

Watch Out for Water

A composite field story from La Carihuela about watches, water, bingo, routes, borders, local attention, and who becomes visible at a table.

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A composite field story from La Carihuela.

The place is real. The tensions are real. Some details are compressed to protect privacy and make the system readable. This is not an investigation.

My mother does not show people the coast by explaining it.

She shows them where to sit.

That is the first thing her visitors misunderstand. They think the sea will introduce the place. The promenade. The bars. The beach. The white tables. The menus in too many languages.

But the coast does not introduce itself.

It repeats until someone learns how to read it.

My mother lives close to the sea now. Close enough that the beach is no longer a postcard.

That does not mean she always goes into the sea.

That is the first mistake: to think proximity is access.

When people visit, she begins with a chair.

A bar table. A glass. A coffee. A cola. Water. Ice.

The sea is visible.

The system that fills the glass is not.

On the promenade, there are shops with walls.

There are also shops without walls.

A sheet on the ground. Bags, sunglasses, bracelets, shirts, watches, football jerseys. A whole storefront laid out flat, always half-ready to disappear.

A quick market. A nervous market. A market with one eye on the tourists and one eye on the corner.

When attention turns, the coast changes shape.

The sheet closes. The goods vanish. The men move.

The promenade becomes cleaner, maybe, but not necessarily more honest.

My mother knows another route through the same economy.

Not every seller becomes part of the place. Most pass through the afternoon and stay outside it. A hand with watches. A sheet with bags. A voice saying sunglasses, bracelets, real Rolex, my friend.

The tourists learn the movement and refuse it before it arrives.

Some of the expats do the same. Local in their complaints, not always local in their attention.

He is different.

Not to everyone. That would make the story too clean.

But to enough people.

Where he had come from was not the most interesting thing about him. That cannot be the first and last fact.

He is the man my mother knows by name.

His name can stay at the table.

Real Rolex, he says, with a face that knows exactly how much truth the table can survive.

My mother laughs.

The visitors do not know at first whether he is selling, joking, performing, or simply keeping the afternoon moving.

Then something breaks.

Maybe a strap. Maybe a battery. Maybe the small metal patience of a watch that has stopped agreeing with the world.

He takes it in his hands.

Not the border. Not the sea. Not Europe.

His hands first.

A watch is a small machine for agreeing with the world about time.

He opens it like someone who has done this often enough not to make a show of it. The visitor who had waved him away watches him work. My mother already knows he can do it.

He fixes watches near a sea where people do not share the same time.

The holidaymaker has one time. The worker another. The retiree another.

But he does not only fix watches.

The watch is only the easiest object to understand.

He can find other things too. A bracelet. A winter jacket. Something my mother needs and does not know where to get.

He knows the small routes.

Not the official routes. Not the routes on maps. The other ones. The routes between need and object.

He does not have a shopfront.

He has recognition.

My mother has his number too.

Not in a sentimental way. In the practical way people become real to each other. If the watch stops working again, she needs someone to call and complain to.

That is funny.

It is also infrastructure.

A phone number is a small piece of market architecture. No platform. No receipt printed by a machine. Just a name in a phone and enough trust to say: you fixed this, now it is broken again.

Some markets disappear when attention turns the corner.

Others survive because someone has your number.

Sometimes her English partner joins her at the table. Sometimes he does not. He carries London with him in that dry, polite way certain older Englishmen do.

He is not the subject of the story.

But he is part of the room.

So is the bartender. So are the people who live there all year and the people who arrive with sunburn and leave with photos. So is the watch man. So is my mother, who has sat there long enough for repetition to become relation.

The next stop is bingo.

Bingo was not one place.

It moved from bar to bar, depending on who was open, who had changed owners, who still knew the people.

The signs changed. The chairs changed.

But the players knew the route.

In that part of the coast, bingo was not only a game. It was a moving room.

A bar could be a business in the morning, a tourist stop in the afternoon, and a small ageing infrastructure by evening.

Then a word followed it.

Licence.

Bingo did not feel like gambling from inside the room.

It looked like old people knowing where to go.

That is why it matters here.

Not because bingo is the story.

Because my mother knows which room is still a room.

She knows which bar has which chairs. She knows who comes. She knows who stopped coming. She knows who always sits in the same place, who is waiting for someone else.

The visitors begin to understand that she is not giving them tourism.

She is giving them her map.

Not a map of streets.

A map of attention.

There is the bar.

There is the bingo route.

There is the path to the beach.

There are the quick shops on sheets.

There is the man who says real Rolex.

There is the man who can fix the watch when the joke stops being a joke.

There is the sea everyone can see.

There is the water no one notices until it fails.

And from higher up, on a clear day, there is the other side of the sea — where continents meet.

The table already has enough evidence.

The coast is shared.

The route is not.

That is the second mistake: to think the same view means the same system.

The table did not move.

The sea did not move.

The passport changed.

Brexit enters quietly. Something that felt like lifestyle can become paperwork.

So they return to the table.

The glass is still there.

The sellers still pass.

The bartender still sees more than he says.

The English partner may have joined by then, or may not have.

Then the watch man either comes by or he does not.

If he comes by, the visitors see him differently.

Not perfectly. Not nobly. Not as a lesson completed. People do not become better that fast.

But they hesitate before sorting him.

They have seen the glass. They have seen the quick market. They have seen the rules around bingo. They have seen his hands open the watch. They have heard my mother say his name.

He is no longer only interruption.

If he does not come by, the lesson is sharper.

Because my mother looks for him.

That is the part the visitors could not have known on the first day. They could see a man pass between tables and think the place was full of minor disturbances. They could not yet see what it meant when one of those disturbances was missing.

He had gone home to visit family.

He had said he would be back.

Then he was not back when expected.

People noticed.

They worried.

Not because a policy told them to. Not because a migration report entered the bar. Not because the coast had become kind.

Because the rhythm had changed and a person was missing from it.

That is where the story begins.

Not with Europe.

Not with the far shore.

Not with Brexit.

Not with water infrastructure.

With a watch that could be fixed, a phone number that could be used, and a man who was expected back.

My mother is not Spanish in the old sense. She is not only a tourist either. She has become something more useful for this story: a foreign local.

This is not citizenship in the legal sense.

It is a kind of attention.

Who do you see?

Who becomes part of the room?

Who becomes only movement between tables?

Who is missed when they do not return?

A place is not alive because it has tourists.

It is not alive because it has views.

It is not alive because the tables are full.

Those things can be signs of life, or only signs of trade.

A place is alive when ordinary people become visible inside its rhythm.

Watch out for water.

It carries more routes than it shows.

A table can look shared while the systems beneath it divide everyone sitting there.

And sometimes, the smallest test of a place is not whether strangers arrive.

It is whether someone expected can fail to return, and someone at the table knows that something is missing.

RELATION MEMORY

NEARBY [Every Town Should Be Able to Taste Like Itself](#) · Both pieces use everyday market life to ask whether a place remains readable through local routes, not only through full shelves or tourist surfaces.

NEARBY [Bread, Water, and the City](#) · Shares the water-as-infrastructure thread: what is visible at the table and what remains hidden underneath ordinary access.

NEARBY [The Hand That Knows How to Knock on the Melon](#) · Both articles treat practical recognition as real knowledge before it becomes formal evidence.

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