



Back In Time

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

To Have And To Hold

In the winter of 1977 I returned to Uruguay to visit my mother. It had been twelve years since I had left my childhood home and gone to live abroad. And eight years since my father had died unexpectedly, just as the first astronauts were landing on the moon.

My mother and I stayed at a friend's apartment in Punta del Este, high up in the building, with a hypnotic view of the ocean. We arrived late one afternoon and it didn't take long to settle in. It was cold and windy on the street as we walked a couple of blocks to the Mariskonea to have dinner. Over a bowl of *mejillones* I broke my news: my marriage hadn't worked out and we were getting a divorce. My mother was unsurprised and, as always, voiced her concern for my wellbeing. As we shared a delicious *dorado a la plancha* I tried to put into words my recent emotional roller coaster ride. By the time flan and coffee were on the table we were talking more broadly about attitudes to divorce in the British Community in Montevideo in the 1950s and 60s, and my mother was telling me how things had changed since then.

In those days the Community was a very clearly defined group embedded in a particular segment of Uruguayan society. The conscious awareness of that network afforded a certain sense of identity and security to its members, myself included. We were a fairly typical British expat community, living far from the heart of the old Empire as its power and influence waned in the aftermath of the Second World War. We were, by definition, a relatively conservative bunch living side-by-side with a conservative Uruguayan population. At that time the world, by and large, had only recently begun to contemplate the idea of divorce as an acceptable status in modern society, and our community was no different. In our ranks there was, no doubt, an eclectic range of personal opinions on the subject, but compared to later standards it was still generally regarded as taboo in the court of public opinion.

There were a number of social and sporting clubs and organizations in the Community, such as the Montevideo Cricket Club, the English Club, the Montevideo Players, and so on. My family were all members of the Players theatre group and it was within that circle that, at some point in my teens, I was first exposed to an actual divorce. A young couple sadly announced that they were splitting up and at first I didn't quite know what that entailed, exactly. At that

age I had no idea what marriage meant, let alone what happened if the happy couple did not live happily ever after. Most members of the Community were sympathetic and supportive, but in the absence of a set of well-entrenched social responses, others were a little uncertain how to respond to a real-life divorce. It challenged people on religious, moral, and social grounds, and some just felt uncomfortable when faced with this unfamiliar phenomenon because they had no precedent to follow. Some were therefore guided less by a sense of the right thing to do than by what people would think. It was still all too new.

There was inevitably a dash of self-righteous disapproval in some quarters, but probably no more than in other parts of the modernizing world. This was after all when *Peyton Place*—the book and the movie—blew the lid off the inner life of a small community in post-war United States and scandalized people everywhere. It was a transitional time, when my parents' generation was struggling to come to terms with short skirts on girls and long hair on boys. Some of the more liberal types in our Community believed that consenting adults should be able to do as they pleased as long as no innocent bystanders were harmed. Wanting to appear modern, that was how I chose to see it then: perfectly clear-cut and obvious, couched in the simplistic black-and-white terms of one who had never been married, let alone divorced and all that that entails. One who had never known the pain and the anger, the sadness and the humiliating sense of failure that can attend the end of a marriage.

But I was now experiencing it in real life and discussing it in the most adult conversation I had ever had with my mother. It felt good to talk about it like that, to look at divorce from a more objective point of view. That broader perspective in turn led me to a more accepting attitude to what, in my callow youth, I used to consider the Community's stuffiness and old-fashioned ways.

We were quiet as we walked home from the restaurant. I had always thought of Punta in terms of summer and beaches, suntanned bodies, and sensual pleasures. But the raw winter night was perfectly matched to my new state of mind, the cold wind a metaphor for the inevitable moment when adolescent certainties meet the harsh reality of life. I had technically been an adult for some time, but that night I finally started feeling like a grownup.