



BACK IN TIME

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It Could Have Happened Like That

I was at the dentist's office, and the effects of the anaesthetic were beginning to wear off. Dr Fazio Calmet had removed a wisdom tooth and the left side of my face felt numb. He insisted on practicing his English—as a student, many years ago, he had spent a year at the College of Dentistry in Chicago—and smiled broadly every time he said “*Awpen wie*” and stuck some sort of instrument into my mouth. I couldn't wait to get out of there.

Until the nurse came around from behind the chair to remove my bib. Instead of the usual mousy little assistant, she was a voluptuous brunette in a tight-fitting white uniform with an eye-catching décolletage. She was having trouble unfastening the bib strap so she sat on my lap with her arms around my neck. Her proximity was disconcerting, to say the least, since she looked remarkably like Isabel Sarli, the erotic film star whose posters were plastered all over the *Ciudad Vieja*, the older, shabbier part of town. I pretended not to look at those posters when I was with my mother, on the way to my father's office, for example. But when I was on my own I inspected these works of art with great interest, since Isabel left little to the imagination of a twelve-year-old boy.

The lift was an ornate birdcage model, in keeping with the ancient building where my dentist had his office. I pushed the button on the brass panel inside the wrought iron gate and the cage descended silently, surrounded by the tiled stairs that spiralled up around the walls. Looking up, I saw a man crouched on the roof of the cage, sawing through the cables with a hacksaw. He had a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth and a dark brown fedora pulled down over his eyes. He looked like a gangster, probably hired to rub me out and make it look like an accident. I braced myself, but the lift reached the ground floor in the nick of time. Without a backward glance, I hurried through the lobby and into the street.

I pushed through the crowd waiting on the corner of Rincón and Zabala and saw the 119 heading my way. I had just bought a newspaper cone full of hot peanuts from a *manicero*¹ [peanut vendor] when a terrorist bomb went off under the bus, flipping it over on its side. People started screaming. The pretty girl beside me fainted but I caught her in my arms before she fell. Her grateful mother thanked me and invited me to dinner that night. She was making her specialty, *puchero* [peasant stew]. The girl's eyes fluttered. I slipped a couple of warm peanuts into her jacket pocket as her mother took her from me, then stepped away.

A 118 pulled around the flaming wreck on the street and stopped right where I was standing. I jumped on and sat down in my favourite seat, by the window at the very back on the left, just inside the door from the back platform. It was a CUTCSA² bus, an open-backed Leyland, one of those fabulous old wrecks with the engine jutting out in front. A battered and abused rattletrap, painted battleship gray with a red stripe along the side, endowed with nightmarish exhaust. There were two rows of lightly upholstered seats on either side of the aisle. Parallel bars hung from the roof, where standing passengers could hang on. Shorter passengers could use a metal grip on the backrests of the aisle seats. Right in front of me was one of the pair of *asientos de los bobos* [silly seats] set parallel to the aisle, facing inwards. They were the most uncomfortable and undignified seats on the bus, where everyone stepped on your feet as they moved up the aisle.

The conductor—in his gray uniform and military-style cap with its shiny black visor and a money purse slung over his shoulder—encouraged passengers to move forward and make room for more people to board. “*Corriéndose que hay lugar.*”³ There were official limits to the number of passengers the bus was allowed to carry, but they were routinely ignored, and people were soon packed in tight, pressed up against each



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other in unwelcome intimacy. I was finishing my peanuts when I spotted a man with his hand in a woman's purse. My parents had always warned me to be wary of "people like that" because they could be armed. ("What if he has a knife?" my mother gasped in horror). Undaunted, I stood up, pointed at the man and shouted "*¡punguista!*" [pickpocket]. A brouhaha ensued and the man was set upon and bundled off the bus as his victim whacked him on the head with her purse. Then everyone turned to me and applauded. "*Sos un fenómeno, pibe*"⁴ said the woman's husband and pressed a hundred peso note into my hand.



When the bus arrived at my stop—at the corner of 26 de Marzo and Pereyra de la Luz—I stood up and, to scattered applause, stepped onto the back platform and jumped off the bottom step. The *Bar Los Dos Hermanos* had been on that corner

ever since we moved into the neighborhood, and—until the UTE⁵ finally installed our own phone at home—that is where I called to advise my parents if I was going to be home late. Raúl or Manolo would send one of their regular bar customers to call my father, *el inglés*, from our home half a block away. Dad would come and take the call, and always had a coffee or a glass of wine to repay the kindness.

Out of habit I looked in the window, and froze in my tracks. There was a holdup in progress! A man was pointing a gun at Manolo, who was standing behind the cash register. Raúl and the regulars were standing around stiffly with their hands up, looking at the man with the gun. I kept walking to the corner then ducked down the side street to the far end of the building and stepped through the other door. I was in the shadows and nobody noticed me. I pulled my catapult from one pocket and my lucky marble from the other. I knew it was a one-shot gamble and I would have to make it count. I took one step into the bar and fired off my shot. My lucky marble knocked the gun out of the robber's hand, just as I'd seen it done a hundred times in the movies. Everyone jumped on him and sat on him while Raúl phoned the police. Manolo waved at me and said "*sos un crack, Antoñito!*"⁶ I waved back and went home. Over dinner I told my parents all about my exciting ride home from the dentist's office, omitting only the part about the nurse, for my mother's sake. They listened politely, as they always did, then asked if I might not be exaggerating just a little. I said what I always said when they challenged the accuracy of my narratives: "It *could* have happened like that."

(Endnotes)



1 **Peanut vendor**

2 **CUTCSA** Compañía Uruguaya de Transportes Colectivos Sociedad Anónima

3 "Move forward, there's room."

4 "You're brilliant, kid."

5 *Usinas y Teléfonos del Estado*, as it was called in those days.

6 "You're an ace, Antoñito."