



BACK IN TIME

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December was a busy time at the agency. I'd worked there for nearly four years and it was always like this. As the month accelerated towards its grand finale, last-minute projects kept popping up, chaining us to the office all day long and preventing us from slipping down to the café on the corner for the usual coffee and a *media luna de jamón y queso*¹. And then Pan American called, needing something done on a very tight deadline. We were their advertising agency; the JWT Company handled the account worldwide, so when Pan Am wanted something done by January 1st, we said "of course, with pleasure" and then tried to figure out how to do it. We were already going to be very busy during the last two days of the year, so there was nothing for it: someone would have to work late on New Year's Eve.

It was my account, so I'd have to be involved. And it was an art project so Varela would have to be there. That was great, because we were pals. He was a few years older than I but we were good friends. We had produced some ads for the Uruguayan press that had caught someone's attention at the client's head office in Miami. They wanted copies of the ads, translated into English, for a presentation in early January. Our job was to produce the artwork and deliver it to the local Pan Am people by 8 a.m. on January 1st, and they would get it there on time.

There were six rather complex ads to produce, and Varela estimated he'd need about four hours to assemble the photos, logos, and type on sheets of cardboard, each one covered with a white paper flap. My job was to check the English and make sure it was correct, so I actually had quite a lot of time on my hands.

We were both very upbeat. There was something quite exciting about working late on this night of all nights. It was a departure from routine and involved a rather pleasant sense of tension because of the deadline and, in my case especially, because of what the rest of the evening held in store. Varela said that when we were finished he'd go back to his flat where his wife was waiting for him. "What are you doing?" he asked, and I said I'd be going to the New Year's Eve party at the Cricket Club. As soon as I made my delivery to the Pan American office downtown, I'd be on my Vespa and off to Carrasco. Varela laughed and said "*inglés de mierda*". I replied "*Gallego podrido*"² and we were even. We were friends, as I say, and this is how we usually addressed each other. In those days, anyone with any Spanish ancestry was called *Gallego*, regardless of where in Spain their family was actually from. I'm not sure I ever knew Varela's first name because we always called him *el Gallego Varela*. His parents uprooted from Andalucía and came to Uruguay when they were in their twenties. That actually made me more Latin American than he was because my Anglo-Argentine parents were born in Buenos Aires, and they brought me to Uruguay when I was three years old.

Since arriving in Montevideo, Varela's parents had focused on becoming Uruguayans and, in their way, had chosen assimilation over





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nostalgia. The British community to which my family belonged, on the other hand, though thoroughly integrated into Uruguayan life over the course of several generations, held on tightly to its identity and created a British island in a Uruguayan sea. This island was anchored by well-established institutions—the British Cemetery Society, the British Schools, and the British Society,³ among many others—and by attendance at events held at the Montevideo Cricket Club, where the New Year's Eve party was the highlight of the year. Some members of the Club sounded more British than others; some didn't sound British at all. But we were all part of a tightly-knit group of people, most of whom had family trees with roots that reached back to the British Isles.

It wasn't long before Varela and I started thinking about dinner. The company was paying, of course, so we weren't thinking of a light snack. I called the café on the corner, which was also a restaurant, and ordered dinner for two. In a little while, a waiter in a black bow tie and a white jacket delivered a *milanesa a caballo con papas fritas*⁴ for my companion and two *chivitos*⁵ for me. And *Doble Uruguaya* beer, two bottles each. We had the radio on, of course, and Radio Oriental was playing all the hits of 1964. The Beatles had just released *I Feel Fine*⁶ and people couldn't get enough of it. I taught Varela how to sing those three words and we joined in every time they were sung, which was quite often that night. We were definitely feeling fine and having a very good time and, for a while, forgot that we were working on New Year's Eve.

Having such a good time meant that the job took longer than we thought it would, but we finally got it all done. We wrapped up the ads, locked the office, and took the lift to the ground floor. Humberto, the concierge, was

sitting at the desk in the lobby with his wife, and they were sharing a bottle of cider. They raised their glasses and we all wished each other a Happy New Year. Varela sat behind me on the ride to the Pan Am office, holding the package under his arm. We delivered it to the duty officer, then went across the road to the bar in the Palacio Salvo and had a shot of whiskey to toast the New Year. “*Feliz año nuevo, inglés podrido.*” “*Feliz año nuevo, Gallego de mierda.*”⁸ It was now just after eleven o'clock.

After dropping Varela off in the Tres Cruces neighbourhood at the far end of 18 de Julio, I headed down Bulevar Artigas to Bulevar España then out along the Rambla, with the beaches on my right. It was a balmy night with a gentle breeze. The sand shone white against the dark sea and the sky was ablaze with stars. I was looking forward to the party but was thoroughly enjoying the feeling of accomplishment that came from having put business before pleasure. My twentieth birthday was three weeks away, and tonight's experience had given me a taste of the profound satisfaction that my father, in his hopeful way, had often told me was the reward for developing a sense of responsibility. I arrived at the Club just in time to join in as everyone sang *Auld Lang Syne*, and suddenly it was 1965.

1 Croissant filled with ham and cheese

2 Stinking Galician

3 The British Cemetery in Montevideo was founded in 1828, the British Schools in 1908, and the British Society in 1918

4 Breaded and fried pounded steak with a fried egg and French fries: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milanesa>

5 Thinly sliced grilled steak sandwich

6 Listen to *I Feel Fine* here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFleHMgn8dg>

7 Happy New Year, you stinking Englishman

8 Happy New Year, you sodding Galician

