

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a lit cigarette. The cigarette is lit, with a bright orange glow at the tip and a small amount of ash. Smoke is rising from the cigarette, creating a soft, hazy background. The hand is positioned in the upper right, with the fingers gripping the cigarette. The overall mood is contemplative and artistic.

# TABLE 6

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ROGELIO RIVERA

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The waitress finished taking the man's order from table 6 and walked back to her station to key in a gin and tonic and a shot of Tequila. The table was located in the back left corner next to the kitchen entrance. It was relatively dark in that corner as the pendant lamp that hung above wasn't working and the light from the neon signs over the bar was just out of reach. The sound of glasses being washed behind the bar and the chatter of the afternoon regulars could be heard along with the NBA game on the flat screen TVs.

The older man, perhaps in his early fifties, sat facing the front of the restaurant. He had never been there and had stopped in for a drink before making his way to the motel across the street for the night. His facial features were hard to see in the dim light. One might not have

seen his thinning hairline or the fine wrinkles that appeared only when he smiled or squinted his eyes to read something. He wore a light blue long sleeved shirt he had purchased from Costco a few years back near his home outside of Los Angeles. His sleeves were rolled up exposing his mechanical watch laying on his sun tanned and cracked skin. His nails were trimmed and clean in contrast to his weathered hands. They looked old against the watch's bright metal and rich leather band. Each crack of his skin breaking into a thousand others, all headed in every direction as if scattering away from some unseen force. His jeans were newer and comfortable. His shoes were black but scuffed and would have benefitted from a shine.

The TVs echoed the 6 o'clock hour with the top headlines during the half time. The man sat indifferent to the announcements as did the other patrons who were involved in conversations about work gossip, sports or busy looking at their phones. Outside the sky had grown into an older version of itself becoming grayer and cooler. Foot traffic picked up as people ended their shifts and were on their way home to their wives, husbands, families, and pets. Others had only worry, debts and guilt waiting for them.

The man was in a small town just North of Phoenix, Arizona. Black Canyon City, a small town with a small main street but just close enough to Phoenix to have a half dozen start ups and satellite offices for Google and Facebook. The man had turned off Interstate 17 to get some rest. He had been on the road for a few hours and decided to finish his drive the following morning. He enjoyed starting a new day in the brisk dawn when the world had not yet left its slumber.

A few minutes passed and the man took a sip from his drink and looked out to his right over the short wall separating the bar area and the rest of the restaurant. He looked out passed the couple ordering dinner, beyond the immigrant buss boy clearing a table, beyond the window pane and beyond the street outside. His gaze focused on nothing and everything at once. Lost in thought, his head began to drop and his gaze lowered to the drinks in front of him. His back arced forward ever so slightly and made him look even older than before. The burden of his thought was almost too much for him to bear and he desperately needed to figure out how he was going to handle the next few days.

He raised his gaze for a moment after some of the bar-folk broke out in laughter and returned to his solemn form. No one in this town

knew this man. He was neither a stranger nor neighbor. He was a point on an axis. Simply a passenger riding a moment of time. Not unlike the droves of travelers in busy airports existing only temporarily until the next destination. A state of temporal limbo and the make up of the margins of life.

A young man, sharp dressed and dapper approached his table and asked if he could sit. "May I join you?" His voice was deep and clear.

The man was slightly startled by the interruption to his thoughts. He wondered if he had been so lost in thought that he had not heard the approaching footsteps. "No hablo Ingles amigo." replied the man without averting his gaze. The man had used this trick for the better part of his adult life. It worked well in the city, no reason it wouldn't do the same in this small town.

"Ah, entonces no te hablaré in Ingles señor.¿Puedo sentarme?" replied the sharp dressed man in impeccable Spanish.

The older man looked up at the sharp dressed man. His hair was combed back and shiny, his eyes an icy blue. The suit he wore was black and he wore a white button down shirt. The man looked

youthful, couldn't have been more than his early thirties. He looked down at the older man and smiled. His teeth beamed brilliant white, almost too perfect to be real.

The older man motioned to the younger man to have a seat. He took a seat in the relative darkness of the corner table.

"I'm not good company right now amigo." The older man said.

