

PATAGONIA

by Paul Calandrino

Paul Calandrino
pcalandrino@gmail.com

CHARACTERS

Everett, a traveler, 67
Aliro, a street vendor, 52

SETTING

Santiago, Chile

TIME

Night

"You probably need to eat something," the baker said. "I hope you'll eat some of my hot rolls. You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this," he said.

—Raymond Carver, "A Small, Good Thing"

A back street of Providencia, Santiago, the end of a long day. A lone street vendor, ALIRO, 52, packs up his inventory of hot dogs, buns, and produce. His cart is past its prime by a regime or two. It has a propane cook stove with a pan, a cutting board with knives. EVERETT, 67, a well-dressed but rumpled traveler, enters.

EVERETT

Oh, thank God. *Buenas noches.* I couldn't find anybody else open. *Está abierto?*

ALIRO

Keep looking, *señor*, I pack to go home.

EVERETT

Oh, please, no. I just want a hot dog. *Una Vienesa. Un Completo, por favor.*

ALIRO

You have waited long. It is after midnight.

EVERETT

I know—and I apologize—but I had to wait until I could ditch my daughter.

ALIRO

"Ditch"?

EVERETT

Leave her behind ... as if in a ditch.

ALIRO

You do not care for this daughter?

EVERETT

No, I do. I love her very much. She is a perfect daughter. And, to be fair to myself, the "ditch" in which I left her is five-star ditch with a king-sized bed.

ALIRO

Ah. My wife has been asleep for many hours, on our mattress on the floor. I go to her now. Maybe I sleep for two, three hours before I return. Come tomorrow.

EVERETT

We leave at sunrise.

ALIRO

America?

EVERETT

Sí, Washington.

ALIRO

You should have come before.

EVERETT

But as I say, the daughter does not approve of hot dogs.

ALIRO

Does not approve? The daughter is a monster.

EVERETT

I snuck out of the hotel after she went back to her room.

ALIRO

You seem desperate for this *Vienesa*.

EVERETT

A *Completo*. Do you know how many years I've lain awake at night thinking *Completo, Completo* before drifting off to sleep? It has been a very long time. I used to get them in this very part of town, from a man named Pablo. Pablo Diaz Carrasco. I'll never forget—

ALIRO

(*suddenly leery*)

Who are you? What do you want?

EVERETT

I'm sorry, did I—?

ALIRO

(*now curious*)

Pablo Carrasco?

EVERETT

Sí. Does that name—? (*Aliro bursts out laughing*) Is that funny?

ALIRO

You bought *Vienesas* from Pablo Diaz Carrasco. Is this what you are telling me?

EVERETT

Yes, it is.

ALIRO

Then, *señor*, you bought them from this cart. (*Everett is confused*) This is the only cart Pablo ever owned!

An amazed beat, then the two men laugh together and shake hands.

EVERETT

(admiring the cart)

I can't believe it. I don't know if I would have recognized it.

ALIRO

After Pablo died, his son took over a few years. And when I was of age I bought it from him.

EVERETT

I see you've made no improvements.

ALIRO

How do you Yankees say ...? If it doesn't broke ...? (*they laugh again, then ...*) I am sorry I cannot help you. I hope you will find your *Vienesa*.

EVERETT

But this is Pablo's cart. I'll pay any price.

ALIRO

Any price?

EVERETT

Within reason.

ALIRO

You think I can be bought?

EVERETT

No, no. But ... you are a businessman and I am a consumer—

ALIRO

You *aspire* to be a consumer.

EVERETT

Yes, it is my fervent hope to be. And price is the language we share. Your English is very good, by the way. Did you study?

ALIRO

My father was a poet. He insisted we learn. So we could read Sr. Whitman in the original. (*hamming it up*) “Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes.”

EVERETT

Haha! Bravo! Very good! (*Aliro bows and returns to packing*) So I beg of you. For Pablo's sake, and mine, and Sr. Whitman's, contradict yourself. Sell me a *Completo*.

ALIRO

Why this long suffering for your *Completo*? It is just a hot dog.

EVERETT

No. It was never just a hot dog. To me, it was ... it was salvation. I know how ridiculous that must sound. But ... (*a beat, then Aliro lights the burner*) Thank you! *Salud! Salud* ... uh ...?

ALIRO

Aliro.

Aliro pours oil into the pan and unpacks the hot dogs and buns.

EVERETT

Aliro. Pleased to meet you. I'm Everett.

Aliro retrieves ingredients from a cooler: an avocado, a tomato, an onion, mayonnaise, sauerkraut, chopped cilantro.

ALIRO

Sr. Everett, why does your daughter disapprove of hot dogs?

He chops and mashes half an avocado.

EVERETT

Nitrates, I suppose. And fat content. Her tastes in general incline toward the refined. Or I should say unrefined. The refined unrefined.

ALIRO

She would not approve of you eating food from a street vendor?

EVERETT

Heavens, no.

Aliro tosses a hot dog into the sizzling oil.

ALIRO

This is what brings you back to Chile?

EVERETT

Patagonia.

ALIRO

¿Qué?

EVERETT

My wife, Molly, died last April. We traveled a lot. She'd always wanted to see Patagonia. A romantic notion. The shimmering glaciers, the vast grasslands, *Los Torres del Paine*, the condors, flamingos, the puma.

ALIRO

The puma is a very rare sight on the streets of Santiago.

He dices a tomato and onion.

EVERETT

Enter Sarah, my daughter. She knew of Molly's desire and insisted we come. To spread Molly's ashes on Lake Nahuel Huapi.

ALIRO

And you agreed.

EVERETT

Not at first. I'd resisted for years. My previous visit was not my finest hour.

ALIRO

No?

EVERETT

Uh ... no.

