

ESSAY

The Foreigner

by Arantxa Hernandez



"Dolabela Engineer" by Guilherme Bergamini

The alarm goes off at 5:45. You have to wake up within the next 5 minutes if you want to make it on time for school. You quickly brush your teeth, wash your face and put on your hideous uniform. You hate your all-girls school as much as you hate the pleated skirt and knee-high socks you have to wear everyday — you always have — but there's nothing you can do about it. It is the *best* option your parents could find.

Your alarm goes off at 6:40. You know you only have half an hour to get ready if you want to catch the 7:20 bus — you still press snooze and bring your warm blankets closer to your face. *I could just skip this one class, you think, we're only going to critique other peoples' essays.* You shake your head and get out of bed before laziness gets the best of you.

Savannah's winter is way colder than what you're used to, so you bundle up with two pants and three different sweaters — it still doesn't feel warm enough. You start shivering as soon as you step outside your apartment's door. The city is still dark and quiet as you walk over to the bus stop. You breathe in the scent of fresh pastries and coffee in the air, mixed with the potent smell of the papermills that seems to reach every corner of Savannah. The smell doesn't bother you though — it is both bitter and exciting.

Your mom is taking too long to come down the stairs into the kitchen, where you sit quietly, tapping your foot on the metal stool to keep you from yelling at her to hurry up. You sip your warm coffee mixed with oat milk as you stare at the clock. You hate the milk's chalky taste, but it's been years since you were able to find any type of milk at the supermarket— you'd add sugar but you know your mom only uses it on special occasions. The clock's hands mark 6:30. You only have 20 minutes to get to class. It is close enough that you could just walk... if only it was safe enough.

It seems to be the start of a nice day. You watch the first rays of sunlight sneak through the dry, yellowish bamboo trees in your garden, faintly revealing the Avila's silhouette. That big, overpowering mountain always reminds you of your guardian angel — no matter where you are in the city, it is always watching you in the distance. Hiking through the Avila is one of the few activities you're still able to do every weekend. Even if your parents rant about getting robbed or kidnapped, you will not let anyone take that away from you. It is the only reason why you keep calling Caracas your home. It is the only aspect that hasn't been corrupted by pessimism.

You still feel the need to run away.

10:30. Your writing class is over. You consider waiting for the bus outside your college's building, but it always takes too long. You decide to walk home, it's refreshing anyways. After two years living in Savannah, walking outside still amazes you — how strangers smile as you pass them by, wishing you a good day, or how couples take their dogs for walks and have picnics at the park without watching over their shoulders every couple of minutes. You still find yourself doing that sometimes. You imagine your dad walking with his left hand grabbing the handle of his gun at a place like this. He'd be looking down at the ground, as if to bother no one, gripping the back of your neck with his free hand—

“Watch out for the man coming on your left,” you hear him whisper as an old man walks past you.

Knowing that your parents are still stuck in Venezuela's reality breaks your heart.

They chose it, you keep telling yourself.

8:30. Recess. You take your breakfast out of your backpack and head out of the classroom: a green apple and the granola cookies that your grandfather taught you how to make.

“These cookies are magic”, he used to tell you, “they keep me full for hours when I'm working at sea. They never give us enough food.”

Your friends make fun of you as soon as you join them at your usual corner at the soccer field, next to a Virgin Mary statue.

“*Ahí viene la burguesa exhibiendo su manzana cara,*” one of them whispers. You roll your eyes and sit next to them — if only they knew your mom can only afford two apples a week for you as a treat.

“Want a bite?” you ask. Her eyes soften and she nods, blushing.

“I miss sitting on the grass man,” one of them says. You do too. You used to escape every day during breaks to the small park just a few feet outside the school's building. A few girls were kidnapped at that spot a few months ago. The school pulled up fences, gates and even security cameras everywhere after that. They only open their doors for 15 minutes during pick-up time. Your friends call it *Prison Break*.

You're out of class. 7:30 pm. It's been a long week for you; you just want to relax and get out of your tiny apartment. "Want to eat out tonight?" you ask once your best friend picks up the phone, "because I really don't feel like cooking." She says she'll meet you at the restaurant; one of the few Hispanic places in Savannah. It's not great but the taste reminds you of home. You hesitate to order an Uber. It still makes you uneasy to get into a stranger's car. Especially at night. "Never get into a taxi, Arantxa," you hear your mother's voice inside your head, "you'll either get kidnapped by the driver or some vicious man outside. Express kidnaps are happening all the time in the city and you never know how the driver is going to react in a dangerous situation like that. If you need to go somewhere, you will only let your father drive you." You shake the thought away and call the Uber. You don't want to leave your friend waiting for too long.

"Are we doing anything tonight?" one of your friends asks. You shrug. They all do. The question lingers in the air, like every other Friday. You like to pretend you can be like any other 16-year-old, going to parties and experiencing life for the first time. It never feels quite real.

