



Back In Time

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Long Pants

In the 1932 movie *Grand Hotel*, Greta Garbo has an emotional crisis and speaks the immortal line, “I want to be alone.” (Actually, “I *vant* to be alone.”) I had my own Greta Garbo phase during my twelfth summer. I wanted to be alone and occasionally thought about not *being* at all, but never very seriously. It was all rather theatrical, I admit, but the underlying emotions were sincere, in a twelve-year-old sort of way. That was the summer I spent my entire school vacation in my room, consumed with a brooding sense of wretchedness, at the mercy of moods that were completely beyond my control.

The high point of my days came right after breakfast when my father left the house and I could take his copy of *El País* up to my room and lose myself in the comics. Uruguay has always had an impressive literacy rate, and there were seven daily newspapers published in Montevideo at the time: four in the morning and three in the evening. *El País* was a broadsheet morning newspaper with a comics section that filled four pages. I read them all. Some of them were essentially soap operas in three or four frames with stories that unfolded over days and weeks, giving me a sense of permanence and continuity in my dismal existence.

One of the main causes of my extreme melancholia was that after the summer break most of my male classmates would return to school in long pants. I was sure that every parent in the whole world allowed their sons to wear long pants as soon as they turned twelve. But not my parents, oh no! Mine had a cruel and unusual rule that boys started wearing long pants when they turned fourteen. I think this was a rule my father learned when he was sent to his father’s school in England ages ago. It was an absurd, unfair rule and I did everything in my power to repeal it—sulking, pouting, darkly threatening dire and unspecified consequences, being cloyingly affectionate, throwing tantrums—but all in vain. My older brother hadn’t been allowed to wear long pants until his fourteenth birthday, so it was three against one in the family council. There was nothing for it but to retire to my room to mope the summer away in splendid isolation.

Sometimes I was rude and inconsiderate where the rest of my family was concerned. One day my mother told me I was wasting my life away and I screamed

“I don’t care!” Well, of course my mother always had a response to most things, being the daughter of my grandfather, who was a master of unusual, sometimes quite surreal sayings and expressions. One of my favourites, which I’m sure he would have trotted out if he had seen me during my Garbo phase, was: “Next time I bring you I’ll leave you at home.” I loved that one. Anyway, true to form, my mother stood in the doorway to my room and recited a very strange verse that she had learned from her mother:

Don't Care was made to care
Don't Care was hung
Don't Care was put in a pot
And boiled till he was done

It might sound a little harsh, but it was nowhere near as heartless as forbidding me to wear long pants. *Me*, the fruit of her loins!

Short pants were fine for little boys, or for messing around in the garden or riding your bike. But bare legs made me feel painfully vulnerable in more serious, mature situations like school and, most important of all, the social life of a budding teenager which involved parties and dancing and girls. Especially girls. I was an all-round late bloomer and didn’t grow to my full height until my sixteenth summer. So I was already, in my opinion, at an embarrassing disadvantage because I was the shortest one in my class — and it was a co-ed school. In my mind I could see a huge spotlight that lit up my knobby knees as they peered out between the top of my long grey socks and the bottom of my short grey pants, emphasizing my diminutive stature (my *lack* of stature!) and exacerbating my misery. School was difficult in that sense, no doubt about it; but going to dance parties in short pants was an agonizing, almost unbearable torment. Although, now that I think of it, I was under no obligation to attend yet seldom failed to show up.

My Garbo summer finally came to an end and somehow two years slipped by and when I returned to school after my fourteenth birthday I was wearing a brand new pair of long, charcoal grey flannel pants. I felt secure and confident and quite grown up. But I think I was the only one who noticed and it struck me, not for the last time, that no one was paying nearly as much attention to me as I had imagined they were.