



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
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THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

If I tell you that I've discovered the Fountain of Youth you might dismiss me as just another dreamer. But I think I can explain what I mean, if you'll grant me a few minutes of your time.

Many years ago, in the beautiful seaside city of Montevideo, a group of children grew up in a small, close-knit expat community. After spending their formative years together at the British Schools some left, for any number of reasons, and scattered across the face of the Earth. As the years glided by they drifted farther and farther apart and eventually lost touch with each other. I was one of those children.



More recently, prompted by advancing age and assisted by the magic of email, we have found each other again and, over the last few years have been exploring half-forgotten recollections, sometimes with surprising results. What, after all, is a memory? A recollection of a specific experience stored in the brain. Presumably, under normal circumstances, every experience is similarly recorded, so that every memory stored in the cranial data base is surrounded by other memories. When we recall a particular experience we shine a light on it, sending in a charge of energy that brings other

recollections to the surface. So one memory can lead to another, and another, and another.

In an email exchange one July we circulated the words to the national anthem we used to sing on special occasions—"high days and holidays"—and shared our recollections about our rehearsals. During that conversation I learned that the 18th of July is not Uruguay's Independence Day after all. I had always believed it was because, among other things, the main avenue that bisected the old part of the city was proudly named 18 de Julio. But it was actually the day in 1830 when the Uruguayan Constitution was ratified, and I was forced to admit that I had forgotten that part of my high school education. It had vanished without a trace from my cranial data base.

Anyway, with each email received, another image was added to the mosaic of memories that was forming in my mind. A particular scene gradually re-emerged from the mists of oblivion. I remembered the music teacher hammering away at the school's battered old upright piano, and my classmates' faces bathed in light from the glass ceiling above us. I could see the dust particles dancing in the air, and pictured myself standing on a wooden bench in the back row. The familiar fragrance of the assembly hall, which doubled as the gymnasium, filled my head, and all at once I was overcome with emotion as it all came flooding back—the thrill of the high notes the girls sang, the excitement of the stirring chorus, the exhilaration of losing myself in the roar of the choir. I was there! Transported to a moment far away and long ago that in my mind was more vivid than a video. As I replayed this memory, I noticed that I felt pleasantly soothed. My muscles and my mind had released whatever tension had been gripping them, and my horizons appeared to have expanded. Possibilities seemed endless



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and the world sat more lightly on my shoulders. What was going on?

The national anthem came to an end, and as I climbed down from the bench, I saw her. I had actually seen her before, frequently in fact, but at that moment it was as if she were appearing to me for the very first time. The soft light from above fell upon her, illuminating her face, and suddenly there was no one in the hall but the two of us. She smiled at me, then turned and walked away. My heart pounded in my chest and I was unable to speak or move. With all the certainty of my twelve years I knew that, for the first time in my life, I was head over heels in love. And I knew exactly what I must do.

Every society has its rituals, its traditions and, of course, its codes of courtship, and at that school at that time there was an established procedure for informing that special someone that he or she had swept you off your feet and taken possession of your heart. In retrospect I'd have to agree that our method lacked the elegance and romance of, say, serenading your beloved from beneath a balcony, but it was our way and we saw nothing wrong with it at the time. Our system was simple: we used bus tickets. Every time we rode a city bus, which was quite frequently in those days, either on the CUTCSA or the AMDET line, we were issued a flimsy paper ticket. When the five or six digits on a ticket added up to twenty-one, that slip of paper was considered the equivalent of a Valentine card that said "I love you."

There were other denominations as well, of course, conjured up by the murkier side of our pubescent imagination; other numbers that signified other things, some of which we barely understood. Those other tickets, furtively shown to close friends behind the locker room, were seldom if ever actually used. But a twenty-one ticket, as precious as a four-leaf clover and about as hard to find, represented pure and innocent puppy love. Smitten ones would never approach the object of their affection directly, but would entrust the ticket to faithful agents and intermediaries. Discretion prevents me from revealing any more details about my first foray into the complex realm of love. Chivalry in short pants may seem laughable to some, but only a rogue would trifle with a lady's reputation.

As I drifted out of this extended daydream, back into my real world, I realized that I felt better than I had in years, awash in a peaceful sense of well-being. I felt refreshed and invigorated and, yes, younger. It occurred to me that reliving pleasant memories of our youth nurtures us and temporarily negates the physical toll taken by time—with no unwelcome side effects. Could it be that the Fountain of Youth is to be found in the well of nostalgia? Maybe you should find out for yourself. Are you ready? Just relax. Let your mind wander freely. Think back to the time when ... yes, that's the ticket.

