

Vámonos a short story by Sherezade García Rangel

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Part I: Allá – Over there

Whenever they see him walk into the little, ancient coffee shop, they turn around to spot the Venezuelan. He has become a frequent visitor and the months rolling by have shortened the space they keep from him. He always walks quietly to the counter, mouths a *buenos días* to whomever is around to listen, and sits glued to his phone while he takes sips of his *cortado* in a stool by the corner of the window. They have begun to nod at him, to acknowledge that he's now becoming a local, but it will still take a few months before they decide to come over and talk to him.

Last year when he first arrived, long before Venezuelans were common in this area, they stood up, defensive, whenever he walked in. He wouldn't linger in the shop then. He would come in, place his order, visibly put the coins on the glass counter, and walk away with his steaming coffee, careful not to bump anyone. He would drink it alone on a bench up the road, regardless of the weather. Of course, they knew that things weren't ok over there. Of course, they knew some day it might be their turn to witness it more up close. Of course, they knew the legends from the Venezuela of the 60s, that golden place blessed with eternal summers where all who could had escaped to, where all who could had taken their money, their university titles, their families and left them to cope with what was avalanching over the country. They knew some day they would hear about the number of Venezuelans making their way down the continent to their country. Of course, they expected them to be wealthy,

able to buy up a nice little place, strong enough to build a community in the capital, to take over a corner in one of the nice neighbourhoods. And of course, this had already taken place. This had already been the first wave. And of course, they had only guessed at it.

Last year, when he first arrived, they expected to be the ones driving the wealthy Venezuelans around. They had prepared and practiced some of the future complains. They had not expected to share the little, ancient coffee shop with one of them over there. The news told of thousands crossing rivers and borders uncontrolled. Told of those seeking asylum in the empire up North. Serves them well, they thought. The news didn't tell how to spot one, how to speak to one, how to defend what was yours, how to share it. So the months passed before they moved closer, long after he had grown comfortable enough and the weather cold enough to drive him inside the shop for longer. If you grew up in eternal summers, what would you know about winters down here?

The first of them to approach the Venezuelan walked over casually, proud to have important news to share. He approached him and announced that he knew of another, mentioned a name, asked the young man if he knew this other one. Startled, he looked up from his phone, where a video was playing. The Venezuelan smiled, said maybe, he did know someone with that name and waited until the man moved away before returning to his phone. Weeks went by, they grew more comfortable, they felt a sense of ownership over knowing the first Venezuelan in their area. Whenever he walked in, they would greet him directly, sometimes invite him over, ask him to explain. When he went away, they discussed his answers, tried to

guess what side he was on, started all over again when he returned. Their first Venezuelan participated politely, but always found a moment to gaze into his phone and watch the same video over again.

They settled into a rhythm of political debate around him. Little he would add to it, but he would listen, he would let them speak, he would let them weave the entire narrative of the Left in Latin America, circling into the current state of Venezuela, loudly naming who was to blame. His silence was interpreted as treason, but tolerable, because he was their first Venezuelan. They complained about the others to him, as if he could resolve the differences for them, as if he could be held accountable, like a brother would, responsible for his other unruly brothers and sisters.

One Christmas eve, one of them took the phone of the Venezuelan, curious about that same video. What could be so interesting he needed to watch it over and over again? He played the video to the rest of them as the Venezuelan tried to get a hold of his phone again. A toddler, blurry, taking a few first steps.

'My son, Manuel,' said the Venezuelan. 'He's three now. He's why I am here, now. I haven't kissed his face.'

They sit with the Venezuelan when he walks in now. They take turns to buy each other coffee. They haven't talked politics since then.

Part II: Dónde sea – Anywhere

In December of his second year anywhere, he sits at the cubicle closest to the window and settles into his first shift. The headset finds the familiar dent in his hair and curves around his cheek, he cleans the small microphone with a wipe. He settles his *Contigo* cup down on the coaster, the green lacquer smoothed down from those years floating alongside him as he chatted with his friends in the transparent waters of the Caribbean Sea. Those years when you could still do such things.

Halfway through his shift, the box of mince pies comes his way and he bites into one, still not quite used to the taste, but proud to take part in a tradition of this place.

During his break, he comes out to check on his bike, sees a couple of his co-workers already on their Christmas clothes. They give him a plastic cup of Prosecco and toast for a passable Christmas party and they ask him again what is Christmas like where he comes from.

'Warm,' he says, pretending not to shiver beneath his Christmas jumper.

'I reckon I couldn't cope! Wouldn't feel like Christmas at all!' one of his co-workers says.

They grab his phone and write down a number in case he gets out in time to meet them at the pub. He waves them off as the cab drives off. He takes a selfie with the plastic Prosecco cup and sends it off to the family chat. Selfies from five different corners of the world answer back.

