Episode 2

The Café that Changed its Name

Hello, I'm Richard Winterbottom.

Welcome back to another episode of Rick's Bite-Sized English. This is Episode Two of Season Three,

Each week, there's a short story and then I draw attention to a word or phrase that's worth noticing and that you can try out for yourself and add to your spoken language.

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Harry walked along the broad avenue, the plane trees shielding him from the still-strong sun. It had been several years since he'd come this way, but little appeared to have changed.

It felt good to be here again. He wasn't sure why he'd found himself in this part of the city. Was it simple curiosity? Or was something else at work?

He crossed the small park where children played and nodded with approval as he recognised the small wooden kiosk just beyond. This was where he used to

stop for a small glass of beer. A young man with long, unkempt hair was leaning over the counter, observing the street. ‘What had happened to Ernesto?’ he wondered, though it would hardly be surprising if he had retired, or worse, after all these years.



a kiosk

Further down he was greeted by the warm smell of bread from the baker’s. That was where he’d learnt some of his first phrases in the language, snippets the assistant there had helped him with. ‘Algo más?’ ‘No, nada más, gracias’. What was her name? Laura? Laura? Leire? He wasn’t sure. He knew anyway that she would no longer be working there, but where would she have gone?

On the corner, the newspaper shop was a sad imitation of its former self, two forlorn piles, no more than a dozen

high. This was where he'd bought his newspapers while he struggled with the language. He would help himself to a paper from piles almost as high as he was, then stand in that tiny space waiting to pay. There had always been a queue. But when had he last bought a newspaper?



pile of newspapers

He was approaching the block where The Green Parrot stood. He could make out the yellow awning that rounded the corner occupied by the café. Had the awning been yellow? Surely it would have been green, wouldn't it?

The terrace appeared busy, but he thought he saw a free table. He quickened his pace, not wanting to have the table taken from him. Of course, he could sit inside as he did on those long Tuesday evenings after training with his friends from the team. But he'd always felt that the inside of the cafe was a little dreary and he much preferred the lively terrace where, in between his reading, he could also watch the passersby.

But as he came to the café something was different. Two large, black, chrome standard lamps stood on either side of the doorway. Garish, these would never have been permitted by Tomás.



standard lamps

Tomás!, he was only remembering now. Would he still be there?

Then he noticed the sign: Bar Esmeralda, a generic sign placed there by a well-known soft drinks firm. What had happened to The Green Parrot?

He took a seat and waited to be attended. He'd been there for more than five minutes when an elderly man at the table next to him leaned over. 'They don't serve you here, you have to go to the counter', he said.

He went into the café. Fluorescent strip lights flattened the room's colours. Apart from that, the place looked the same, the same bentwood chairs, the same formica-

topped tables, the zinc-top counter curving away from the door to a hidden corner.



a bentwood chair

The place was almost empty. The television high up in one corner was blaring out a speech by a recently elected politician promising a return to better times.

He ordered his coffee and sandwich, then asked the waitress, a bright-looking girl of about seventeen, what had happened to The Green Parrot. She looked at him, clearly astonished. ‘Esmeralda’s my Mum, it’s been called that for years’, she said.

Had he got the wrong place? But no, everything, apart from the name and those awful lamps, was just as before.

He took his coffee and sandwich back to his table. The coffee was just as delicious as before. The sandwich too was good, though it was quite a bit smaller than he remembered. He looked around at the café clientele. They could have been the same customers as when he

was last here. Did they not notice the changes? Or did they just accept them?

People had such short memories, he reflected. The girl had said the bar had been called Esmeralda for years, as though forever. But it wasn't all that long since he'd been a regular at The Green Parrot. Or did he simply remember further back than most? Of course, the girl was young, much younger than he was.

A light rain had begun to fall beyond the awning and a chill wind came from around the corner. He turned up his collar, took out his book and began to read.

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'But it wasn't all that long since he'd been a regular at The Green Parrot.'

Harry uses a phrase here that's very common in natural spoken English. It helps express time as something personal, or subjective: "wasn't all that long."

'All that' qualifies the adjective 'long'. How long is that? Well, not recent, not distant.

Harry could have said "it was not very long ago" or "it was only recently", but "it wasn't all that long ago" sounds far more natural.

In general we can use ‘not all that’ to qualify or soften an adjective, to mean ‘not very’ or ‘not to the degree you might expect’.

You might say, for example, ‘I’m not all that sure’ instead of ‘I’m not very sure’ or ‘I’m not all that bothered’ to show something is not important to you. If someone says you were driving too fast, you might reply by saying ‘I wasn’t driving all that fast’.

Let me know how you will use this language. Please leave a review or a comment wherever you listen to the podcast.

I’d love to hear from you.

Thanks for listening.

See you next week.

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