ALIRO

(half joking)

Señor, I believe fate has brought you to my stand.

EVERETT

It seems so. But for what reason?

ALIRO

It is clear your hunger is very deep. You see, everybody, all the vendors, have their own way of making *El Completo*. *Sí, sí*, the elements are all the same. *Vienesa* and bun, *sí*. Avocado and mayonnaise. Tomato, onion, sauerkraut, cilantro. But they all claim to know the *secret* ingredient, the arrangement that transforms these common flavors into pure gold on the tongue, an alchemy which feeds not just the stomach, but the soul. I do not merely *claim* to know. I *know*.

EVERETT

You are my savior, then.

ALIRO

We shall see.

Aliro loads mashed avocado into the hot dog bun. Onto that he squeezes a snaking river of mayo.

EVERETT

Avocado and mayo first.

ALIRO

Sí, sí, sí ... you cannot be afraid of either.

EVERETT

I see that you are fearless.

ALIRO

Fearless, this is so.

Using tongs, he lowers the hot dog into the glistening bed of avocado and mayo.

EVERETT

Then the *Vienesa*.

ALIRO

Sí.

EVERETT

Exquisita.

ALIRO

Then the sauerkraut. You must not—

EVERETT

—be afraid of the sauerkraut.

ALIRO

Precisamente.

He loads sauerkraut onto the hot dog, followed by diced onions and tomatoes.

EVERETT

Onions. Tomatoes. Bravely applied!

ALIRO

And on top.

He sprinkles cilantro.

EVERETT

Cilantro.

ALIRO

Sí.

Aliro holds up the finished Completo for them to admire.

EVERETT

I have never seen anything so beautiful.

Aliro places the hot dog on his cutting board.

ALIRO

You have not seen much, have you.

EVERETT

No, I *have* seen much. More than I'll admit to. This *is* the most beautiful thing.

ALIRO

So.

EVERETT

So.

ALIRO

How much are you willing to pay for this beauty?

EVERETT

(considers)

Ten US dollars.

Aliro picks up his trash can and starts to sweep the hot dog into it.

EVERETT

No, no, no! Twenty! Twenty US dollars.

ALIRO

Sr. Everett, twenty dollars is all you would pay for salvation? You did use the word salvation.

EVERETT

I did, yes. (*thinks*) One hundred dollars. (*Aliro is ready to agree, when ...*) It's been forty years.

ALIRO
(quickly calculating)

Forty ...? When were you here?

EVERETT

Oh, uh ... 1975, briefly ... uh ... representing my government.

ALIRO

A diplomat?

EVERETT

Not exactly. No.

The truth jolts Aliro.

ALIRO

CIA? (*Everett does not deny it*) And *un Completo* is your salvation? Is it really so simple?

EVERETT

I'm sorry?

ALIRO

Please, Sr. Everett. I was young, but I remember.

EVERETT

Of course. Of course you do. Did you ... lose people?

ALIRO

Lose? (*smirks*) As one loses a piece of jewelry or clothing? One day it is where it has always been, on the shelf beside the window. The next day it has disappeared without a trace? Everyone *lost* someone.

EVERETT

I'm sorry. We had no idea.

ALIRO

No idea?

EVERETT

How bad it would be.

ALIRO

Ah, a simple lack of foresight—

EVERETT

The Company did not plan the coup. You must know that. We came to assist with the transition. Yes, we knew there would be reprisals. Political housekeeping. But we didn't know—

ALIRO

You knew or you did not know. Either way, shame. Shame on—

EVERETT

We believed we were helping the people—

ALIRO

How did you help Pablo Carrasco? Eh? What was he to you? A mere street vendor? *¿Un conocido, un amigo?* No, no. He was more than you imagined. He opposed Pinochet. An outspoken *Socialista*. Pablo Diaz Carrasco, *tu amigo*, was "lost" ... in *la Caravana de la Muerte*.

EVERETT

I ... I had no ...

ALIRO

And you have the audacity to offer one hundred US dollars for your salvation?

EVERETT

What do you want me to say? What price can I possibly offer? A thousand? Ten thousand? Aliro, you know and I know there is no amount of money that—

ALIRO

So, please, let us *not* talk of salvation.

EVERETT

Then how do we continue? We were wrong. We have formally apologized. If I had known then what I know now ... I never ... I hope I ...

A long standoff. Everett turns to leave, when ...

ALIRO

Mil doscientos.

EVERETT

What? Pesos? You can't be—

ALIRO

Sr. Everett, I do not know *how* we continue. But I know that we do. Every Chilean know this. We breathe. We work. We eat. We forgive, or we do not. Either way ... we continue. *Mil doscientos, por favor.*

Everett takes two dollar bills from his wallet and holds them out warily. Aliro takes the money and hands him the hot dog. Everett takes a bite and, despite the tension, savors it. He savors another bite, and Aliro, despite the tension, is pleased.

EVERETT

A pleasure my daughter would never understand.

ALIRO

And the wife ... eh ...?

EVERETT

Molly. Molly would have loved this. *Cherished* ... this *Completo*, this place ... the people, you. I should have brought her here. I should have brought her years ago. But I ... I couldn't bear to, knowing what we'd ... the part we played. I'm not certain ... she would have forgiven me.

ALIRO

I am not your savior, Sr. Everett. I believe you are sincere. I see you have regrets. I am heartless if I do not see this. But at sunrise you will return to America. Your home. And America will always be America. You understand what I mean?

A silence.

ALIRO (cont'd)

Eat, *por favor*.

He takes a can of Coke from the cooler and hands it to Everett.

EVERETT

What do I owe you?

ALIRO

Nada.

EVERETT

You are too generous.

As Everett eats and drinks, Aliro repacks his wares.

End of Play