



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
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BUSTER & PAM

The house on Calle 26 de Marzo had a garden. Well, my parents made it a garden; they transformed a wasteland into a thing of beauty. When we moved in, right after the house was built in the early 1960s, there was a large *terreno baldío* behind it: a patch of naked earth (mud when it rained) that went all the way back to the wall that separated our property from someone else's back yard. Our yard was pitted and pocked with masonry and rubble that had been dumped there during the construction of the house. There were also lots of rocks and smooth boulders, natural features in the Uruguayan landscape, that would have been deposited there when Pocitos was still virgin land, long before it was developed as one of Montevideo's early beach-front neighbourhoods. My mother and father spent a lot of their spare time out in that wasteland, digging out old bricks and chunks of cement and lugging them off somewhere. Once all the debris had been removed, which took many, many weekends, they coaxed and nurtured the traumatized earth back to life and gradually transformed the space into a pleasant green haven. They still spent a lot of time out there on weekends, but now they were tending the lawn and the flowerbeds they had put in along the side walls. And then sitting on the patio with a gin & tonic in the late afternoon, admiring their handiwork and planning what to do next.

In the centre was a large fig tree that had fallen over at some point before we arrived and then decided to keep growing. The trunk was bent over at the roots and ran parallel to the ground for about six or eight feet, then made a 90-degree turn and grew straight up toward the sky. It had a fine canopy of leaves in the summer and

was a perfect tree-house for my brother and me when we were little boys. It also produced delicious figs which, in their prime, were firm and sweet; you could peel them like a banana and eat them like a peach.

Someone gave my father some clippings from their grape vine and by the time I was in my teens he had grown a lush green *parral*, a vine arbour, that stretched from one side of the garden to the other. This tapestry of vines and leaves and bunches of grapes created a welcome patch of shade where we gathered on summer afternoons. One Sunday the four of us had just finished lunch and were lounging under the trellis, teetering on the brink of a siesta. I was holding a grape in my fingers, pressing it gently, trying to force the flesh to bulge out of the blue-black skin at the neck so that I could suck it into my mouth and eat it. These were Zinfandel grapes: plump, juicy balls of sweet jelly that Dad was sure would make a good wine "one of these days."

As I reached up to pluck another grape I saw Buster come waddling out of the dining room onto the patio. Buster was our brown dachshund, who had been with us for a long time and was part of the family. On sunny weekends my mother put his





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food out on the patio in the shade by the east wall. In those days there was no packaged dog food of the kind we have now, so Mum bought cheap cuts of beef at the butcher shop and stewed them in a pan on the kitchen stove. She cut up the meat into bite-sized cubes and served it on a metal plate, with a little gravy, and Buster loved it. From my deckchair under the grape vine I watched as he lowered his hindquarters and sat down in front of the dish. Then he put his snout down and began to feed. His long velvety ears drooped onto the meat and gravy, but he didn't seem to mind. He ate about half the meat on the plate and then, confident that his lunch would still be there when he woke up, wandered closer to the wall, where it was cooler, lay down and went to sleep.

At that point Pam entered the scene, strutting along the patio from where she'd been sitting on her cage, eyeing Buster and enjoying the sunshine on her shoulders. Pam was a green parakeet who was also part of the family. We brought her home from the Tristán Narvaja street market one weekend in the largest cage we could find. Dad kept her wings clipped, so on nice days her cage was left open and she was allowed to wander about at will. She was a sweet bird who would sit on my shoulder and nibble my earlobe while making conversation in a guttural language I never fully mastered.

Once she saw that Buster was snoozing happily after his lunch, Pam sauntered over to his dish, climbed up onto it, and



proceeded to help herself. Gripping the rim of the dish with one claw, she picked up a piece of meat with the other and pecked at it as though it were a canape. As soon as she finished that piece she picked up another. And another. She was a small bird but could eat her weight in meat, as long as it had been cooked and served with a little gravy, of course. When she had eaten her fill, she stepped off the plate and tottered over to where Buster was lying fast asleep in the shade. She carefully climbed onto his recumbent body, found a comfortable place on his ribs, tucked her head under her wing and joined him in a postprandial siesta. This was a regular routine, and Buster either didn't notice or didn't mind because he never objected.

I looked around and saw that my father, barely awake, was enjoying the scene I'd been watching. "I've never seen a lion lie down with a lamb," he said, "but I think it's just as moving when a parrot lies down with a dachshund." Such were the tranquil Sunday afternoons of my youth.

