefully on and off the speeding buses in that wild downtown traffic. We were awed and envious. It wasn't

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that hard or dangerous once you got the hang of it (every mother will disagree), although it's probably a miracle that none of us was killed. But you didn't want to get too bold. You had to hit the ground running and then keep running as fast as your little legs could carry you, because if you didn't you'd fall flat on your face. During that headlong moment you knew that you were alone and there was nobody to help you; you were racing against yourself, completely on your own. In earlier years, while still too young

to take our place on the back platform, we revered the older brothers, veterans of countless flying leaps. If we were ever picked on by some wretched bully, we'd threaten them with, "You'd better watch out or I'll call my brother—and he jumps off the bus while it's still moving!"

The Randall brothers were both excellent jumpers, and from time to time we'd all abandon the bus-of-the-moment and leap from the back steps. This was called "parachuting in behind enemy lines."

Once we'd all reassembled after the jump, we'd look for a place to buy some gum or a coke. Shopping on foreign soil was a way of taking possession. Establishing a beachhead. Marking out a territory.

Then we'd take another bus and ride it to the end of the line, down near the port in the old part of the city. We'd sit on a bench in the small park across from a newspaper office, sharing our candy and reading headlines about world events. The gum always tasted better in this part of town. ★