



Back In Time

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Slingshot Cowboy

Cowboys played an important role in my childhood. They were my heroes. I wanted so much to be like Tom Mix, Lash LaRue, Hopalong Cassidy, the Lone Ranger, and all the other good guys on the silver screen. They always knew how to react when faced with adversity, and instinctively did the right thing. They reminded me of the Knights of Old that I'd learned about in history class. I used to think I could learn more from cowboy movies than I ever could at school.

The most exciting moment of any little boy's birthday party in Montevideo at that time was when the lights were switched off, the rather rickety rented projector whirred, and we watched a black-and-white cowboy movie, perched on sofas and chairs and sprawled on the floor in the birthday boy's darkened living room. There was, of course, considerable interaction between the screen and the audience. During the inevitable saloon brawls we staged our own mock fights, throwing ourselves into fake punches and dramatic falls with all the enthusiasm of extras on the set. Our manly dialogue came straight from the soundtrack: "Why, you...!" and "Take that, you...!" and "Ooooooff!" and so on. The parts I loved best were the wild horseback rides as the cowboys fought running battles with the Indians, the thunder of galloping hooves and the shrieks and whoops of the warriors filling my head with romantic wonder.

When I was just a little older I spent one of those endless summers being a bicycle bum. I rode with a small gang of like-minded boys, all similarly blessed with dubious social value at that stage. Our bikes were central to everything we did, and we were on and off them all day long. Mine was a tall, gangly Triumph, midnight black with chromed handlebars. It may have looked like a bicycle to anyone else, but it was really my horse, my gallant stallion, my noble steed. In my mind we had a sort of Roy-Trigger thing going. Being ten years old really wasn't that bad, for me.

Our home turf was a lonely, barely-used road that hugged the coast between Pocitos Beach and the Punta del Buceo, with empty fields on one side and the open sea on the other. A low wall ran alongside the

field, pockmarked and crumbling, in about the same decrepit condition as the road. The ground was littered with rubble and small stones, some of which were very beautiful, professionally speaking.

I should explain that our other passion that summer was the slingshot — the "catapult" as we called it then, or "*honda*" if we were speaking Spanish — and we always carried one strung around the neck. To serious slingshot aficionados like us, the pebbles on that road were an irresistible temptation.

We learned to gather our ammunition without getting off the bike, leaning way over and scooping up stones as we coasted down the road, just like they did in the movies. From that angle we spotted the potential of the low wall, and it wasn't long before we had tin cans and empty bottles lined up and were shooting at them from under the crossbar. Did I say crossbar? I meant the belly of our horses. And the slingshots, of course, were really our Winchesters.

With practice we became good marksmen, and contributed generously to the environmental pollution and degradation of our town. Some of us went on to use our talents in ways I'm sure we'd rather forget (I'll name no names for the children's sake.) In my case, I have a gnawing sense of karmic debt concerning the city's street lighting along the Rambla at the Casino Carrasco Hotel. Those large, elegant globes looked like huge harvest moons, gorgeous golden orbs serenely suspended in the night sky, and then . . . a phantom horseman appeared out of nowhere, did his dread work, and was gone!

It took me some time to realize how I must have disappointed my heroes, those straight shooters on the screen, who only ever used their weapons in a noble cause. But one day it finally dawned on me that that was precisely the point of those "moral compass" tales set in the Wild West. It was simple — I just had to choose whether I wanted to wear a black hat or a white one. Well, when it was put like that, the choice was easy. Hi Ho, Silver, away!