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## Manhood

Maria León

**ABSTRACT:** *Manhood* is a short story about Fernando, a pre-teen coping with the death of his father in the Andes region of Venezuela in 1958.

The Andes region of Venezuela is the only part of the country that cools down enough to see snow on mountain tops from December to February. The rest of the country mostly oscillates between thirty and forty degrees celsius, a temperature warm enough to melt an ice cream cone in a few minutes. Being able to eat ice cream from a cone before chocolate drips all over one's hands is an accomplishment that most Venezuelan children master by age ten.

But not Fernando.

The last time Fernando had ice cream was on a hot June afternoon in 1958. He was twelve years old and sitting next to his old man, Don José. The attendant at the *heladería* handed the boy a double scoop on a waffle cone wrapped with a see-through white paper napkin. Fernando held it with both hands and opened his mouth big like he did when he sang about the letter "O" in preschool. He closed his eyes, wrapped his lips around the cone and sucked the top ball into his mouth. Fernando smiled and the sweet cream coating the inside of his cheeks dripped past the edges of his lips. His hands and fingers became sticky and his giggles turned into a guttural chuckle that rose from deep inside his belly. Don José looked at Fernando, his first born child with his uncalloused hands and his prepubescent hairless face, covered in melted chocolate and licking the cone with zest. Don José wrinkled his brow and said:

"Son, don't eat like a fag. You're a man."

Don José died a tragic and unexpected death. For months, he'd experienced chronic mild pain on his left wrist that bothered him when he drove and did crosswords. At the clinic in the nearest city, the procedure took less than one hour but the staff recommended an overnight stay as a precaution. Don José slept in a shared room on the fourth floor of the building and woke up at midnight with a pressing need to urinate. He stumbled out of bed and followed the glow of the fluorescent, long tubes that lit the empty corridor. In between sleepy blinks and cloudy awareness, he leaned his body against a door he assumed led to the bathroom but was instead, the entrance to an emergency exit under repair.

His body was found on the pavement early the next morning.

At home, María, a twenty-nine year old woman now solely responsible for the well-being of three children, sat on a red velvet

couch holding a rosary and staring at a wooden crucifix pinned to the white wall in front of her. It was February, a time when kids celebrated carnival by throwing water balloons at unwilling passersby and willing bystanders. Fernando walked into the house with a wet shirt stuck to his chest; his nipples poked through the cotton like birdseed. María smiled and patted the seat next to her, directing her firstborn to sit.

"How does it make you feel? To be the man of the house," she asked.

Fernando's stomach rumbled inside his belly and his heartbeat slowed to a heavy palpitation. The boy sat in silence while a drop of water slid from the widow's peak on his forehead and rolled down towards the tip of his nose. The drop dangled there, waiting for the boy to move in order to freefall towards the ground, like his father.

Conchita took care of the house since before Fernando was born. She was an eternally old woman with a nervous tic that made her chew saliva after speaking. Her front teeth were crooked and so she used her molars to bite into *arepas* and bread. Her short stature never stopped her from dusting off the ceiling fans or from getting the fine china from above the stove. After Don José's death, she agreed to work for a reduced rate as long as María continued to feed her and let her move into the room in the coolest corner of the house. To accommodate the request, María asked Libertad, her oldest daughter, to share a room with her sister.

"Why doesn't he share his room?" The young girl growled and looked at Fernando, who was reading the dictionary by himself in the living room.

"Boys need privacy," María said softly and floated down the hall.

Libertad was a year younger than Fernando and she accepted but was annoyed by his seniority. She too wanted to read books instead of folding laundry. She wanted to run outside instead of dropping eggs into socks to mend them. Libertad took a sip of juice, walked to the living room and used the narrow gap between her two front teeth to shoot melon water at her brother.

"Stop it!" He shouted, wiped juice off the page and went back to the sentence he'd read three times.

According to Larousse, a fag was a cigarette. A fagot, another

er word Fernando had heard in the streets, was a bundle of sticks bound together for fuel. Fernando pictured the twigs; strong and stable, ready to ignite when prompted. Then he thought of himself, weak and alone.

"I can work with Flavio," the boy offered when María announced she'd get a second job.

"Your job is to go to school," she replied while Conchita threw coffee beans inside a blender.

"I'll go after school," the boy demanded, cutting through the grating.

"Conchita, what do you think?" María asked, covering her ears.

"A job would be good for the boy," Conchita said and turned off the blender.

Flavio, across the street, was a stocky leather maker with a small family shop that remained successful even after his wife's passing.

"I hope you find a woman to screw you real good. And I hope you get her pregnant too!" Flavio told his son, Junior.

