

The Sunken Secret

Cristian Perfumo

Translation: Barbara Salsgiver and Stephen Logan

To Mónica and Norberto

The events and characters from the XVIII century described in this work are real (ninety percent of the time).

Those from the 80s, on the other hand, are a product of my imagination (except for the ones that aren't).

Cristian Perfumo

I. The H.M.S. Swift

The first time Marcelo Rosales heard someone mention the Swift he didn't know people had died for her, nor that still more would die. And he couldn't feel his own nose.

"Good morning, class," said Mr. Garecca. It was still dark and Marcelo and the rest of the fifth-year students—the seniors—were back in class for the first time since the winter break. That Monday in July was reportedly one of the coldest days of 1981 in Puerto Deseado, Patagonia.

"I hope you all had a good break and are fired up and ready to start the second half of the school year."

Instead of being fired up, Marcelo was sleepy. The fifteen minutes of icy wind on the way from his house to the school had frozen his face, but somehow it hadn't woken him up.

"For the rest of the year we'll study quadratic, cubic, and exponential functions."

But everyone—including Garecca—knew they wouldn't start talking about math just yet. First they needed a bit of distraction.

"Over the break," said a boy seated by the windows, "I was at my grandfather's farm. He told me that in the sixties a whole family that was living in the Lozadas' house disappeared. He said the couple and the three daughters are buried in the yard. Is that true, Mr. Garecca?"

Garecca was a walking encyclopaedia of the town's legends, and there was no myth about Puerto Deseado he could resist. He seemed to enjoy talking about haunted houses more than talking about logarithms. And his students—especially Marcelo—even more so.

"It's actually *proven*," he said, returning the chalk he'd just picked up to its tray under the board, "that that is nothing more than one of the many myths that circulate in this town. I, in fact, was interested in buying that house quite a few years ago. In the end we didn't close the deal, but I know the story perfectly well."

"The Dietrichs," he continued, "sold everything before moving north in '64. The house was bought by the late Leonardo Belizán, a loan shark who never lived in it and refused to rent it. One of the many people who didn't care much for Belizán started the rumour that he had his motives for leaving it empty. From there the legend grew, eventually becoming five corpses being buried in the yard. I don't need to explain how rumours get twisted in this town, do I?"

The teacher took a moment to catch his breath.

“The house had two more owners before Mr. Lozada bought it in the late seventies. End of story. No graves in the yard.”

“But that’s how it always is,” chimed in the only girl in the class wearing makeup. “Around here people invent all kinds of stupid rumours. Every other day I’m supposedly making out in some corner somewhere with some guy or another. The funniest part is that no one steps up and actually says ‘I saw her’—everybody hears the story second hand.”

Whispers swept through the classroom.

“Mariela’s right,” said Pedro Ramírez from the back of the room, not daring to look up. “In this town we always have someone or something to talk about. Just the other day we were at a barbeque and my uncle—on his fourth glass of wine—started talking about a treasure ship that sank in a storm near Deseado and I don’t know what other nonsense he said. Luckily, we all know what he’s like. My mom says he comes up with that sort of stuff to get attention.”

And that is how Marcelo Rosales first happened to hear mention of the Swift, though without knowing its name. Or indeed, if it was just another rumour.

Marcos Olivera's house was the only one in the entire town that had a flagpole in the yard. At the top waved a tattered Argentinian flag.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Olivera?" said Marcelo to the strapping figure who opened the door to him.

The man nodded as he put on the glasses he'd been carrying in his shirt pocket. When he seemed to have the image before him in focus, he raised his eyebrows and rubbed his meticulously-trimmed white beard. The lost look in his eyes gave the impression that he was trying to remember something. After a few moments, he asked hesitantly, "Aren't you Diego Rosales's son?"

The question hit Marcelo like a punch in the stomach. It was the last thing he was expecting. He tried to mask his discomfort with a smile and responded affirmatively with a polite nod.

"You're the spitting image of your dad! I was in the service with him. Our beds were pretty much next to each other in the barracks. Besides that, we were on sentry duty together."

"Oh, I didn't know that. I don't talk about that stuff much with my father."

Actually, he hadn't talked about that or anything else with his father for more than two years. The last contact hadn't been on an insignificant date, but even if it had been, Marcelo would still remember the date *and* his father with the same hatred.

"Well it was a thousand years ago," responded the old man, playing it down. "The truth is I don't even remember the last time we saw each other. It might have been in the service. I really don't get around town much."

The probability that two of the two thousand five hundred people that lived in Puerto Deseado could go long without seeing each other was remote. Sooner or later everyone ended up crossing paths. In the supermarket, in the bank, in the post office, at Mass or at a funeral. It was just a matter of time before you'd end up bumping into everyone. Mr. Olivera, however, was one of the few exceptions. He'd spent almost his entire life sailing, and when he was in town he preferred to stay home.

"My name is Marcelo."

"Marcelo, what brings you to my house?"

“This morning at school, a classmate said something about a ship that sank in Deseado, and Mr. Garecca said he’d heard that story, too. When class was over I asked him what else he knew about it and he sent me to talk to you.”

The old man smiled and invited him in.

