



Back In Time

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Got A Light?

There are certain things one learned during a childhood spent in Montevideo in the 1950s that have come in handy over the course of a lifetime. I'm thinking, in this case, of learning how to cup one's hands around a match as one tries to light a cigarette when standing at water's edge in a stiff onshore breeze.

The shoreline around the point from Pocitos beach all the way to the Buceo Yacht Club was buttressed with huge, rough-hewn stone blocks arranged as a seawall behind a buffer zone of ordinary rocks. Under cover of darkness this area was used as a rather rugged Lover's Lane by furtive couples far older than I and my little band of friends. To us, however, who were just as furtive, it was a no-man's-land, a rough terrain to negotiate on the way to our secret smoking hideout. Our clandestine haven was a protected—sort of—place that could only be reached by a narrow ledge that ran along the sea wall just above the waterline at low tide. When the sea was running high and rough, as it often was, the ledge was under water and our hideout was maddeningly inaccessible.

There were usually four or five of us, and one was always the hero who had managed to “borrow” a few cigarettes from somewhere. Mine were always *Unión*, which was the brand my mother smoked. My father smoked *Republicanas*, whose black tobacco I came to appreciate later in life but which, at that tender age, were too strong for me. My parents and their friends were pretty relaxed about smoking in those days. Almost everyone in our community was a smoker, and people seemed to take it for granted that when the kids were old enough they would smoke. Until then, of course, we all had to pretend that nobody knew that the kids were borrowing cigarettes left and right and smoking on the sly.

It was there, at our smoking hideout, that I learned how to light my cigarette no matter how hard the wind was blowing. We used wax matches, which didn't burn for very long, so I had to practice lighting the match, holding it between my thumb and forefinger and cupping my hands around it like a screen as I leaned in and edged the tip of my cigarette into the flame. When I did it properly, the way I'd seen my father do it on the deck of his father's boat, I would soon

be puffing proudly. The first time I got it right I inhaled rather more smoke than I had intended and soon felt so queasy and light-headed that I had to be helped along the ledge on the way home.

I felt just as wretched on that occasion as I had when I borrowed some of my mother's airmail paper and rolled up cigar-sized cigarettes made of dried corn silk, or *pelo de choco*. These were an evil invention I had been introduced to in the “camp” in rural Uruguay or perhaps Argentina. I lit up one of those lethal stogies one afternoon behind a shed at the Montevideo Cricket Club. The corn silk, which was as dry as a bone, ignited like a brush fire in a gale and almost exploded, throwing up flames that singed my eyebrows and scorched my lashes. In my alarm I inadvertently inhaled deeply, and as a lung-full of acrid smoke entered my bloodstream I almost fainted on the spot. I later learned that a group of grownups had been enjoying their gin & tonics *al fresco* at the time. Some of them expressed concern when a ball of smoke billowed up over the roof of the shed, but the more experienced among them said, “Oh, not to worry, that's just the kids smoking *pelo de choco*!”

Apparently, neither of these two miserable experiences managed to override my conviction that smoking was a clever habit that made me as sophisticated and irresistible as a movie star. One sometimes has to wonder how one survived adolescence.

It has now been many years since I smoked my last cigarette, but I still enjoy an occasional cigar. And sometimes, when I am sitting out in the garden, as I was this afternoon, I will cup my hands around the flame of a match and remember that narrow ledge and those exciting moments on the banks of the Río de la Plata, puffing at an *Unión* and gazing at the horizon through a cloud of smoke.

