



Back In Time

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

Saying Goodbye

The day had finally arrived and we were sitting at a marble-top table by the window at the Café Sorocabana, looking out at the Plaza Cagancha. It was a grey, rainy morning, unusually cool for mid-March, and my parents were both wearing mackintoshes, their collars turned up against the weather. I was wearing my Wrangler denim jacket—made in USA, my pride and joy—and my shoulders felt damp and chilly as I sat hunched over, staring at the steam rising from my coffee. None of us could think of anything to say.

I had just turned twenty and was leaving my home in Montevideo, setting off to see the world. This was the day I had been dreaming of for months; years, really. Monte had been a wonderful place to grow up. But for some time now I'd had the nagging feeling that it was a long way from the epicentre of everything that mattered to me, which at that point in my life, in 1965, meant swinging London. I felt that I was living on the outer rim of things, and desperately wanted to get closer to the action.

I sold my Vespa—my other pride and joy—and had more money in my pocket than I'd ever had before, which actually wasn't saying much. Then fate dealt me a cruel blow; the peso was devalued and my net worth in dollars was drastically reduced. When I counted up my very small fortune I found that I didn't have enough to fly to England or get there by ship. Undeterred, I thought: why not go by land? I pored over my old school atlas and pinpointed all the places in the Americas where family or friends might be willing to put me up for a while. I soon had a route mapped out that would take me west to Santiago, then north all the way to New York, with many stops along the way. Perfect! I could see this part of the world from the window of a bus and then catch a cheap Icelandic Airlines flight to London, via Reykjavik and Glasgow. It would take a lot longer, but I had no alternative. And the more I thought about the many miles I'd have to travel, the more it seemed that maybe fate hadn't been so cruel after all. I began to focus more on the journey than the destination.

One of my reasons for leaving home was that I wanted to find out what I would do with a day if I had all day to do it. I had just read Jack Kerouac's book, *On the Road*, and was enthralled by his description of road trips across the States with bohemian companions who seemed to embody the freedom I yearned for. Free to do anything and go anywhere, whenever they wanted. Free to be themselves, whatever that meant, unrestrained by space or time or conventional boundaries. That's what I wanted. Other books I'd been reading, like *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, also made

me question my identity and wonder what it would be like to be stripped of the trappings (such as they were) of my family, my community, and my position at the company where I'd been employed. Without all that, who would I be? I'd never find out if I stayed where I was.

I pared down my possessions until they fit into a small suitcase my father had brought home from a trip to London. My mother made a little black silk purse for my travellers cheques that I would safety pin to the inside waistband of my jeans. And she made a canvas pouch for my passport and notebook, which I would strap on under my jacket. I had a sturdy pair of boots. I was ready to go.

But now that the longed-for moment had finally arrived, I couldn't summon up my usual bravado. The boundaries I had thought of as fencing me in now looked more like a comforting bulwark against an unfamiliar world. Having stepped to the very brink of my separation from everything I knew, I contemplated—for the first time—the vast expanse of the unknown that lay ahead of me. As I did I glimpsed a kind of loneliness I had never imagined in my short, happy life. I raised my cup and forced a smile at my parents. They did the same. We all took a sip, watching the raindrops slide down the windowpane.

Of course I had no idea what my parents were going through. At that age I didn't have a clue what we meant to each other or how my absence would affect their lives. I didn't know they were struggling to put on a brave face as I prepared to set off alone into an unpredictable world where they would be powerless to help me should things go wrong. They had encouraged me when I'd first broached the idea of leaving home, agreeing that it would do me good to get out on my own and see something of the world. Now, as we sat in stoic silence, we were all wondering if I was making a terrible mistake.

My father suddenly looked at his watch. He smiled his most reassuring smile (the one that promised that *everything was going to be alright*) and said, "It's time you got on the bus." Glad to break the mood, we hurried outside and down the block to where the ONDA bus was parked at the curb with the engine running. Someone stowed my suitcase, then I hugged my mother and father quickly and stepped on board. My seat was on the pavement side. I slid open the window and looked at my parents huddled together under the awning. Fighting back the tears, I said "goodbye" and then the bus pulled away and I was gone.