“Wait here a moment. Sit down if you like,” he said, pointing at a black leather sofa. “I’m going to the back room to see if I can find something that I think might interest you.”

The living room walls were full of pictures. On three of them there was no apparent order to the collection of oil paintings of birds, watercolours of landscapes, and extremely old portraits of people—perhaps Olivera’s ancestors. The fourth wall, which was the first one a person would see upon entering the house, was different. It was adorned by a stone fireplace that helped dispel the memory of how cold it was outside.

Above the chimney mantel were five pictures arranged like the five points on the face of a die. The ones on the corners were framed sailor’s knots made from rope and mounted on blue velvet. In the middle, an Olivera who was at least twenty years younger was posing next to a beautiful dark-haired woman in front of the Perito Moreno glacier.

“That wall,” said Olivera as he set a dusty box down on a small table, “represents my entire life. The knots I had to make millions of times during my career as a sailor and, in the centre, my wife, my only reason for wanting to return to dry land when I was aboard ship. I’ve nothing left of any of that now. I’m retired and widowed.”

“And you don’t have children?” asked Marcelo, immediately regretting it. If he had any, they would be in the centre photo.

“It’s the only thing that was missing for Margarita and me for our happiness to be complete,” said the old man, offering up a worn-out smile. “But hey, every now and then an old friend visits me and we spend long hours sharing stories of the high seas. *Mate?*” he offered, handing him a metal *mate* cup with an Argentinian flag on its side, the colours much brighter than those on the one waving in the yard.

“About the Swift,” the man continued, “it’s something I almost never speak of with anyone. Not because I don’t want to, but because the topic generally doesn’t come up. Very few people believe that story.”

“Do you believe it?”

“That doesn’t matter in the least,” he said, indicating with a nod that Marcelo should come closer and examine the box.

“As you will see,” he continued, having wiped the dust off the top with his hand, “this has been stashed away for a long time. When I received it I spent several months listening to the account and imagining how things might have been at that time. Afterwards, I decided to put the box aside until someone showed some interest in the subject. If that didn’t happen I’d planned to donate it to the library when I was a little older.”

“*Listening to the account?*” asked Marcelo, handing the *mate* back to him.

“You’ll find out in a second. But before we begin, why are you interested in the story?”

“I’m a diver,” said Marcelo without taking his eyes off the box, “and if there is a sunken ship in the inlet and we know where it is, we could do some dives to try to find it.”

“If only it were that easy,” sighed the old man, opening the box.

Inside was an antique tape recorder about the size of a typewriter. One of the reels of tape had a white label on it with the word *AUSTRALIAN*.

“And what does that have to do with the ship?”

“One of the few disadvantages of being young is the lack of patience,” said Olivera. Then he slowly unwound the machine’s cord and plugged it into an outlet in a corner of the room.

When the reels started turning, there was a low buzzing sound and then a female voice said:

“An account on the loss of His Majesty’s Sloop Swift, in a letter to a friend.”

Just when Marcelo’s heart started to gallop in excitement, Olivera pressed a button, pausing the machine.

“Is this the ship you were referring to?”

“I . . . I guess so,” stuttered Marcelo. And even if it wasn’t, it didn’t matter. He wanted to hear what came next.

The former sailor resumed the recording with the same button.

“Dear Sir, having frequently mentioned to you some of the circumstances attending the loss of the sloop Swift, on the coast of Patagonia . . .”

The woman’s voice began narrating the adventure lived by ninety-one British men whose ship sank on Tuesday, the thirteenth day of March 1770 off the coast of Puerto Deseado. The tale

was told in the first person and had been written by Erasmus Gower, lieutenant of the British Royal Navy on board the H.M.S. Swift.

The Swift had left from Port Egmont, the only British naval station in the Falkland Islands in those days, with the objective of exploring the coast of the Patagonian desert. But six days after setting sail, a massive storm exhausted the crew's strength and forced them to stop in Puerto Deseado to regain their stamina and dry their clothing.

Port Desire was how the British corsair Thomas Cavendish had christened that inlet on the Patagonian coast, in homage to his ship, the *Desire*. Magellan had earlier named it *Bay of Troubles* after having been forced to put in there to repair his ships. It appeared on all the nautical maps. However, in 1770 when the Swift arrived there for the first time, it would still be twenty years before the Spanish would build a fort and a whale oil plant that would not survive more than two decades. Not to mention the fact that the town in which Marcelo now lived—Puerto Deseado—wouldn't be founded for another one hundred fourteen years, its name a translation of Cavendish's *Port Desire*. The coast that the men on the Swift encountered on that fateful morning was as deserted as the rest of Patagonia.

Upon entering the inlet, they ran aground on a rock that was not mapped. After unloading all the ballast, including a large portion of their potable water, the crew managed to free the ship. But their joy lasted only a few minutes, as the wind slammed the Swift into a second rock. And this time it was fatal, for both the ship and three of the crew.

At six o'clock in the afternoon on that Tuesday, the thirteenth of March, the H.M.S. Swift, armed with fourteen cannons and twelve swivel guns, sank into the depths of what Marcelo and all the inhabitants of the town knew as Deseado Inlet.