



Going back in time

by Tony Beckwith

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The Fine Four Marbles

“Chuck here, boys, at the fine four marbles. Chuck here boys!” I leaned back against the brick wall as I called out the chant in the sing-song style used by all the other little marble merchants in the playground. There were several of us open for business, each set up at a strategic spot around the wall. Since we were in Montevideo, some of the chant was in Spanish: “¡No chanta no richa no paga bochón!” This part, which was essentially the promotional fine print stipulating certain rules and disclaimers, was usually all run together so that it was completely unintelligible to all but the initiated: “¡Charripáchon, charripáchon, at the fine four marbles!”

My fellow-merchants and I were marble entrepreneurs at the British Schools, a co-ed institution for children of the foreign community which also catered to a particular sector of Uruguayan society. Ostensibly, we were there to learn and/or improve our English and to be introduced to certain essential facets of the British way of life. But on another level entirely, as I understood it, we were there to socialize with our peers in the playground. The venerable School was housed in a large, old building in a quiet residential neighborhood, with high-ceilinged classrooms on two floors. There was a gymnasium-cum-assembly hall on the ground floor, and an open-air, paved playground around the back with a high, red brick wall surrounding the perimeter and another, lower one that separated the boys from the girls. I was only about ten years old at the time I’m referring to, but there were others who were already beyond puberty, and the wall was no doubt there for a reason.

When the bell rang we all poured out into the playground. There were no swings or roundabouts to play on; we were required to entertain ourselves. Whether this was by design or not I don’t know but it was an excellent idea. Some boys stood around in groups and talked. Some hovered longingly near the gateway in the dividing wall and had to be turned away by the male teacher on duty, who stood chatting to the female teacher on the other side for the duration of the break. Impromptu soccer games (*partidos de fútbol*) began spontaneously whenever a ragged, grey tennis ball was produced from somewhere, and almost every boy joined one side or another and played in a chaotic free-for-all with very few rules, in which some players showed remarkable skill and actually managed to control the ball and score. The noise was deafening!

Different fads came and went in seasonal cycles,

such as spinning tops (*trompos*), and trading cards (*figuritas*) that came inside the wrapper of *El Aguila* chocolates. On their side of the wall, from what we could see through the gate, the girls played jacks (*payana*), and hopscotch (*rayuela*), and skipped rope. On our side, marbles were a constant. Almost every boy carried a few *bolitas* tucked away in the pocket of his grey flannel uniform jacket, and there were various ways to play with them. One was called *hoyito* in which two contestants each flicked their marble along the ground, trying to sink it in the little scooped-out hole that gave the game its name, or to knock their opponent’s marble out of the way if it threatened to score. It was a simple game, requiring moderate skill, and the winner kept the loser’s marble. To some of us, this kind of profit margin was hardly worth the effort, and we moved on to bigger things.

Sitting on the playground with my back against the wall, I stretched out my legs, my skinny knees exposed between the bottom of my grey flannel short pants and the top of my long grey socks. Between my legs I set up a little pyramid of marbles, three on the bottom and one on top: the “fine four marbles”. They were mainly clear glass with multicolored swirls inside, quite beautiful really, when you held them up to the light. As other boys strolled by I tried to entice them to play against me: “Chuck here boys!” Those who decided to try their luck would stand with their toe on a line about five feet away, and chuck a marble underhand at my pile. If they knocked it over, they’d take all four of mine. But they usually didn’t, and then I’d keep theirs. On a good day I might take home twenty or thirty marbles clear profit. This allowed me to operate as a marble retailer on the side, providing a service not unlike an ATM machine at a casino.

Sometimes, the bolder entrepreneurs set up larger pyramids, and the chucking distance would be proportionately extended. On one legendary occasion, someone set up a huge pile and caused a near riot when boys started hurling *bolitas* overarm like baseballs from the far end of the playground. Marbles were ricocheting wildly all over the place until the teacher on duty managed to drag himself away from the gate and put a stop to the game. Then the bell rang and we all trooped back inside, leaving the playground empty and seemingly forlorn without the high-spirited mayhem of games and commerce, and the shrill cries of “Chuck here boys, at the fine four marbles!”