Junior didn't flinch, he smiled to himself and waved at Fernando who was standing by the door. Unlike most people in town, Junior was aloof to others' comments, including his father. He walked down the streets whistling like the town was fiction. Fernando watched him move from one side of the room to the other, in awe of his weightlessness.

"Your birthday's coming up, right?" Flavio asked and Fernando nodded. The man pointed at a box in the back of the shop and Junior pulled out a smooth leather briefcase the color of rust. The teenager handed the bag to Fernando and patted his shoulder smiling. Fernando stood up, slung the briefcase over his shoulder and put his book inside. It fit perfectly. A custom gift like that was labor intensive and expensive but that wasn't the reason Fernando's chest was tight with emotion. He didn't know what to say so instead of words, he gave Flavio Junior a kiss on the cheek, like he'd seen him do to Flavio and he ran outside to find his mother.

María went back to work after the customary ninth prayer for the dead. She left the house in the small hours of the morning, before the caged parrot in the patio sang to the national anthem that came on the radio at six a.m. From seven in the morning to three in the afternoon, she filed death records and birth certificates at the County Clerk office. On her first day back, she created a sad label for her own Don José. For her second job, María prioritized verbs and omitted prepositions writing telegrams at the post office. That's where Fernando found her. He ran in, chipper, hugging the new bag. The boy sat next to María in silence and stared at the reflection of the fluorescent light on the pristine leather.

"Dear son," a tall man with a snug green shirt dictated, "a year has passed since you left. We don't hear from you. Your mother cries nightly."

María pressed one of Don José's handkerchief against her eyelids and typed the message.

"Write soon," the man added, looking at Fernando and the

boy's big brown eyes and his soft expression made the gentleman tear up. He cleared his throat, placed a few bolivars on the counter and walked outside.

Fernando followed the man down the street, past the church with the overgrown bush, into a corner store with a blue awning. Inside, the man drank orange soda and wiped sweat off his forehead. Fernando tapped him on the shoulder.

"Why did he leave?" Fernando asked him.

The man kneeled down and looked at the boy's face.

"I hope he fell in love."

"And that's what men do," Fernando stated even though he meant to ask.

Later that day, Conchita peeled carrots and potatoes by the sink while Fernando played out back. The boy sat behind the rose bushes and at first it looked like he was playing with his cars and plastic soldiers but when she opened the window, she heard him talking to, or worse yet whispering, to the roses. After a minute of sighs and murmurs, she heard him compare yellow petals to the sun; she saw him kiss the red blooms gently, as if they were lips; he talked to the bush dotted with pink blossoms and said:

"You're beautiful."

Conchita shook her head confirming this should be the last strange behavior she ought to accept from Fernando. María was too busy to notice but Conchita knew he had become increasingly quiet since Don José's death. In addition to talking to the roses and a few other peculiarities, he expressed no interest in conversing with his sister's friends or to anyone except Flavio. For a boy his age, this presented a serious problem in the eyes of Conchita. After all, he was a promising young man, able to receive an education. In the future, he could provide a bright future for a family; he had such high potential.

When Conchita was a child, José, who was not a Don yet, was a promising bachelor in the community. Despite her mother's suggestions to the reputable family, Conchita was not a good candidate for them. Not officially nor for the long term. It was after refusing to give herself to José behind the mango tree outside of her parent's house, that Conchita learned the value of timely action.

"Hijo," Conchita exclaimed, opened the fridge and took out a chicken. Blood-stained black and white feathers pressed against a clear plastic bag as the fleshy bird sat lazily on the counter. She stuck her head out the window and called out for the boy again, much louder this time.

"I need help skinning this bird."

Fernando wasn't her son but Conchita was María's eyes around the house. With that responsibility in mind, that evening, Conchita sat in the living room waiting for María. She flipped through a magazine, trying to make out the words while looking at the pictures on the pages. Her shoulders hunched high, closer to her ear lobes than usual. Shortly after seven, María walked in and Conchita stood up and announced she needed the help of a younger girl.

"You don't have to pay her, just feed her. It's too much work for me alone."

Conchita's niece was fifteen and happy to share a room with her auntie instead of sharing a smaller space with four relatives at home. María's house was also much closer to her school so instead of waking up at four thirty in the morning to ride a minibus and transfer at Plaza Bolívar, she woke up at six, helped Conchita with breakfast and got to the classroom by seven. Her name was Emilia and she had a freckle above her upper lip and long, curly hair that smelled like coconuts. She reminded Fernando of Don José's forever-friend.

