

HOME SWEET HOME SICK

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AT SEVEN YEARS OF AGE I considered myself a worldly fellow. I had lived in two countries and spoke a couple of languages, more or less. I felt at ease in my parents' cosmopolitan milieu, and had overheard adults lauding my social skills. My good friend, Dani was the Italian Ambassador's son. We called him Danny at school, but to his parents he was *Daneee!* He spoke three languages and had been everywhere.

Dani invited me to spend the weekend at his summer residence in Punta del Este, an idyllic vacation spot on the Atlantic coast of Uruguay. It had once been a fishing village and had somehow managed to keep its charm and pristine beaches. I'd never spent a night away from my family, and was excited to be embarking on such a grownup adventure.

The Ambassador was a splendid man who dressed as though his yacht were riding at anchor not far away. His wife was the most exotic woman I had ever seen. She had it all: platinum hair and mascara, stiletto heels and a throaty voice that swooped and soared with her emotions. Huge gold rings jangled from her ears. I became mesmerized whenever I looked at her.

Dani and I were chauffeured around Punta in the Embassy's Rolls by Orlando, who wore a dark suit and a military-looking cap with a shiny black visor. We cavorted on the back seat and did wild things at the windows. Dani, who always looked pale and plump, could have anything he wanted. When he said, "I want an ice-cream," Orlando drove us to the Heladería del Mar and brought triple-scoop cones out to us in the car. There

wasn't much about life at Dani's house that was anything like mine. I understood that they were foreign, but there was more to it than that. It scared me to think that a child's wish could be a grown man's command. That would *never* happen at home.

We came back from a run in the Rolls, and scampered around to the pool to have one last dip before it got dark. The sun had just gone down



behind the high garden wall and the light suddenly changed. It wasn't as brilliant any more, or as warm. The shadows suddenly made me shiver. The water looked cold, and I no longer wanted to swim.

As daylight faded I realized I was a long way from home, and all at once I knew I couldn't stay here, not in this foreign place, so far from all that was familiar to me. Nightfall brought on a most unsophisticated attack of hysteria and Dani's mamá was soon on the phone, looking for my parents. The phone rang and rang but there was no reply. My stomach was in knots and my throat was hot and dry. I wanted *to go home*, and by that time I wasn't the

only one who wished I could leave. When anyone wanted anything badly enough in that household, it usually involved Orlando taking a drive somewhere, and it wasn't long before he and I were on the road back to town. Punta was about an hour from Montevideo. During the day it was a glorious drive with views of the sea through thickets of tall pines. But that night it was a long and tortuous

journey. I counted the seconds and pictured myself arriving home, running into my parents' loving embrace.

My legs stuck straight out in front of me as I sat on the front seat of the car. Beside me, in the dark, Orlando seemed huge. He always wore a pleasant smile, and was as accommodating as a person could possibly be. But in the faint glow from the dashboard his face under his chauffeur's cap looked sinister. I tucked my hands under my thighs and stared out of the

window at the darkness racing by. The Rolls was a magnificent ride, and all I could hear was the hum of the tires speeding along the highway. They sang, "*When* will we get home tonight? *When* will we get home?" over and over again.

Finally, the Rolls slid up to the curb in front of my house and purred to a stop. I scrambled out, raced to the front door and rang the bell, even though I could see quite plainly that there was nobody at home. I was breathing hard, biting my lip, close to panic. They *must* be here! Why weren't they here? "They weren't expecting you until tomorrow," said Orlando. "Is there a neighbor we can talk to?"

There was! Paco and Cuca owned the store down the street. It was a large room with a high ceiling, painted dark green, with boxes of fruit and vegetables arranged around the floor. The smell was what I loved most: an undercurrent of grain and burlap, overlaid with coffee and olive oil and cantaloupe. My mother did most of her grocery shopping there and they kept her account written down in a battered old notebook. Paco and Cuca were friendly and easy to deal with. My mother occasionally referred to other shopkeepers in less than flattering terms, but she never had anything but

praise for the *verduleros*. I used to think that Paco and Cuca were unusual names; none of my parents' friends had names like that. But I liked them both; they were so familiar.

I hurried ahead of Orlando. The store was still open; they lived in the back and seldom closed early. A couple of powerful, naked light bulbs dangled from long strands of wire that dropped all the way from the ceiling. The cool smell of evening mingled with the burlap and floated gently in the air. Paco looked up. "¿Antoñito?" he said, and I ran to him smiling. He told Orlando that he'd take care of me,

and the Rolls glided off into the night.

Cuca settled me into a deck chair while Paco went to leave a note for my parents. I moved the chair to where I could keep my eye on the door to the street. She offered me anything in the store—anything I wanted—and I asked for a carrot and a Pepsi. It was the most delicious carrot I had ever eaten. I lay back in the deck chair saying to myself: "They'll be here any minute now!"

I was asleep when they came to fetch me, and woke up in my father's arms as he carried me home. Home! It's true: there's no place like it. ★