La Boca

Twilight



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Nelson Literacy Directions

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La Boca Twilight

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Meet the Characters

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Victor Ruiz

A young violin player.



Señor Florida

The owner of La Perla.



Eduardo

The bouncer at La Perla.



Señora Salguero

A once-famous tango dancer.



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POSTCARD

Dear Reader

Many years ago, I found myself in a cafe called La Perla in La Boca, Buenos Aires. Guarding the cafe's entrance was the scariest doorman I have ever seen. As soon as I laid eyes upon him, I knew he would appear in one of my books. I hope you like this story – and, if I ever go back to La Boca, I hope the doorman likes it, too. Otherwise, I'm in big trouble!

John Parsons
Author

Buenos Aires



1. Argentina
2. Buenos Aires
3. Las Islas Malvinas
4. La Boca (a suburb of Buenos Aires)

1 A Wily Chameleon

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Any good tourist guidebook will describe La Boca as a *barrio*, or neighbourhood, in the south-east of Buenos Aires, in Argentina, South America. What it won't describe are the slow, filthy waters of the Matanza River, better known as El Riachuelo, or "The Little River", with its rusting, half-submerged freighters, marking La Boca's southern boundary. To the east, the sullen river wharves are bullied by the surging, oily waters of the Rio Plata. To the west lies the grim working-class area of Barracas and the slums of Nueva Pompeya, known to the locals as *villa miseria* – the villages of misery.

To the tourist, the face of La Boca is Caminito, a colourful street market, where couples in elegant costume will dance the tango for ten pesos. Here, on hot, overcast Saturdays, throngs of tourists jostle for cheap T-shirts that later fall apart in their suitcases. To the ardent sports fan,



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this *barrio* is home to a football team, the Boca Juniors, source of hope and crushing despair to thousands of fervent supporters resplendent in colours of blue and yellow. To the weary taxi driver, it is a fifty-peso fare from downtown Buenos Aires, never to be accepted on game day. To the residents, La Boca is a living thing, a wily chameleon that creeps slowly along a precarious twig, its skin changing colour by the hour. It has a thousand eyes, flickering, watching, hungry for prey. Find yourself lost in this *barrio* and it will swallow you in a second.



To Victor Ruiz, a hopeful young musician from the vast Argentinean countryside, La Boca was a destination often dreamed about, but not yet reached.

On his first afternoon in Buenos Aires, Victor had three duties to fulfil: to his family, his country and to himself.

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Travelling south through the city, with his small backpack and violin case, Victor stopped first at the Plaza San Martin, near the main ports of the city. There, he set himself the solemn task of finding his grandfather's name on the wall commemorating those who had died in Argentina's invasion of Las Islas Malvinas, an ill-fated attempt to recapture the disputed islands from the British thirty years before.

Amongst the hundreds of names, he soon found that of Manuel Ruiz. He ran his fingers across the letters carved into the smooth black stone. He had never met his grandfather – a British missile fired to protect the islands they knew as the Falklands had seen to that – but he had heard the tales of his bravery.

Victor sat for a few minutes beneath his grandfather's name, trying in his heart to feel sadness or loss. But the sounds of the city drowned out his thoughts and, although he did his best to silently pay his respects, a name carved on a wall could not evoke a real person. The late

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afternoon sun was hot and drained his spirits. He stood and started to walk south. His first duty left him feeling faintly hollow but was, nevertheless, complete.

After an hour, Victor found himself at the Plaza de Mayo, a dusty square hemmed in by tired government buildings and dominated by the faded presidential palace, Casa Rosa. This square marked his country's birthplace and was, for many Argentineans, the heart of their country.

From the palace balcony overlooking the square, the famous Evita and her husband, the steely Argentinean president Juan Peron, had once waved at crowds of patriotic followers. When their popularity waned, the square transformed itself into the scene of violent protests and riots. As the mood of the country rose and fell, so too did the passion of the people who came to stand amongst the watchful statues and plaques of the Plaza de Mayo. Today, there were only small clusters of curious tourists and a handful of stray dogs lazing in the sunshine.

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As Victor tried, and failed, to imagine the passion that had flared here throughout the years, a military band filed out of the Casa Rosa. Out of step and looking bored, they finally arrived at the flagpole in the plaza and assembled themselves in a formation. While one of the soldiers tried to untangle the knotted lanyard around the flagpole, the band struck up a patriotic tune. But, instead of being stirring, it was flat and out of step, like the band's half-hearted marching. The local stray dogs, their afternoon sleep disturbed, embarked upon their own impromptu performance, howling and barking. Finally, the soldier at the base of the flagpole released the lanyard, and the limp blue and white flag, emblazoned with a multi-pointed sun, was lowered to a dull cacophony of brass, drums and dogs.

The tourists drifted away, the dogs fell back on their sides, and Victor walked to a corner of the square, his eyes scanning the avenue for a black and yellow taxi. Vaguely disappointed, he had

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nonetheless completed his second duty, and he could continue his journey south. With the sun falling and the changing moods of the *barrios* between here and his destination, he knew a taxi was the safest option.

He flagged down a taxi and, with relief, saw the small blue and yellow beads hanging from the driver's rear-view mirror. This driver would not refuse a fare to his football team's home *barrio*.

Victor climbed in, clutching his violin case and backpack. He hoped his third duty would be more satisfying.

"La Boca," he said. Without a word, the driver joined the rush-hour traffic creeping around the square that marked the weary heart of Buenos Aires.

