



## BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith  
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### JUST PASSING THROUGH

Business was bad in Britain when I first arrived, at the age of twenty, in 1965. There were no jobs to be had in the advertising business, and that was all I knew how to do.

I didn't realize at the time that I was just another immigrant, an unremarkable newcomer at the bottom of the pile. Back home in Montevideo my status as a second-generation Englishman had granted me a relatively privileged life. I suppose I'd nurtured vague illusions about being welcomed as a prodigal son when I arrived in the land of my forefathers. "We're so chuffed you're finally here!" I thought they'd say. "What can we do for you, old chap?" But they didn't.

My grandparents sailed from England in the early years of the twentieth century, like so many Europeans who went looking for a new life, hoping to ride the economic boom in the Río de la Plata region. One of my grandmothers never stopped missing London, however, and her rose-coloured reminiscences of *Home* influenced my youthful vision of England, making it indeed seem a green and pleasant land. But by the mid-1960s London's streets were not as clean as she remembered them. Busses didn't always run on time, as she'd told me they did, and people were not unfailingly polite. The halcyon days of Empire were already a distant memory.

I roamed the foreign streets of the City looking for employment, trudging past massive buildings that seemed forbidding and inhospitable. Nothing looked familiar. I wasn't used to the low, grey skies, or the flat, metallic light that faded so early in the day. Oh, how I missed my hometown! I had just learned to carry a *broolly* at all times when the Daily Telegraph classifieds finally led me to a job at the BBC. I immediately pictured myself purring into a microphone in a soundproof studio, speaking such immortal lines as: "This is the British Broadcasting Corporation. Here is the news."

But that wasn't quite what "Auntie" was looking for. I was hired to be a filing clerk and worked deep in the lower basement of Broadcasting House, in a room that felt as though it had been hewn from the bedrock, like a tomb. Metal shelves lined the walls and stood in orderly rows, stuffed with thousands of files in folders, all the way to the ceiling. I sat on a wooden chair, at a wooden table, utterly alone. In front of me was a pneumatic chute that came from somewhere unseen, upstairs, far away. Every now and then, with a whooshing sound, a metal canister crash-landed at the bottom of the chute. Inside the canister was a sheet of paper with a number scrawled on it.

London, 1960





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I'd search for the folder with that number on it, sometimes dragging a short ladder down the aisles to reach the top shelves. Then I'd take the file back to the table and open it. Whatever papers were inside had to be rolled up and slipped into the canister. Then I'd send it back up the chute, to some office up there somewhere, maybe with a window. Maybe with other people nearby.

The room, my tomb, was lit by fluorescent lights. The walls were painted a shabby shade of yellow. The floor was tiled. The silence was overwhelming. There was a stillness, as unto death, until a canister clattered to the bottom of the chute. And that didn't happen very often.

The first three days went by so slowly that I thought I would go mad. I tried to read and write letters but couldn't concentrate. I paced the aisles back and forth in every conceivable permutation. I counted all the shelves and the floor tiles, then multiplied them together and arrived at a number that made no sense. The shelves towered above me, rising up like steep coffin walls, boxing me in, stifling my spirit.

On the fourth day, with no regrets, I resigned and walked out into the street, literally overflowing with a delirious sense of freedom. I held a few more mind-numbing, self-esteem crushing positions, and then, in September, the miracle I'd vaguely prayed for finally happened: I heard that an international advertising agency in Madrid was looking for someone just like me. I applied and was flown over for an interview, and from the moment I set foot in Spain, I felt that I'd come home.

The lazy chaos at the airport was comforting. Downtown, the air was heavy with the full-bodied smell of exhaust I knew so well. People laughed out loud and embraced each other in the street. The sky was blue, and the sun was shining. My eyes misted up behind my sunglasses as I was driven along busy boulevards and avenues. Much later that night I swayed on my chair in a dimly lit flamenco bar, my head full of wine and guitars and the pounding of the dancer's heels. Within a month Madrid became my home and I lived there happily for several years. I soon stopped missing Montevideo. And once in a while I'd listen to the BBC and thank my lucky stars.

Madrid, 1960

