

# PASSING THROUGH

by Tony Beckwith ©1999

BUSINESS WAS BAD IN BRITAIN when I first arrived, at the age of twenty, in early 1965. There were no jobs to be had in the advertising business, and that was all I knew how to do.

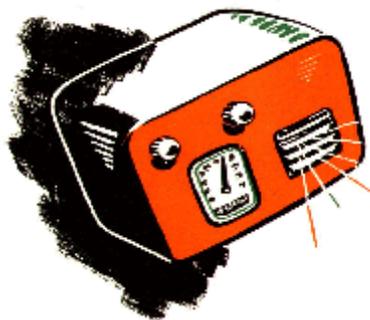
I didn't realize at the time that I was just another migrant, a newcomer at the bottom of the pile. Back home in Latin America, my status as a second-generation Englishman had granted me a relatively privileged life. I suppose I'd nurtured vague illusions about being welcomed as a prodigal son when I arrived in the land of my forefathers.

My grandparents sailed from England in the early years of this century, like so many Europeans who went looking for a new life, riding the economic boom in Argentina. One grandmother never stopped missing London, though, and many years later her pining reminiscences of "Home" would color my vision of England, making it indeed seem a green and pleasant land. By the mid-sixties, however, London's streets were not as clean as she remembered them. Busses didn't always run on time, and people were not unfailingly polite.

All day I trudged the foreign streets of the City, past massive buildings that seemed weary and forlorn. Nothing looked familiar. I wasn't used to the low, gray skies or the flat, metallic light that faded so early in the day. I had just learned to carry a *brolly* 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."

My job was actually deep in the lower basement of Broadcasting House, in a filing room that felt as though it had been hewn from the bedrock, like a tomb. Shelves lined the walls and stood in orderly rows, 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. Once in a while, 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.

I'd search for the file with that number, 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. When it was ready, 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 paced the aisles 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, leaning over, boxing me in, blocking my spirit, like deep coffin walls.

On the fourth day, with no regrets, I resigned, and walked out into the street literally overflowing with a delirious rush of freedom. I held a few more unremarkable positions, than then, in September, the miracle I'd vaguely prayed for finally happened: an old friend called to tell me about a job in an advertising agency in Madrid. I flew 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 with feeling. My eyes misted up behind my sunglasses as I was driven along boulevards and avenues. Much later that night I swayed on my chair in a darkened flamenco bar, my head filled with wine, and the music of noble guitars, and the pounding of the heels of the dancers. Within a month, Madrid became my home. I lived there happily for several years. And once in a while I'd listen to the news on the BBC. ★