In December of the fifth year anywhere, he is huddled in the lobby of an airport watching the blizzard rage outside. Flakes of snow the size of two-pound coins catch

the light floating in orbs at the top of lampposts. The news-scroll on the televisions that hang like bats from the tall ceiling officially announce that the storm that had been keeping Europe in check has crossed the channel two days earlier than expected. He had hope to make it through just before it touched these shores.

The vouchers from the airline are enough for coffee and a pastry. The French couple behind him on the queue lend him their charger and he gets enough battery to send a selfie of himself sitting on his suitcase in the packed airport lobby. Got here with the snow, he texts. All flights cancelled, he texts. Not going anywhere, he texts.

In December on the ninth year anywhere, he sits on their small kitchen table, wiping pumpkin soup off his ironed shirt with one hand, still feeding the rest to his one-year-old daughter with the other. On the other side of the table, his wife has just managed to join the family call on time. Four other babies from anywhere else in the world stare at each other over the call, and his brother's son says his daughter's name loudly over the raucous coming from the computer. Paula. His wife takes a screenshot of this moment together. His daughter smile at the screen. As he waves to his nephew the image freezes for a moment in the call.

Part III: Aquí – Over here

I still keep good company. Every weekend, at one of our houses, I join the Association of Orphaned Parents for *dominó*. I'm getting good at it. I admit I didn't use to care about the game before, it is true. But I've begun to grow fond of it. Gives me more to tell you over our weekly calls, adds a little anecdote or two to the rota. We get a good group too, a steady dozen make it every week. I bring the whiskey sometimes, or a nice dish of *caviar carupanero*. Mrs Rodríguez has taught me how to cook it. She's teaching me other things when she comes over to look after the house. I've asked her only to focus on my room, the kitchen, the bathrooms and the living room. No point in doing much for the other rooms now – but I'll make sure she cleans yours when you come to visit. Between the Association, Mrs Rodríguez, my twice a week visits to the office, and lunch here and there, I see a good group of people, you don't have to worry. I like my bubble, emigration is for the new generation, not for the old ones like me. Someone has to keep this circus running. The video is gone frozen again, I'll call you next week if I can. Take care, get out when it's sunny. Don't worry. I'm good, I don't need any money. Keep it for yourself, put it up for savings. I'm good, ok, I'm good, see ya.

Yes, yes, we still meet. It's harder now, gotta save fuel, we can't do it every weekend. To be honest, that was quite a luxury, a bit tiring. But the Association of Orphaned Parents still going strong. We've swapped it for every other week. There's eight of us most times, we take turns to play. I've begun winning. Yes, I have! I'll show you when you come visit. I'm making pizzas now, managed to get some cheese and your aunt gave me some of her homemade passata. Came checking if I was ok. You didn't have to tell her I needed help. I'm a grown man, I like my bubble.

No, I don't need anything. I still go to work once week when they let us. It's very hard out there, but I'm in my bubble. No, I didn't make it to the protest in the end, didn't have fuel. Yes, don't worry. I'll let you know if I get to join the next one. I'll be careful. All is good, ok, ok, talk to you next week.

The new internet. Yes, I know is expensive, but I need to talk to you and your siblings. No, thank you, but no. I can still pay my way. I have a good salary, I don't have many expenses. Thanks, but no. Ah, yes, it's today actually, the meeting of the Association of Orphaned Parents. It's just the six of us now. Maria Elena and Raúl moved to Spain. I gave them your number. They are with their eldest, Maritza, in Oviedo now, she's based there. We met last month for a final game before they set off, managed to sell their house even. I'm hosting now. They're coming over. Can't talk long, *mi amor*, we're meeting during the day now, safer that way, yes. You were right, yes. We keep it going, yeah. We don't play much anymore, just a couple of games. But Angel brings his *cuatro* and we sing. It's lovely, you would love it. Oh, that's the bell, come say hi. This is my daughter, the one in Barcelona. That's her. Yes, that's the one that studied with Otulio. That's her, yes, the dentist, that's her. Ok, bye *mi amor*. Call me tomorrow, we'll talk it over. No. no. I'm fine. Yes, in my bubble. Love you too, *mi amor*, *chao*, *Dios te bendiga*.

Ah, that's just like the news. Of course I am eating. I am eating three times a day. Yes, I have enough. Mrs Rodríguez now has breakfast and lunch with me too. She takes some home, I don't need that much. It has gotten harder *mi amor*, yes, but I am safe in my bubble. Yes, if I ever don't have enough to eat, I will tell you. Or your aunt will tell you, somehow you'll know. I've seen it, yes, the money is there. Thank

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you *mi amor*, only for emergencies, only then I will use it. Don't worry *mi amor*. I'll come over when I get my passport back. It's been a year. I might actually need to pay someone. Don't worry *mi amor*, I am fine. The bubble has shrunken, but I am still in it. Ok *mi amor*, bye, *chao*.

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