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El Paso Chronicles

Downtown El Paso's The Tap Will Be A Little Less Familiar

Everyone has their place, their watering hole, their very own Cheers where they feel safe and it's filled with familiar faces. One of my favorite places is downtown favorite The Tap.

It's funny, because I basically inherited the place. I went there as a child with my grandma, Ita and spent a lot of time going back and forth between the jukebox and peanut machines perched on the bar. It was my favorite bar because of the Budweiser sign that had the Clydesdale horses behind the bar. (Now, it's above the new jukebox.) My grandma worked there for many years before I was born, so when we went to watch the fight, hang out, whatever, she always knew lots of people.

As an adult I only know a few people: Jasmine the waitress who greets me and the people I'm with every time with a familiar smile. Veronica, who I call Vaca who's like an Aunt to me. She became a part of the family long before I was born. A friend of my grandma's who became a friend to my mom and uncle. Who now my sister and I introduce as our Aunt. (I have black and white pictures of her from the early 70's in bell bottoms when she was young and we laugh whenever we see them, she was funkadelic.) And last, there's Justo. Justo was the door man, sometimes bartender, bar back, all around The Tap guy. He was a broad man with black rimmed glasses and a grey crew cut who often wore jean overalls. Justo also died three days ago.

Now, I didn't know Justo well. When I moved back to El Paso, Vaca reminded him of who I was, "Es la neita de Licha," and he stared trying to remember the little girl version of me with a long black braid sitting next to my Ita vodka tonic in hand. I didn't remember Justo well either, but he remembered my Ita and because of that we both came to a mutual agreement. From then on when I went to The Tap we greeted each other warmly. If I needed to get Vaca's attention while she was busy he yelled out to her over the noise. If he saw I was waiting a long time he'd sneak me my order. When Vaca told him about my story "The Pink Shoes" being published in BorderSenses he wanted a copy of the magazine. He was interested in my writing and asked what I wrote about my Ita, about The Tap. I think he hoped he would make an appearance as Vaca had in other stories. Justo had a serious, no nonsense face, I assume from working in a bar atmosphere for a long time but with me he was kind. His eyes softened a bit. He'd greet me with a, "Hola mija."

Even though I didn't know him well it still saddens me. I know that Vaca is extremely sad, and that in itself makes me even sadder. Justo seemed like an extension of my grandma. His



memory of her lived on and therefore gave her another life, and now that he's gone that life, along with his is over. After we die it's the memories we leave with others that allow us to live on, and I suppose that's why I'm writing this, to have Justo live on. With as many years as The Tap has been around I know that there are others outside of family and close friends who have memories of him. I hope that this jogs memories. When it's read people will think, "Oh, Justo. I remember him. How sad." or "I remember him he..." and it will trail on into a story as mine as.

Sunday en Segundo

Sunny spring Sundays always brought the people out of their red brick apartments. The rows of doorways popped open and screen doors kept the flies out. Opened windows let in the fresh breeze and sunlight. The neighborhood knew to take advantage of it because there were only a few days like this in El Paso's spring before the winds came.

El Freddy walked down 3rd Street toward Stanton. He'd just left from La Bowie where he ate a warm empanada. He'd passed on the cafecito even though he thought it always made the piña of the empanada taste sweeter, but it was too warm for café.

As he walked, he passed some vatos who were riding around the barrio on their tricked out chrome blinding bikes. El Freddy nodded as he passed them and he heard their laughter as one of them hit the curb and almost wiped out. El Freddy didn't laugh but just smiled. In the alley, he heard the sounds of chavitos as they kicked a worn soccer ball shirtless and barefoot up and down toward makeshift goal posts. He liked the sounds of his gente as he made his way to his compa Beto's house. Cumbias spilled out of the windows and mingled with the vatos and chavitos laughter. La Señora Lupe was sweeping the sidewalk in front of her door and she nodded at him as he passed. Her eyes were steely and even though El Freddy hadn't done anything wrong his gaze moved down toward his feet.

"Esa Señora era bruja", he thought and walked faster.

El Freddy found Beto outside, like everyone else, sitting in his dark green Oldsmobile wiping down the dashboard with Armor All. He wiped around a black sticker with white letters that said "Raza is Love". Beto's ruca had stuck it there one evening after they'd smoked because she thought it was beautiful. He heard the easy notes of Malo's Suavecito flowing out of the car.

Laaaa-ah-ah, la-la, laaaa-ah-ah

Laaaa-ah-ah, la-la, laaaa-ah-ah



That's what today was. Suavecito. El Freddy leaned against the side of the car and shot the shit while Beto made sure the inside of his ride gleamed so bright it hurt the eyes of anyone walking by.

Suavecito, mi linda
Suavecito
The feelin' I have inside for you
Suavecito, mi linda

They checked out the chavas as they walked by and laughed when the girls rolled their eyes at them. They were laughing so hard that El Freddy almost missed her. A mamacita he'd seen around a few times but never talked to was getting out of an old Buick across the street. He stared as she bent at the waist, arms against the window frame, to talk to the driver. Her tight bell bottoms hugged all her curves and he couldn't stop staring at the jean clad corazoncito facing him.

"Ay," he said to Beto and jutted his chin in her direction.

Beto turned to look, shook his hand fingers flapping freely and said, "Esa ruca, man. Tiene un culo," then bit his lip.

As she straightened up, she turned to look behind her and saw El Freddy and Beto staring. El Freddy froze, lips parted, but no sound came out. She smiled at him, flipped her dark hair, and disappeared toward the corner tienda. The Buick roared off.

Never, I never meet a girl like you in my life
I never, no, no yeah
I never meet a girl like you in my life

"Andale," Beto said toward the store.

El Freddy looked at Beto, smoothed his hands on his faded Levi's, and nodded.

Downtown El Paso

Yesterday I went for a walk in downtown El Paso. The older part where they are trying to turn the hood into a postcard where everyone is smiling brightly and sunlight reflects off chemically whitened teeth.

I won't get into how I feel about parts of it: disappointed and choked with things being forced down my throat as the city officials place their hands on the back of my head. Or how



I feel about the other part of it: nostalgic with it's restored beauty and I remember my childhood, clasping my grandmother's sweaty palm as we walked the downtown streets.

As I walked by Firefighters Memorial Park, a small corner hidden behind tall buildings and homes, I snapped some photos. The sun was bright and unforgiving--it must be called that in El Paso because it's the best description--but I still wanted to look around and get close to the vintage light posts which have replaced the tainted silver ones that used to be there. Beads of sweat were already beginning to surface across the bridge of my nose and along my spine but I still crossed the street and looked at the street art. I smiled at it being left intact and the color it brought to brown adobe colored buildings and at the young green trees just planted trying to establish roots, standing next to giants that have been their for decades. I looked up at their pink flowers, shaded from the sun, and breathed in deeply.