



ON THE EDGE

by Tony Beckwith © 2002

IF YOU HAVEN'T BEEN TO THE EDGE and looked down into the abyss, you simply have no idea. My roommate, Larry, for example, had no idea. He once told me, in all seriousness, that he was down to his last thousand dollars and felt nervous to be so near the edge. *His last thousand dollars?* Good grief, that's not even close!

I, on the other hand, had been living right on the edge for quite some time. It had all happened so easily, somehow. Oh, I knew all about living within one's means, of course. My parents had advised me on that before I left home. Like that rather mysterious rule about leaving a little on your plate as a sign of politeness to your hostess, apparently you were supposed to leave some of your salary in the bank every month and not spend it. It sounded simple enough but nobody had ever explained exactly how (or why) to do it.

Anyhow, for quite some time, each month had found me a little short of funds. So I talked to the lady in accounts and she made me sign a voucher and advanced me a few pesetas against my next month's salary. It made all the difference to what she called my "cash flow" and, since it was my money to begin with it never occurred to me that I'd have to pay it back. So the next month I took another advance, and then another, and another, until finally I was drawing a whole month's salary in

advance. It would appear that I was actually living far beyond my means. Well, one day the lady in accounts told me I'd have to pay back everything I owed before she could give me any more money. Which meant that I'd have to get through a whole month with no salary at all. That's what I mean about living on the edge!

The following Saturday morning I was in my kitchen, standing around with my other roommate, Juanín—a prince among roommates, by the way, who had already lent me a fair bit of money of his own. We were with some friends who hadn't managed to go home after the party the previous night. Some had actually been there for several days. We were drinking coffee and eating the soggy oranges and lemons we'd fished out of the dregs of the sangría (following yet another excellent bit of parental advice: citrus is *so* good for you). And then, just like in the best of stories, the phone rang.

A lot of movies were being made in Madrid in the mid-sixties, many of them low-budget productions shot with unknown actors of all nationalities, then dubbed into various languages. The phone call was from a friend who worked in that business—he was looking for voice talent to dub a series of movies into English. The project was to begin immediately, he needed about seven voices, and the pay was, by my standards, astronomical. I returned to the kitchen and broke the news to the assembled talent that, if they were interested, they could all be in the movies. We unanimously agreed to toss out the old sangría and make a new batch immediately, as it was obviously time to celebrate a truly historic reversal of fortune.

We worked at night and on weekends in a studio in the old part of town. It was an ancient, musty old place and I loved it. The movies were all sliced up

into short takes, each one with just a few sentences of dialogue. We were all assigned a part, and had to study the mouth movements of the actor or actress we were dubbing so as to try to say the English words in such a way that it looked as though they were being spoken by the person on the screen.

We stood in the darkened studio, the script and the microphone in front of us. On the director's signal the projectionist ran the clip. As the scene flickered on the screen we watched and listened to the soundtrack. The actors might be from Turkey, or Latvia, or anywhere. Some spoke their lines in their own languages, which were usually unintelligible to us, but some tried to speak in English and that was even worse.

Then the soundtrack was turned off, the mike was turned on, and the clip ran in silence. As each character's mouth moved we spoke our lines, trying to make the words fit and give them the right tone and inflection. The scene was then shown again, but now it was in English and we could all judge how successful our efforts had been. It wasn't easy, and we sometimes recorded a seemingly endless number of takes before the director was satisfied.

Some weeks later the job was finished. I paid my debts and still had a little left over. We naturally threw a party to celebrate, and in addition to the usual circle we also invited everyone at the recording studio. Remembering some advice my father had given me about keeping doors open after you walk through them, I also invited the lady in accounts, whose name was Graciela. Good friends are important if you're inclined to live your life on the edge. ★

