



Back In Time

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Hat Party

Gerry Fairless was my stage mother, a long time ago. When the Montevideo Players produced Alan Melville's play "Simon and Laura" in 1957, Gerry and Dion Bridal played the leads as a British theatrical couple starring in what these days would be called a TV reality show. I was cast as their son in my first major role on the stage. I was twelve years old at the time. Gerry was kind to me and generous with her advice. "The theatre will teach you many things," she said. "You'll play different parts and you'll learn to see life, on and off the stage, through many different eyes." On the brink of my teenage years, I was just beginning to feel the first stirrings of what was to become a lifelong fascination with how people see and experience life, so I was intrigued by what she had to say. Gerry's words were prescient and, since then, I have written a number of stories about just the sort of experience she predicted. This is one of them.

In the late sixties I lived in Madrid, in one of the older residential neighbourhoods not far from the Avenida del Generalísimo. By day I worked at an advertising agency, wearing a coat and tie and a crisp white shirt. But at night I moved in the city's café society, dining late and gliding on to flamenco bars and cabarets in the wee small hours of the morning. I travelled in excellent company; my flat mate, Juanín, shared my interest in the bright lights, and possessed impeccable credentials as a boulevardier and all-round bon vivant.

There was something a little surreal about living as a foreigner in Franco's Spain of that period. As Juanín and I whiled away the evenings at sidewalk tables, we wondered aloud about expatriates in other places and times. We fantasized about Paris in the twenties, and wished we could have been there in those sepia-toned days, sipping absinthe and saying exquisitely witty things to adoring sycophants and generous patrons. Perhaps we were too easily impressed by the presumed glamour of those other times and places. We certainly seemed to spend a great deal of time wishing we were somewhere else, or someone other than who we were.

One aimless rainy Sunday afternoon as we waited at a traffic light in an unfamiliar part of town, we noticed a shop on the corner. The sign over the door said, 'Blanca's Theatrical Costumes.' In the window were dozens of hats of every imaginable kind, and above them a handwritten sign that said, 'Going Out of Business Sale. ¡Bargains! ¡Bargains!'

As we stepped over the threshold into the shop we felt as though we had gone backstage at the Teatro Calderón. There were costumes of every colour and fabric, rows and rows of them hanging chaotically on racks against the walls. There were suits of armour, horses' heads, swords, wishing wells, and half-moons hanging from the ceiling. And there was an all-pervasive fragrance of greasepaint, geraniums, and dust.

We were met by a very small woman of indeterminate age. Her hair was platinum blonde, cut in a pageboy style. Her eyes and lips were heavily made up, and in her red-tipped fingers she carried a cigarette in an extremely long holder. "I am Blanca," she said in a deep, melodious voice. "How can I help you?" We pointed to the hats in the window and she arched her eyebrows and blew out a long plume of smoke. "You like the hats?" she inquired. We nodded, yes. "Which ones you like?"

There were top hats and berets, bowlers, elegant felt homburgs, fedoras, jaunty straw hats, ladies' hats with veils, green ones with feathers, turbans, more than one fez, Stetsons, trim-looking derbies, sombreros, bonnets, sailor hats, shiny black tricornered hats, picadors' hats, pillboxes, some splendid maroon velvet toques, a crimson cloche, and a marvellous mauve boa several feet long.

As we examined them one by one, Blanca smoked thoughtfully and watched us through half-closed lids. "Every hat is special, you know, like a costume, and much better than a mask" she said. "With each one you can become whoever the hat makes you feel." We nodded again, yes, exactly! She shrugged her tiny shoulders in a gesture of extraordinary eloquence and murmured, "Why not take them all?" So we did.

Two weeks later we threw a Hat Party that is still talked about by the regulars at the Café Gijón. Hats of every description were scattered about the apartment, on the furniture in the hall, and on coat hangers by the door. As guests arrived they chose a hat and put it on. Some wore the same hat all night; others exchanged hats with people they had never met and discovered things about each other that nobody had ever known before. Miraculous conversations took place as people came to see themselves as they could have been, should have been, and indeed would have been, if only they'd been wearing the right hat.