

BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
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A Night on the Town

My friend—I will call him Gerald—was a year older than I was and I had just turned eighteen. Our dates for the evening were younger, but their precise ages had never actually come up. Until that night. I should make it clear from the very outset that all names mentioned here have been changed to protect the essential innocence of those who were involved in the events I am about to describe.

I was wearing what my mother called my “snazzy outfit”: a blue blazer, grey flannel trousers, chestnut brown moccasins, pale blue shirt, and a tie with dark blue and red angled stripes separated by very thin yellow lines. The tie was given to me for my recent birthday and I thought it made me look more grownup. We were in Gerald’s car, of course; I had left my Vespa at his house. We picked up our dates, who filled the car with their fragrance and their laughter, and drove off in high spirits. La Boite was a cosy night club, tucked away in the eucalyptus woods of Carrasco, where couples went for an evening of cocktails and dancing in a discreet setting. We were escorted to a booth in a secluded corner and settled in; Gerald and I on the outside, the girls against the wall. The lights strung from the low thatched ceiling were subdued, and a candle flickered in a wax-coated Chianti bottle on the white tablecloth beside a Cinzano ashtray. We felt as though we were in our own private world.

We ordered four rum & cokes and Gerald and I smoked the Chesterfields I had bought especially for the evening. I lit mine from the candle flame and felt so grownup, so very sophisticated. We danced to the band’s lively sambas and slow boleros as twinkling lights swirled over us like snowflakes on the club’s

tiny dance floor. Inge was exactly the right height and seemed to share my sense of rhythm, which made dancing a pleasure. When we returned to the booth she was bright-eyed and chatty and, as the evening wore on, we were having a wonderful time.

We had just ordered another round of Cuba Libres when the lights were suddenly turned up and the music came to an abrupt stop. About eight police officers and one lieutenant strode into the club, an ominous presence in their dark blue uniforms and serious faces. Two of them blocked the door while the others checked everyone’s documents, and that’s when we learned that our dates had not quite reached legal age yet. They were in fact sixteen, and as such were “committing a grave infraction” by being in a club of this sort at this time of night. It transpired that both sets of parents were under the impression that their daughter was spending the night at the other’s house. Gerald and I talked to the police officer who came to our table, inventing convoluted and far-fetched stories about notarized parental permission and diplomatic immunity, but all in vain. Our delinquent girlfriends were marched into a paddy wagon and we watched in horror as the door slammed shut behind them. The lieutenant explained that the young ladies’ parents would have to present themselves at the comisaría in person to claim their errant offspring, then drove off, leaving Gerald and me feeling as though the weight of the universe had just been dropped onto our shoulders. For of course, in order to facilitate the aforementioned claiming process we would have to call their parents. At one thirty on Sunday morning. There were

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a million things we would rather have done than make that call, but we had no choice.

“Hello, Mr. Berenson, sir, this is Anthony Beckwith.”

“Who?”

“Um, Anthony Beckwith, sir, and, um, I have some news about Inge.

“Inge?”

“Yes sir, um, your daughter, sir.” I launched into an account of the evening’s activities, and what had once seemed like good, clean fun now sounded devious, deceptive, and faintly sleazy. I tried to portray Inge and me as innocent victims of capricious fate as I stood squirming by the phone at the Bar Arocena, where Gerald and I had gone for a drop of Dutch courage before making the dreaded phone calls.

Mr. Berenson met me at the comisaría and we shook hands, sort of. He was tall, fair-skinned, and forbidding. I tried to make some ingratiating remark about getting him out of bed at this time of night and he gave me a look that turned my blood to ice. I started squirming again as he narrowed his cold, blue eyes, shook his head very slightly, and turned away. I wasn’t feeling at all grownup any more, and had never felt less sophisticated. We stepped inside the police station. Mr. Berenson had to sign something and then had a somewhat heated conversation with the lieutenant, asking why his daughter had been swept up in this sordid affair. The lieutenant, who was apparently in no mood for diplomatic niceties, explained that it was part of an official campaign to round up “subversive elements” and, while they were at it, teach a lesson to the wayward children of people who think the laws do not apply to them. I stood pressed up against the wall by the door with my hands behind my

back, and the feel of the rough stucco surface soon had me thinking about firing squads. Then my erstwhile dance partner came through the gate and her father drew her to his side with a look like the one he had given me earlier. She didn’t resist. She’d been crying, and looked dishevelled and wilted, a far cry from the radiant young thing who had recently nestled her cheek against mine on the dance floor. Her eyes darted in my direction and immediately looked away as her father took her arm and escorted her out of the station. I glanced nervously at the lieutenant but he just shrugged and nodded toward the door.

Gerald said his version of the same scene had gone quite differently. His date’s father had evidently been in similar jams when he was a young man, and was inclined to be much less severe than my Mr. Berenson. This tended to confirm what some of us had long suspected, which was that parents were a decidedly unpredictable bunch, and should always be approached with a great deal of caution. We were back at the Bar Arocena, which was open till all hours, having one for the road. As luck would have it, one of the tunes on the jukebox was “Sweet Little Sixteen”,¹ so of course we played it a time or two. The eastern horizon was turning a delicate shade of pink as I rode home, ruminating on the evening that had started out so brilliantly and ended so badly. After thinking it all through, I had to acknowledge that feeling grownup and sophisticated was not necessarily the same as being grownup and sophisticated, and ruefully admitted to myself that on both counts I obviously had a long way to go.

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