



Back In Time

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The Accountant

My father had done it again. He had decided, as he frequently did, that some relatively insignificant event called for a celebration and he was taking us out for dinner. The waiter saw us coming across the patio and held open the door. He smiled and escorted us to a table. “You and your family are always welcome here, Señor. This is your home.”

We were at one of several neighbourhood restaurants we frequented in Pocitos on these spontaneous special occasions of my father’s invention. A cosy place, with a row of tables tucked against one wall and the bar and tiny kitchen ranged along the other side of the long, narrow space. The owner stood behind the cash register at the front end of the bar, and he too smiled at us as we settled into our seats, my brother and I against the wall, my parents on the aisle.

We looked at the menu while the waiter—in his standard white coat, black trousers, and black bow tie—brought a bottle of *tinto de la casa*; the house red was from the Cerros de San Juan winery and was, in my parents’ opinion, a splendid Uruguayan wine at a very reasonable price. My brother had an Orange Crush and I had a *Bidu*, a local cola. Whenever we came to this restaurant I always ordered a *milanesa* with two fried eggs, French fries, and a salad. The waiter dressed the salad at the table and I loved watching him do that. The crisp green lettuce, bright red tomato wedges, and slivers of raw white onion came in a metal bowl. He added salt, pepper, olive oil, and vinegar—all of which were on the table—and tossed everything enthusiastically with two soup spoons. When he was satisfied that all the ingredients had been well seasoned, he picked up the bowl in one hand and held the two spoons in the other like a pair of tongs, deftly serving the salad onto my side plate. It was always delicious. After the main course, my brother and I would agonize over which dessert to order. He would usually decide on *dulce de leche* pancakes, and I would have a *postre chajá*, a typical Uruguayan dessert made with sponge cake, peaches, meringue, and whipped cream.

When the meal was over and my parents had finished their coffee and the last of the wine, the waiter approached the table with the bill on a white saucer. This was the part of the evening that I dreaded, because it was my father’s invariable custom to check

the bill in minute detail. Usually, when he’d finished, he would nod and put some money on the saucer and that was that. But sometimes he would find a discrepancy, and he would then call the waiter over and point out that they had forgotten to charge for something or had made a mistake in the addition. He was scrupulously honest in everything he did and, in the nicest possible way, would call attention to any errors, regardless of who they favoured. The waiter would then take the bill back to the owner, who would make the appropriate adjustments. I used to squirm in my seat during this whole procedure, embarrassed to the core, convinced that the whole world was watching and we were the laughing stock of the restaurant.

I could not have been more wrong. Over time, the waiters and owners of the restaurants we visited regularly came to respect and appreciate my father’s approach. It was not that he mistrusted them, or felt that they might be trying to cheat him, not at all. He just wanted to be sure that the accounts were accurate and fair to all parties. I can remember many occasions when waiters were amazed that a customer had pointed out a mistake in the restaurant’s favour, and my father always insisted on paying for things that had been inadvertently left off the bill.

On this particular occasion, the waiter put the bill on the table, as usual. When my father inspected it, he saw that the items we had consumed were listed, together with the price for each one, but there was no total at the bottom of the column of figures. He raised his eyebrows at the waiter, who shrugged and said that the owner thought it would be better if *el Señor Contador* [Mr. Accountant] took care of the addition himself. Highly amused, my father obliged. He then suggested that someone should verify the result, whereupon the waiter threw up his hands and said that nobody would presume to check *el Contador*’s work. In that instant I had an epiphany; I suddenly saw my father as the waiter saw him, and my childish embarrassment dissolved and mutated into pride.

As we left, the owner reached over the bar to shake my father’s hand. They smiled at each other and said good night, and the waiter held the door open as we took our leave. I think that was the last time I was ever embarrassed about anything my father did.