



Back In Time

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Lost & Found

My first bicycle was a Triumph, and in my eyes it lived up to its name in every possible way. It was sleek and black, with large wheels and chrome handlebars and a black leather saddle. It was my pride and joy.

And then one day it was gone—stolen!—and I was beside myself with grief, sobbing so hard I could barely tell my parents the devastating news. My shoulders shook and my nose ran. I was a broken boy. As my mother stroked my anguished brow, my father wrinkled his and said, “We’ll go to the Lost & Found on Sunday and get it back!” My mother said, “Oh yes, that’s a good idea.” I was suddenly sure that everything was going to be all right.

My father was a kind man, a gentle man. He had a beguiling effect on people from all walks of life, who let down their guard and treated him like a trusted friend, often like a distinguished guest. If anyone could find my bicycle in the murky recesses of the outside world, I knew that my father could.

On Sunday we drove into town and parked on calle Gaboto. We stopped at a café and when the waiter brought our coffees my father asked if he knew where we might find bicycles. “Bicicletas?” the waiter enquired, rather vaguely. Dad explained that we were hoping to find one that might have been lost. “Oh, *that* kind of bicicleta!” The waiter nodded and said that one could usually find them on a street a couple of blocks away. “All kinds, you’ll see. And anything else you want,” he said proudly. “This, señor, is the Feria de Tristán Narvaja!”

La Feria de Tristán, as it is affectionately called by local residents, started in 1909 and was already a legendary place when my dad took me there in the early 1950s. It was Montevideo’s flea market, a sprawling assortment of stalls and booksellers and antique stores in the Barrio Cordón. Its roots go back to the fruit and vegetable market that assembled every Sunday in the Plaza Independencia in the late nineteenth century. After being evicted from the heart of the Ciudad Vieja, the market had a nomadic phase before settling along calle Yaro, which is now called Tristán Narvaja in memory of a well-loved Argentine judge, professor, theologian, and politician. Narvaja came to Montevideo in 1840, where he soon earned a law degree. In 1855 he joined the Facultad de Jurisprudencia as a professor of Civil Rights. He was one of Uruguay’s early intellectuals,

and it is no surprise that a street lined with booksellers should be named Tristán Narvaja.

The booksellers, like the antique dealers and the art galleries, set up shop on Sundays to cater to the crowds that filled the street. It was a savvy strategy and soon there were stamp vendors and old coin dealers as well, and behind them came the second-hand stalls and the upturned boxes selling all kinds of things, huddled in doorways and perched on the narrow pavements, spilling over into the surrounding streets. You could find a nut for an old machine and the bolt to fit it. Spare parts for all kinds of vehicles were spread out on a blanket or stored in little compartments in wooden trays. Furniture and antiques—the discarded accoutrements of earlier generations—narrated an anthropological history of the citizens of Montevideo.

Over time, another line of business took its place at the Feria, specializing in items that had fallen off the back of a truck or had come into the vendor’s possession in a variety of mysterious, almost magical ways. This was my dad’s Lost & Found. As we left the café, he told me that if I spotted my bike I was to point at it and say, “I’d like that one, please.” I was NOT to scream, “*That’s my bike!*” or in any other way reveal that I was its true owner.

We walked along streets that teemed with people and things for sale. The jumble of sounds and sights and people was exhilarating, but we walked slowly, trying to look as though we were just browsing, just like everyone else. There were tools and jewellery and clothes on hangers. There were clocks, records and tapes, magazines, and fishing poles. There were songbirds in cages, their shrill notes blending with the inevitable tango music coming from a record player in the doorway of an antique store. It was still early and the air was cool, wafting scented waves of leather, burlap, rosemary, mate, and oranges.

And then, suddenly, there it was. I almost choked and very nearly screamed “*That’s my bike!*” Somehow I managed to contain myself and instead touched my dad’s arm and said “I’d like that one, please.” Smiling broadly, my father approached the vendor and soon they were talking and nodding, and before I knew it I was walking away, back along the crowded streets. Only, this time I was oblivious to the chaos and the beauty around me. I only had eyes for my bike.