

The Fountain of Youth

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IF I TELL YOU THAT I'VE DISCOVERED the Fountain of Youth, you might dismiss me as just another dreamer. But I think I can explain what I mean, if you'll listen.

Many years ago, in the beautiful seaside city of Montevideo, a group of children grew up in a small community. After spending their formative years together at school many departed, for dozens of different reasons, and scattered across the face of the earth. Bit by bit they drifted farther and farther away and lost touch with each other. I was one of those children. Recently, prompted by advancing age and assisted by the magic of email, we found each other again and organized a reunion at our alma mater. What a homecoming that was! Now, having reestablished contact with those who were once my extended family, I have been exploring half-forgotten memories with these old friends, sometimes with surprising results.

The 18th of July is Independence Day in Uruguay. Last year on that date, a number of us circulated the words to the national anthem we used to sing on special occasions, and exchanged recollections of our rehearsals. With each email received, another image was added to the mosaic of memories that was forming in my mind. Bit by bit the scene reemerged from the mists of oblivion: I remembered the music teacher coaxing patriotic notes from the tired old upright piano, and my classmates' faces bathed in light from the glass ceiling above us. I could see the dust particles swirling in the air, and pictured myself standing on a wooden bench in the back row. The familiar fragrance of the assembly hall, which doubled as the gymnasium, filled my head, and all at once I was overcome with emotion as it all

flooded back – the thrill of the high notes the girls sang, the excitement of the stirring chorus, the exhilaration of losing myself in the roar of the choir. I was there! Transported to a moment far away and long ago that in my mind was more vivid than a video.

As I replayed this memory, I noticed that I felt pleasantly soothed. My muscles and my mind had released whatever tension they'd been struggling with, and my horizons appeared to have expanded. Possibilities seemed endless and the



world sat more lightly on my shoulders. What was going on?

The national anthem came to an end, and as I climbed down from the bench, I saw her. I had actually seen her before, frequently in fact, but at that moment it was as if she were appearing to me for the very first time. The soft light from above fell upon her, illuminating her face, and suddenly there was no one in the hall but the two of us. She smiled at me, then turned and walked away. My heart pounded in my chest and I was unable to move. With all the certainty of my thirteen years I knew that, for the first time in my life, I was in love. And I knew exactly what I must do.

Every society has its codes of courtship, and at that school there was an established procedure for informing that special someone that they had

conquered your heart. In retrospect I'd have to agree that our method lacked the romance of, say, serenading your beloved from beneath a balcony, but it was our way and we saw nothing wrong with it at the time. Our system was simple: we used bus tickets. When the five or six digits on a bus ticket added up to twenty-one, that slip of paper was considered the equivalent of a Valentine card that said, "I love you." There were other denominations as well, of course; other numbers that signified other things, some of which we barely understood. Those tickets, surreptitiously shown to close friends, were seldom if ever actually used. But a twenty-one ticket, as precious as a four leaf clover and about as hard to find, represented pure and innocent puppy love. Smitten ones would never approach the object of their affection directly, but would entrust the ticket to faithful intermediaries. In my own case, discretion prevents me from revealing any more details about my first foray into the complex realm of love. Chivalry in short pants may seem laughable to some, but only a rogue would trifle with a lady's reputation.

As I drifted out of this extended day dream, back into my real world, I realized that I felt better than I had in years, awash in a peaceful sense of well-being. I felt refreshed and invigorated and, yes, younger. It occurred to me that reliving pleasant memories of our youth nurtures us and somehow negates the physical toll taken by time—with no side effects. Could it be that the Fountain of Youth is in the well of nostalgia? Maybe you should find out for yourself. Are you ready? Just relax. Let your mind wander freely. Think back to the time when . . . yes, that's the ticket. ★