"Call me..." The younger man paused and smirked. "Vero. And thank you. Now, why wouldn't you be good company amigo?" Vero replied in a slightly sarcastic tone.

The older man returned his gaze to his drinks and didn't bother looking up. The sound of a hundred screams rang out as Vero struck a match to light his cigarette and took a puff. The flash of light revealed Vero's face briefly. His eyes were bloodshot. The older man took in this scene as it offered sensory stimulation. The sweet dirty smell of the smoke combined with the red glow of the cigarette's ashes falling onto the table made the older man uneasy. Vero crossed his legs and sat back into the chair. The moment was broken

when the waitress abruptly appeared and said "You can't smoke in here mister. You have to go outside or put it out."

Vero turned his gaze to the waitress, his bright smile turned to a scowl as he looked at the young woman. "You can look at me all you want, but you can't smoke. Put it out."

Vero took the cigarette from his lips and squashed the lit end onto the table surface creating a small burn mark. His gaze didn't leave the waitress.

"Thanks, do you want a drink or are you just gracing us with your presence?" The waitress asked in a snarky tone.

"I'll have a glass of red and join my melancholy friend here, uh. What is your name Señor?" Vero said. "Saul." The older man said forcefully.

The waitress turned and walked to key in the order, Vero's gaze still fixed upon her and eventually returning it to Saul, smiling.

"Melancholy?" Asked Saul.

"Why hadn't you noticed? You seem to be in a bit of a rut. I can..." he paused "tell these things about people. I mean, I can read their... state of mind. Call it my specialty amongst men."

"Is that right. Well, as I said, I'm not in the mood. So uh...if you wouldn't mind, Vero, uh maybe you can have your drink somewhere else." Saul said.

The waitress brought a glass of wine over and placed it on the table. Vero took a drink and set down the glass. He looked at Saul as if trying to peer inside his soul.

"There are only so many reasons you could be sad Saul. Perhaps I could help in some, insignificant way. Can I do that for you?"

Saul kept looking down at his drinks. He felt comfortable there even though this stranger was sitting right across from him. He didn't know why, but he felt as though he was right where he needed to be.

"I don't think so Vero. You don't know me. You don't know what I'm about and to be honest, you are starting to annoy me. Do you mind?" Saul motioned to the empty bar stools.



"Ah. I see. You don't trust me. Of course, why would you? I am a stranger to you. But now, Saul, *we are not strangers*. You know my name, I know yours and we have shared a drink. After all, isn't this what men do when they become close? Yes, close friends share drinks don't they."

Saul smiled and took a drink from his glass and set it down. He looked up at Vero and smiled. "You are not my friend. I'm sorry. But I don't know you and I don't care to." His smile vanished. "I'd rather be alone if you don't mind."

Vero picked up his glass of wine. He swirled the glass slowly and brought it up to his nose and took in the notes. He then looked up at the pendant light, motioned just so with his index finger and suddenly, the light brightened. "Ah, that's better, wouldn't you say friend? One doesn't feel quite comfortable in the dark, does he?"

Saul looked at Vero with his wine glass in his hand. The light had now revealed Vero's physical details in the pale yellow light. His appearance was indeed immaculate - with the exception of a few oddities that Saul couldn't make out right away. His eyes, as Saul noticed earlier, were bloodshot. The whites of his eyes were slightly

yellowed crowned with red blood vessels like the sun surrounded by its rays.

Then he noticed something that years later he would try to forget. Vero's right hand was holding his wine glass but something was off. It looked...like a hand but something about it was peculiar. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but that thought quickly changed to astonishment. He followed Vero's hand from the glass to his wrist and back to his fingers. There to Saul's fright were Vero's fingernails. They were grimy, dirty and long. They came to a an acute point as if Vero had purposely filed them but why would anyone do that wondered Saul. His nails had what looked like dried, caked on dirt and what looked like dry blood. He hadn't noticed in the dim light but now, it was all Saul could see.

The blood from Saul's head flushed through his neck and small beads of perspiration formed on his forehead. He wasn't quite sure what he was going through but then he noticed something else. Vero's hands had no veins! The skin wrapped bone and flesh in an almost latex finish the way medical gloves do. He started to feel lightheaded.