

Old Tennis Shoes

by Tony Beckwith © 2000

IT WAS MY FIRST VISIT to the United States and everything was fascinating. Coming to New Orleans in the mid-sixties from Montevideo, Uruguay was like being fast-forwarded into the future. There were vending machines in the Greyhound bus station that I'd never seen before, selling products I'd never heard of. And that was just my first stop. It was a far different world from the one I knew.

I was twenty years old, a "road scholar" hitchhiking the Americas, searching for the meaning of life, or the next good time, whichever came first. My friend Keith was in New Orleans. He was studying economics at Tulane University but had a part-time job as a bartender at *Your Father's Moustache*, a lively place on Bourbon Street.

We went out for dinner to an open-air burger joint. My first real American hamburger tasted so fine I almost fainted on the spot. Later we prowled the city's nightspots, dallying at a low-down dive called *La Casa de la Marina* where they played the *Wooly Bully* so loudly I can hear it to this day, still throbbing somewhere on my mental jukebox.

The refrigerator in Keith's kitchen was a round-shouldered model with one of those little metal freezer compartments at the top. There was no door on the freezer compartment, of course, so the ice buildup was a chronic problem. One day someone (it may have been me) used a screwdriver to pry the ice off the metal surfaces, and I learned all about something called Freon. I must have been absent the day they covered

refrigeration at school because this was all new to me.

After a few days I was running out of clean clothes. Keith said we'd go to the laundromat, which was exciting because I'd never seen one before. Being a student, Keith's house was in a low-rent part of town. The laundromat was a couple of blocks away and had a sign in the window: *Whites Only*. I said, "What about my colored shirts?"

Keith threw back his head and laughed. He'd forgotten what it was like, but said he was just as naïve when he first arrived from Uruguay, not that long ago. There were so few black people back home that we had no experience of racial tensions—of that particular type at any rate.

In the evening I explored Jackson Square and the French Quarter, and the jazz halls, and the length and breadth of Bourbon Street which kept me busy far into the night looking at the people. In the wee small hours I drifted back to the *Moustache*.

It was nearly closing time and the crew was cleaning up, so I took a rum-and-coke and parked myself out of the way by the back door. It was a hot night, and the door was open to the alley. A handful of men were gathered out there, shuffling back and forth and talking amongst themselves like connoisseurs. "You cain't beat it when it's been a big bourbon night," said one.

"Hell no, red wine!

Red wine! Gimme that good red wine!" sang another.

"It don't make me no never-mind, man, just so it don't have too much club soda. All that gas 'bout kills me."

They were winos, gentlemen of the alleys, bums looking for a night-cap. The *Moustache* had a long-standing and immensely popular tradition: all the slops from the night's business went into a tub at the end of the long bar. Whatever came back in customers' glasses was tipped into the tub and left to ferment till the end of the night. The foaming concoction, regardless of its flavor, was called *Old Tennis Shoes* and was sold out the back door at twenty-five cents a pint. Four pints for a dollar! Sales were brisk.

The Quarter was beautiful at daybreak. The light was pearly soft and glistened gray off the cobbles. The air felt heavy and damp blowing in from the Gulf. As the sun came up we drove home through city streets, gleefully taunting people on their way to work with the chant, "Nine-to-five! Nine-to-five!" It was an excellent time to be an economist and a writer on the streets of New Orleans. ★

