



BACK IN TIME

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A Few Close Friends

It's not that she wanted a large circle of acquaintances. She didn't. Muriel was a private person who was perfectly comfortable in her own company. What she wanted was a few close friends, women she could really talk to. She loathed small talk and dreaded the fluffy conversations at the official receptions she was obliged to attend when my father was with the Commercial Department of the British Embassy in Montevideo.

Muriel was born in Buenos Aires to English parents and grew up as an anglo-argentina in the British community in BA. When she was twenty-seven she and my father moved to Uruguay, where she lived for the next thirty years as a member of the British community in Montevideo. She was happy there and, over time, had a number of close friends. Some of them, unfortunately, were part of the nomadic wing of the community—people posted there by a foreign company, government, school, or religious organization. Inevitably, of course, those friends were eventually re-assigned and that was hard on Muriel. “You find someone you feel you can really talk to,” she said wistfully, “and after a couple of years they move on. It's very sad.”

One of her close friends was the English mother of two kids who were at school with me. She was a lovely lady with a wonderful sense of humour whose husband was transferred to Uruguay by a British firm in the early 1950s. She had taken some Spanish lessons in England and a few more once she had settled into her new home in Montevideo. We had all heard foreigners of various stripes doing amazing things with Spanish but hers was truly extraordinary. She could rattle it off con brio,

with enthusiastic gestures and hand motions, but it wasn't always easy to understand. She kept mainly to the present tense and used wildly unorthodox constructions to express herself in past or future tenses. The subjunctive and conditional were totally absent. Her vowels never sounded anything but English. She had the most precarious grasp of gender and number, and her syntax was flexible in ways that prompted looks of grave bewilderment among Uruguayan tradesmen and shopkeepers. As befitted her English upbringing, she was unfailingly courteous and polite, but on one occasion, after someone had treated her shabbily, she was moved to say that she had a good mind to go back and “tell that chap he's an idioto.” Muriel was hugely amused and, as gently as she could, explained that the correct word was “idiota” which, though it ended in ‘a’ was used for every kind of idiot, male and female alike. Her friend was unconvinced and protested: “But he's a man, so it should be idioto.” And so, naturally, our family never used anything but her “masculine” version of the word from that day forth.

It was no doubt daunting to be uprooted from one's native habitat in Europe, Canada, Australia, or the States and replanted in Montevideo in the 1950s. In most cases the men were immersed in their assignments—busy at the office, embassy, campus, or mission—and the women were left to deal with the children, the servants, the school, and the running of the house. It was the typical expat lifestyle, wherever they were assigned. Muriel's friends in this community tended to be the kind who settled in and made the best of things.





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She didn't have much patience with those who liked to complain about everything and never realized how lucky they were to be posted to a place like Montevideo. "I know it's a bit off the beaten track and it's not London or New York or even Buenos Aires," she said. "And we don't have the shops or the theatres or the restaurants or blah blah blah. But London doesn't have beaches like ours, does it? Beautiful beaches right at our doorstep. If they lived in New York would they let their children take off on their bicycles and not come home till sunset? I doubt it. And in Buenos Aires you have to take buses and trains to get anywhere because everything is so far away, and it's hot and humid in the summer and freezing in the winter. Give me Montevideo any day!"



Her friends in the expat community came to understand exactly what she meant and couldn't agree more. Her English friend was heartbroken when her husband was posted back to England. "It's not just that I'll miss everything about Monte," she lamented. "It's that I'm not sure I want to live in England again. After living here, the thought of being stuck in Surrey feels a bit, well, claustrophobic don't you know; a bit grey. Nowhere near as much fun!" Muriel, in turn, was heartbroken because a blossoming friendship was nipped in the bud and she was losing a little bit of Surrey in her life. It was very sad.

Fortunately she had other close friends, some of whom were not really part of the British community at all. Myrtha, for example, who was born in Montevideo, had an English grandfather but lived a Uruguayan lifestyle rather than a British one. That is, she spoke nothing but Spanish at home, and her family did not observe or participate in any British customs or rituals. She learned English at the British Schools but had hardly used it since she graduated some years ago. She and Muriel met at an event and detected a compatibility that led to a lifelong friendship. Muriel was blonde and fair and Myrtha was an olive-skinned brunette with dark eyes. They were both tall and slim and made a stunning pair when sitting together in a confitería

somewhere in Pocitos, nattering away in Spanish over a cup of cappuccino, waving their cigarettes gaily in the air between puffing on them and leaving the tips bright red with their lipstick. It didn't matter where a close friend was from, or what language she spoke. What mattered was that she stayed put and didn't get transferred somewhere else. People promise to write when they move away but it's not the same, and close friends gradually drift apart.

It's so sad.