"I don't know. We could go to LeClub but I'm only allowed to sign in four of you and we are seven," one of the girls finally answers. LeClub has become the new Thursday and Friday trend — the only dance club where your friends' parents feel comfortable enough leaving their daughters unsupervised. You know your friend has to pay an entrance fee for each person she signs in— she never mentions the price and just signs you in when you ask her. Today is different.

"My dad just got an email notifying them they're increasing each cover by another twenty thousand Bolivars," she mumbles, "that's pretty much all I have left in my account. He won't transfer me any more money until he gets paid next week so I can't really sign you all in."

"We can pay our own covers Valen," one of them murmurs, knowing very well that not all of you could.

"I'll never step into that place again *mis amores*," you announce. "If you all want the bartenders sneaking drugs into your drinks and ending up in the hospital, sure. You are welcome to go, but I'll pass." They all look at you apologetically, you roll your eyes and pretend it doesn't matter. It happens all the time anyways.

"Let's do dinner after class then," Valentina says. You all nod.

“Are you going home for the summer?” your best friend asks as she takes a bite of her sweet plantain. Your spring quarter is coming to an end, roses are starting to bloom and so is your anxiety about finding an internship that will give you an excuse to stay in the U.S. for the summer.

You shake your head, “doesn’t feel like home anymore.”

Her eyes widen and she stirs uncomfortably on her chair, “but it’s home at the end, isn’t it?” She thinks she understands you because she also had to leave her home and move to Savannah, and she does in some ways — both of you feel like outsiders whenever someone doesn’t understand your accent, or asks ignorant questions like, *Are there any cars in your country? Do you have internet? Did you have social media when you were growing up? Does your house have concrete walls? Did you come here on a boat?*

“I guess,” you shrug, “I got so used to Savannah’s freedom that whenever I go back depression just hits me hard — I can’t stay on lockdown for so long anymore.”

“So, Savannah is home,” she says, trying to cheer me up.

“I guess.” You take a bite of your *tequeño* and mutter, “but it also doesn’t feel like it.”

“Remember guys, if we’re splitting the check between the six of us, you can only have one bottled water as drink,” Valentina says, laughing, as you all open the menu.

“Wait,” you interrupt them. “What happened to Oriana? We were supposed to be seven.”

“Oh,” one of the girls in the corner of the table says. She doesn’t look up when she speaks.

“She was ashamed to tell you guys. She can’t afford dinner.”

All of you sigh, defeated. You think about asking them to change the plans so she can join you, but it’s too late. You promise yourself to invite her to dinner with your entire next month’s salary. *It’ll make her happy*, you tell yourself as you look down at the menu.

The prices are ridiculous. You flip through the pages and anxiously scratch your legs underneath the table trying to choose something you can afford, but there’s hardly anything to choose. You discreetly take your phone out of your purse and text your mother.

A: Can I spend 8.5 million bolivars in sushi?

Mom: “Yes, hija,” she replies right away.

Mom: But I don't have that amount of money in one account. Pay half with my credit card and the other half with my debit. The tip is gonna have to be on you.

You shake your head and order the cheapest sushi roll on the menu. Most of your friends order the same.

The discomfort of the meal's price and the current chaos of Venezuela's situation is quickly washed away by your friends' laughter and conversation. You make fun of the pack of bills, taller than the water glass, when you pay for the tip in cash. Adults sitting around you look at your friends comically, some even make ironic comments once you stand up to leave.

"Student budget's struggle huh?" the waiter chuckles as he clears out the table and our mountain of bolivar bills. You all nod, laughing along with him.

"Can we grab the check please?" your best friend asks. You pay for your dinner and leave the restaurant within 5 minutes, remembering all the embarrassing times you had to pay with three different cards when you were in Venezuela. Your best friend jokes about not ever letting you return — you know she's only half kidding.

You both walk to your apartment in silence. You unnecessarily look over your shoulder every few minutes to make sure nobody's following you. You say goodnight to your best friend and get into your bed, texting your parents the same.

As you lay in the darkness, you long for your home in Venezuela — the soothing sound of your mom's voice wishing you goodnight in Spanish, the comforting scent of burnt sugar and spices from your grandma's desserts and the cool air flowing through your window as you went to sleep every night, lulled by the melodic sound of crickets and your dog's quiet barks.

You get out of the car and kiss your dad goodnight once you get home from dinner. You hurry up the cold wooden stairs to your room and wave at him one more time before closing the door. His exhausted look makes you feel guilty about asking him to pick you up late at night, but you doubt he'd give you any other choice. You get under your sheets and fall asleep imagining how your life will be once you leave for college. You hope you'll feel more at home than you do trapped inside the four overwhelming walls of your home.

Now you think about both places. How none feel comfortable enough, warm enough or welcoming enough to call home. You wonder if you'll ever have one. Maybe you're not supposed to.