



BACK IN TIME

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TEA TIME

The streets were deserted that Sunday afternoon in Olivos. It was midsummer and the large houses in this leafy Buenos Aires suburb were quiet, their well-groomed gardens empty. Some of the owners were away at the beach or the mountains; those who were in town were taking a siesta after a big lunch. It was the mid-1940s, the twilight of Argentina's British-backed golden age, and properties encircled by high walls were still few and far between. It was a beautiful place to ride a bicycle.

My parents each had a bicycle, and were keen riders. For one thing, they had no car, so they took the train if they went into town, and took a bus to more local destinations. But they rode their bikes around the neighbourhood. Especially if we were just going over to Grannie's for tea. Sunday afternoon tea at my paternal grandmother's house was a much-anticipated and well-attended family event, and we were all looking forward to it. Dressed in our Sunday best, my brother and I were placed on our seats; he on my father's bike, and me on my mother's. Hers had a woman's frame, so my little saddle was bolted to the diagonal bar. I sat facing forwards with my hands gripping the centre of the handlebars and my feet resting on little struts attached to the fork that held the front wheel. I was just a few days from my fourth birthday.

On a previous ride I had discovered that I could make a marvellous noise by putting the tip of the sole of my shoe up against the spokes of the front wheel, edging closer and closer until the very edge of the leather made a rapid flapping noise that, to me, sounded just like a motorcycle. I had been rather strictly reprimanded for doing so, and told in no uncertain terms that I was

never to do it again. But that Sunday afternoon I couldn't resist the temptation to slide the toe of my left shoe very furtively, a millimetre at a time, towards the spokes. I was not actually intending to break any rules, I was just thinking about the sound of the motorcycle. At that very moment the front wheel ran over a seam in the road filled with a slightly raised wedge of tar, and the jolt was enough to slide my shoe onto the spokes. My foot was dragged forwards and downwards and my ankle pressed against the spinning metal rods. I squealed and my mother braked and swept me up in her arms, letting her bike fall with a clatter on the street. Both parents examined my ankle and, seeing that it was a scrape and a bruise rather than a broken bone, decided they should take me to the neighbourhood *farmacia*. On a Sunday afternoon in Olivos in those days, that was about the only place where any sort of first aid was available.

There would be a wait while someone went to the pharmacist's house to rouse him from his siesta, so my father and brother went on ahead, and my mother and I sat on a bench in the park across the street where, she said, we would "possess our souls in patience." By that





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time the shock of the accident had worn off, and though my ankle was painful I certainly wasn't in agony, so my real concern now was that we were missing tea at Grannie's. I was a little weepy about how the afternoon was turning out and, as always, Mum rose to the occasion. She sat at one end of the bench and I stretched out with my head in her lap and my wounded ankle cushioned on a towel.

"Do you know why we have tea at Grannie's?" she asked. I shook my head. My eyes were closed and I was picturing the table in Grannie's dining room, laden with plates of biscuits and cakes and buns. The scones were hot out of the oven and let off a little puff of steam when you sliced them open and lathered each side with butter that melted immediately and sank into the grainy texture. There were spice cakes and carrot cakes and chocolate cakes; the cucumber or watercress sandwiches were double-layered between three slices of white bread, moist with mayonnaise, cut into triangles with all the crusts neatly trimmed away. Grannie poured tea from a large teapot that sat, snuggled in its knitted cosy, on a wooden rack at her elbow. She filled one of her dainty china cups, milk first, and passed it to me, the spoon lying in the saucer ready to shovel in a heap of sugar and stir.

My mother kept talking, explaining that the custom of drinking tea had originally started a long time ago in China, probably as a medicinal drink. British merchants shipped cases of tea back home and introduced it to their compatriots, who took to it and made it their national temperance drink. Samuel Pepys tried it in 1660 and immortalized the experience in his famous diary: "I did send for a cup of *tee* (a China drink), of which I had never drunk before."

The tea plant had also grown in India since time immemorial, and when the British East India

Company arrived there in the early 1820s it set about producing tea on a massive scale. It wasn't long before the names of Indian teas—Darjeeling, Assam, Nilgiri, and others—had become household words in the United Kingdom, and afternoon tea had become a national institution, an expression of British identity. When Grannie's grandparents came to Argentina from England in 1872 they brought their language, their culture, and "tea time"—their custom of having a cup of tea at four o'clock in the afternoon. Like their other traditions, this daily ritual was a comfort as they settled into their new life and adjusted to their new surroundings far from home. On weekends, especially on Sundays, it became a way to bring their expanding family together and nurture the bonds between generations. Time passed. Things changed. Children grew up, got married, and begat children of their own. "But the tea time tradition survived, and I'm glad it did. Aren't you?" my mother asked.

What she had been talking about was very interesting, but not to an almost-four-year-old who was daydreaming about slices of hot buttered toast smothered with *dulce de leche*, soft croissants dusted with powdered sugar, and homemade *alfajores de maicena*, which were not British at all, a token reflection of the family's transplanted heritage. And so irresistible! I was still thinking about glazed pastry cones filled with whipped cream while the pharmacist bandaged my ankle and reassured my mother that all was well. We then cycled over to Grannie's house where aunts and uncles and cousins gave me a hero's welcome. I could neither understand nor articulate what Mum was saying that afternoon, but in time I came to see her point, and agree that our tea time tradition was—and is—an integral part of who I am.

