



Back In Time

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Boarding House Boys

One evening over dinner my father cleared his throat and said to my brother and me, “Um, we have something to tell you boys.” My mother looked down at her plate and my heart sank.

My father said, “Your mother and I are going to England for three months but I’m afraid you boys won’t be going with us.” I started to feel cold. My brother’s eyes were huge. My mother finally spoke up and said, “The firm is sending Dad on business, but it has to be at a time when you’re at school. It sounds ghastly, I know, I can hardly stand thinking about it and I’ll miss you terribly, but the time will fly and we’ll be home before you know it.”

And that’s how Christopher and I came to spend three months at the Hawkins boarding house in early 1952. I had just turned seven and he was a year older. Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins were an elderly English couple who ran a boarding house that catered mainly to British families who owned or ran *estancias* in “the camp” but sent their children to the British Schools in Montevideo. Britain had long had an interest in the Uruguayan cattle business, having built the railway network that linked the interior to the capital city in the 1860s, shortly after the Liebig’s Company opened the plant that would one day introduce the world to Fray Bentos Corned Beef.

The boarding house sat on the corner of two quiet streets in Pocitos, within easy walking distance of the school on José Benito Lamas. It was old and rambling, and reminded me of my grandparents’ house in Buenos Aires. Our bedroom was off a long hallway that ran through the middle of the house. At the far end was the vast kitchen where Mrs. Hawkins prepared the meals. The dining room was halfway down the hall on the right. Our roommate was Richard, whose family owned an *estancia* in Paysandú. He was eleven so I was in awe of his worldly wisdom and loved lying in bed at night, lights out, listening to him talk about life in the country. He described the mating habits of cows and horses in great detail, and with easy authority explained how that applied to human beings. These were my first sex-ed classes and I found them fascinating and bewildering in equal measure. I was a city boy, utterly clueless about the ways of the natural world. In a letter to my parents I described a weekend visit to a friend’s *estancia* and

said that, as far as I could tell: “Cats are girls, dogs are boys, and cows are horses’ wives.”

Most of the time, Richard’s stories helped me forget how much I missed my parents. Except for one night when I lost it completely. It had started earlier, when I was in the kitchen watching Mrs. Hawkins at the stove. She had a cigarette hanging out of the corner of her mouth, just like my grandmother when she was cooking. I remembered that, when we visited my grandparents, I would watch Grannie’s cigarette ash very carefully to see where it fell when it got too long, and then gratefully decline a portion of that item when we were sitting at the table. My vivid flashback opened up a void that took my breath away and left me feeling stunned. That night, lying in bed, Christopher asked, “Did you see where Mrs. Hawkins dropped her ash tonight?” The stunned feeling gave way to a deluge of sadness that had been bottled up for too long and I cried like a baby. When I had settled down, Richard said, “In the camp when you’re feeling sad the *gauchos* say *La vida es una cebolla y hay que pelarla llorando*. My Mum says that means ‘Life is an onion and we must peel it and weep’.”

One night, as I listened to Richard’s disembodied voice floating in the darkened room, with just a sliver of light slipping through the curtains from the street light at the corner, I asked him about the land on his *estancia*. At school I had heard the Uruguayan terrain described as being *levemente ondulado*, or gently rolling, and I asked him about that. He said it was true, the land rolled inland like a wave, green all the way to the horizon, with fields and trees and wild flowers and rutted tracks and black mottled rocks sticking out of the earth here and there. He painted a picture of life in Uruguay that was very different to the one I led as a city boy living on Calle 26 de Marzo just a mile or so from the Hawkins boarding house.

My mother was right; time flew and she and Dad were home before I knew it. Life in a boarding house had proved far less wretched than I had expected it to be, and those after-hours conversations had given me a feel for the Uruguayan countryside that has stayed with me ever since.