

Our clientele consists largely of business reps, finance execs, lusher on shopping sprees and retirees; many of whom eat with us like we're their personal kitchen. The guests that resonate with me the longest, though, are the one-offs. The kind I may or may not see again, under context that'll never be the same.

Take Arturo, who I met the other week. After the dinner rush had dwindled he sat at the far end of the bar. He drank Reissdorf Kölsch— a German served in a tall, slim glass. Halfway through it he ordered dinner, handing me his menu while maintaining eye contact. In doing so he nicked the top of his glass, spilling beer over the bartop. After recovering from the panicked look in his eye and apologizing, he lamented that he shouldn't have tried to act cool.

“Don't worry,” I said, as I soaked up the mess. “I've spilled plenty of drinks trying to look cool back here. It's always worth the risk.”

I laid out fresh linen and went to fill his glass to par. He protested, giving the usual, “Please, charge me for a new one,” which I dutifully ignored. When I returned with it a regular had sat beside him.

I said hello and set them up as well. As I got their usual going, the two got acquainted. They got along well, regaling stories that inevitably led into their personal histories. Although I only heard it in pieces, Arturo's happened to pique my interest.

He spent his youth in the outskirts of Santiago. After the dust of Pinochet's coup had settled, he moved to the US on scholarship at an OC university. Once he'd established himself in Newport, his parents would visit frequently. They loved it, even if the lavishness of the area clashed with their humbler life back home. While out at dinners Arturo's late father, a true Chilean (stern, proud, typically stoic), would sometimes get uneasy. In asides to his son he'd ask if he was sure they should be at such nice places, worried someone might ask where they were

from or what they did for work. Although his mother still only speaks fragmented English, she continues to visit on her own. She's happy enough people-watching at bars with her only son, celebrating her golden years with virgin margaritas.

Once most of the restaurant had cleared, I got to talk to Arturo directly while wiping liquor bottles at the end of the bar. I admitted I'd overheard he was from Chile, and after giving me information I'd already eavesdropped, I asked whether he'd heard of Roberto Bolaño. He hadn't, which I'd quietly expected, and he asked me who that was.

"He was a Chilean author roughly your age," I explained, "who spent most of his life in Mexico City and Spain. He was arrested while visiting home when the coup kicked up. Most of his writing has to do with his generation of Latin-American expats."

Although I hadn't rung any bells, I could tell I'd elicited something in his memory. He asked whether I'd heard of Pedro Pascal's story.

"Vaguely, yeah. His parents were politically involved if I remember right." Arturo shook his head. "Politically adjacent. They were liberal college students, sure, but all they did was tend to a wounded revolutionary. DINA snatched people for less, though. I saw people ripped out of class without explanation, and all we could do was sit there. Speak up, and you could be *desaparecido también*."

The word hung there for a moment. It rolled smoothly off the tongue, like most Spanish does in the mouth of a native speaker. But the breathlessness those syllables left in their wake didn't fade. It sank, like the echo of something dropped deep into a well.

*Desaparecido*

I'd read the word plenty—in non-fiction, like *Huesos en el Desierto*, and indirectly through the work of Bolaño—but I'd never heard it spoken. Let alone by someone who'd seen the disappearances themselves.

I set down the bottle I'd been wiping and wondered whether I'd pried on something I shouldn't have. "I can't imagine what that must've been like. I'm glad you and your parents made it through all that." I began wiping another bottle as Arturo nodded his head. After setting it down, I added, "Do you find it interesting, at all, seeing similar things happening these days?"

He glanced up for a moment, curiously, before looking down the barrel of his third glass of beer. "It's funny you say that," he said, and took a swig of what remained. "I obviously see things online, you know? But out here in Newport, you just don't. You see plenty of other things, sure, but because we're in a bubble it's mostly talk. The last time I was here, though, at the other side of the bar, I got caught off guard.

"There was a man having a drink across from me. He was the only other Latino in the restaurant, or at least the only obvious one, and he was dressed to the nines. Nice suit, nice watch, nice hair. You could tell he was loaded, is what I'm trying to say, and after closing out he walks around the bar to talk to me.

"He asks me where I'm from, so I tell him. I ask him where he's from, and he tells me. We chat casually for a bit, then he tells me with a real serious look to stay safe out here. I tell him to do the same, but he doesn't leave. Then he asks if I'm carrying my passport.

"I wasn't sure how to respond at first. But because he didn't seem like he'd drop it, I

asked why I'd need it. He scans the restaurant around us for a second, then says, 'In a crowd like this, we're easy pickings.' Apparently he lost some workers at his warehouse by South Coast, and not all of them were here illegally."

3

I paused mid-wipe, staring at my distorted reflection in the curve of a bottle of Fortaleza. "Honestly," I admitted, "I keep my passport in my shoulder bag these days. I might pass pretty white in the face, but 'Alejandro Hernandez' is *way* too Mexican of a name."

The words felt strange as they left me—part joke, part confession, part embarrassed awareness of my insulation as a *gringo*. Between my fair skin, green eyes, and self-effacing smirk, the only Latino thing about me is my curls; a quality appropriated en masse by true *gringos* of my generation, leaving me a low priority target. Even so, the threat of getting caught in the crosshairs lingers. It's a new era, and an even more impressive vanishing act. They don't need stadiums, firing squads, or even uniforms anymore. They just have quotas, and outsource their dirty work to the lowest bidder.

A smile flashed across Arturo's face as he traced a circle with the base of his empty glass. After I'd finished wiping the bottles, he slid it over to me. "I guess I just didn't expect to see something like this up close again." After I grabbed it, he placed a card beside his tab.

"We like to think lightning never strikes twice." I put his glass in the sink and grabbed the card. "But realistically, it's a lot more likely to than not." I took his payment to the terminal. As the AmEx processed I killed the light switch in the reach-in refrigerator. As the compressor died down I heard a faint, steady tick that held my attention. It kept time like a metronome: uniform, unfeeling. I was pulled from its trance by Arturo saying something, which I hadn't made out. I asked him to repeat what he'd said.

“Nowhere’s sacred anymore,” he repeated. “I forgot to mention it, but that’s the last thing that guy told me the other day.”

I pulled his card from the reader. The receipts jutted from the printer, curled slightly from the heat. I fastened them to his card with the clip of a pen and handed him the bundle.

4

“Places are only sacred if we all agree to treat them that way. And we can hardly agree on whether the Earth is round or not.” I smirked and told him to take care before turning around to continue working.

“You’re a trip, *Alejandro*,” Arturo said as he got up from his seat.

I turned to say, “Nah, man, I’m just trippin’,” and smiled in earnest.

When he left, the bar settled into an idle state. The fridge ticked steadily, glassware sat inverted on the mats, and the air carried the faint smell of citrus and sanitizer. While inputting tips that night, I caught myself thinking about whether my shoulder bag was where I’d left it. The thought came easily, the way certain precautions do, long before you realize you’ve learned them. The rows of bottles surrounding me gleamed, like sentinels in the dim light.

