



Back In Time

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The Night Boat

The estuary of the Rio de la Plata that separates Uruguay from Argentina is the widest in the world. At its mouth it is about 130 miles wide. Montevideo sits on the northern shore, right where the river meets the Atlantic Ocean. Buenos Aires is upriver almost due west from there, on the southern shore. There were many ways to travel from one city to the other in those days. There were airplanes that took about an hour to make the trip. There were seaplanes that took off and landed in the harbours, the pontoons kicking up terrifying sprays of seawater that spattered the windows like machinegun fire all the way down the fuselage. There was a bus-and-ferry combination through Colonia, just across the river from Buenos Aires. But none of these was as romantic as the Night Boat, and that's how Rex wanted to take Muriel to Montevideo to celebrate their fourth wedding anniversary.

There were actually two Night Boats ("Vapor de la Carrera")—the *Ciudad de Montevideo* and the *Ciudad de Buenos Aires*—and each one left in the evening from one city and arrived the following morning at the other. They were splendid vessels that evoked a genteel nineteenth-century style of travel and leisure, and were affectionately described as being "like the Queen Mary but on a smaller scale." These ships, each equipped with three majestic funnels, had been ploughing back and forth across the estuary every night since about 1918, steadfastly maintaining their gracious, old-world elegance in the face of the increasingly fast-paced, modern lifestyle that had been evolving since the turn of the century.

On a warm January evening in 1947, Rex shepherded Muriel through the jostling crowd on the dock and up the gangplank of the *Ciudad de Montevideo*. They were shown to their cabin on the upper deck and, after freshening up, they repaired to the lounge bar. Perched at a table by a window they clinked their champagne glasses in a silent toast and smiled at each other. The ship was by then on its way and Buenos Aires was slipping away to stern, the city skyline silhouetted against the night sky. Once it had left the harbour and was out on the open river, they finished their drinks and went to the dining room. Muriel was thrilled to see the crisp white tablecloths and the candlelight reflecting off heavy silverware and crystal glasses. "It is like the Queen Mary!" she whispered as a white-coated waiter escorted them to their table. Rex ordered a bottle of Rioja

Gran Reserva and the sommelier nodded approvingly. Over dinner they spoke of their life together so far and their hopes for the future. Rex reassured Muriel (not for the last time) that their two little boys would be just fine in their grandmother's care for a couple of days. After dinner they strolled down the grand staircase to the nightclub. It was quite crowded and a lively buzz of voices and laughter rose up to meet them. The men were in suits and ties, the women in fashionable cocktail dresses. The piano and trio struck up the unmistakable opening notes of *Fina Estampa* and Rex took Muriel in his arms and waltzed her around the dance floor. Later they took a turn around the deck, the sea breeze ruffling their hair. "This is bliss!" sighed Muriel as they stood hand-in-hand at the railing, looking up at the stars.

In the morning the ship nosed into the Montevideo harbour and docked right on time at 8 o'clock. After a breakfast of fresh croissants and café con leche, the young couple stepped off the gangplank and took a taxi to the Hotel Nogaró. Like honeymooners, they spent the next two days wandering around the city, exploring the leafy plazas and narrow streets in the old part of town. They walked through the Plaza Independencia, admiring the statue of Artigas and the stately columns on the façade of the Teatro Solís. They made the trek to the Cerro fortress and enjoyed the panoramic view of the city and the harbour. They stopped here and there at sidewalk cafés, thankful for the shade of the many lovely trees that lined the streets. "Monte is so pretty," said Muriel, and Rex nodded. It was true.

And then, all too soon, it was time to go home. Once again they boarded the Night Boat and left their luggage in their cabin. They were on the *Ciudad de Buenos Aires* this time, but it was just like its sister ship and they felt comfortable in the familiar surroundings. They stood at the stern railing for a while, watching the Montevideo skyline gradually vanish below the horizon. Then, almost wistfully, they went to the lounge bar and ordered champagne. As they raised their glasses, Rex said, "Let's make a wish." They gazed quite seriously into each other's eyes for a second, then the bubbly chill of the first sip made them both laugh. "We've had the most marvellous time!" said Muriel. A year later, almost to the day, their wish came true and they left Buenos Aires and brought their two little boys to Montevideo, where the four of us settled and made our new home.