



Subtitled Saturday Night

by Tony Beckwith © 1998

In my sixteenth summer I spent a couple of months at my father's cousin's husband's ranch near the town of Venado Tuerto, in Argentina. 'V.T.' – as the local Brits called it – was a tiny pueblo out in the middle of nowhere, somewhere on the way to the Pampas. At least, that's how it seemed to me.

That summer was something of a rite of passage for me. I was thrown from an enormous horse at the end of a terrifying gallop through fields of waving corn. I drove a car for the first time and took the whole left door off the garage as I honed my reversing skills. I learned about gin and tonics and discovered the thrill of carrying my own pack of cigarettes and Zippo lighter. I developed a crush on my father's cousin's daughter-by-a-previous-marriage who was seven years older than I and so glamorous that I grew weak at the very thought of her. Well, that may be a little over-dramatic, but I was

going through a rather theatrical phase at the time.

Of all the stirring memories of that period, there is one that stands out above the rest. 'V.T.' was a huddle of houses and a few stores at a highway intersection in a vast expanse of flat, fertile land. There was one large building in town which served as the venue for any event of any size. About once a month, someone brought a projector and a couple of reels from the nearest large town and showed a movie on Saturday night.

People came from far and wide, from shack and farmhouse and ranch. Everyone brought a chair and something to eat and drink, and after an eternity of milling and settling, the crowd was ready for the show. The movies were often foreign productions with Spanish subtitles. After a few scenes, during which the subtitles glided across the bottom of the screen at their usual pace, somebody would invariably call out, "Hey, slow down! I can't read everything if you go so fast."

A brouhaha would ensue, with some people making rude remarks about other peoples' education, other people saying it was better to be a little slow at reading than to have a face like a donkey, and so on. In the excitement, neighbors with an

inadequate grip on their emotions might occasionally seek to settle some old disgruntlements by unduly escalating the rhetoric: "Next time, why don't you stay at home and send your chickens instead? I bet they can read faster than you can!"

While everyone was busy letting off steam, the projectionist would cut back the throttle on his machine and the movie would slow down. Scenes now remained on the screen for a good long time and there was scattered applause and enthusiastic cries of "That's better!"

The actors moved as though they were under water: their speech was slow and gravely and slurred, their gestures surreal and absurd. Any music on the soundtrack was ruined, sounding now like a band of exhausted amateur bagpipers at the end of a particularly bad day. And of course, the movie lasted four or five hours.

During the numerous intermissions created by changing reels and assorted technical difficulties, people would visit, share food and gossip, occasionally arrange a marriage, and always trade tall tales about the weather. Children gathered under the long admissions table near the door and giggled hysterically at everything that any of them said. Teenagers with bright, darting eyes exchanged loaded looks, smiling and whispering behind cupped hands. Sometimes the hubbub was so loud that people didn't even notice when the picture lurched back onto the screen again.

But it didn't much matter – nobody really came for the movie anyway. ★