For as long as the boy could remember, Don José drove him out of the city on Saturday mornings to visit his friend La Negra. They rode past the paved roads and the roundabout with the white sculpture of the Virgin Mary where indigenous people from the mountains sold fragrant flowers, ripe papayas and green guavas. La Negra lived in a small house made of cinder block with polished cement floors that shone with pride of ownership. She lived there with her mother, father and two boys a few years younger than Fernando. With every visit, the children ran outside and welcomed Don José with their hands interlaced behind their backs. Don José handed off blessings, chocolates wrapped in cellophane and after a few minutes, he disappeared with La Negra.

On their last visit, Fernando was restless. It was a very hot day and his father was groaning on the other side of the wall while the two boys insisted on playing. They tugged on the leg of his pants and begged him to share the nice pebbles he kept in a net inside his pocket.

"Stop it!" Fernando yelled, stood up and pushed the boys away. The youngest child ran outside crying and Don José and La Negra came out, half dressed and alarmed.

"What happened?" La Negra asked Fernando.

"He's being a fag," Fernando said and walked to his father's car.

La Negra chased the boy down, slapped him across the face and ran into the house.

On their way back, like always, Fernando and Don José picked up fresh fruit for Conchita and colorful flowers for María. At home, Don José and Fernando dropped off the goods in the kitchen and María sniffed the colorful arrangements not mentioning that the big monks and chuquiragua, the lilies and the orchids, smelled like La Negra's coconuts.

"When you love a woman you gotta grab her with a firm grip, that's how she knows you like her," Flavio said and slapped a metal ruler on the counter with a smile.

Junior looked at Fernando and rolled his eyes and the unspoken exchange between them felt breezy and bright. It was that sense of closeness along with the smell of tannins, oils and glue, what brought the boy back to the store every week. He liked brewing coffee for customers and restocking the toilet paper in the bath-

room. From time to time, he'd get lost in place thinking about his father but neither Flavio nor Junior pressed him on it. They let him be quiet and didn't suggest Fernando did or didn't do things because he missed his father. They didn't ask unanswerable questions about mourning.

"Emilia is pretty, huh?" Flavio told him.

Fernando looked up from his book and nodded.

At that moment, Conchita walked inside the shop and put tired moccasins on top of the counter for Flavio to inspect.

"Might be time for a new pair," Flavio said and ripped what was left of the sole like one peels a banana.

"How much for new ones?" Conchita asked.

Flavio looked at her, amazed at what acrimony can do to a face. He remembered Conchita back in the day, willing to love with trust. He pulled out a catalog from under the counter, flipped through the pages and pointed at a picture of shoes with thick padding under the heel.

"They're costly but your back will thank ya," he tapped his fingers on the price written in blue ink and leaned in closer to Conchita, as if he wanted to smell her.

Conchita stared at the number on the page and shook her head.

"Just fix the ones I brought," she said and looked at Fernando. His face was hidden behind a hardback featuring a man with a handsome hat.

"Still reading that book," Conchita remarked and crossed her arms. The boy put the book down. "You shouldn't spend all day smelling fumes here. Go outside and play like the others," she said and left the store in a hurry.

"Tough lady, huh?" Flavio said, whistling while his eyes followed the seam on the back of Conchita's dress.

Rumors and *chismes* didn't bother Conchita, it was the unsaid, the assumed that disturbed her. Flavio's pleasantries towards her for example, were theater. Everyone knew he had his eye on María. There was also the neighbor's new habit of drinking and listening to loud music until midnight almost every night. María refused to think those occurrences were connected to Don José's death but one day, Conchita asked the neighbors to turn down the radio and laughing, they told her to send the man of the house to take a shot of rum with them. Then there was María, the quiet widow with porcelain skin and an array of men knocking on the door, delivering sweet bread and offering to prune the bushes. Everyone knew María could barely pay the bills without her husband but no one said it. They dropped by and walked past Conchita holding gifts and lengthy rants, insinuating a better future for the family. The fact that those so-called gentlemen would knock on the door less than a year after Don José's death, infuriated Conchita.

"Let marriage be held in honor among all and let the marriage bed be undefiled," Conchita said to herself, out loud, while María read in her proximity eating a sweet guava treat she'd received from one of the men.

"Oh, yes," María said and passed a page calmly. "The bible also says God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous but don't worry Conchita, I don't have time for nonsense."

Conchita thought she was the only one who noticed the towns' whispers but evidently, everyone knew everything about everyone.

One day, Fernando heard his mother cry inside the bathroom. He knocked on the door and sat in the hallway reading a passage from his book out loud to sooth her:

We wake like this, alone  
At the hour of bravery  
And tremble with tenderness  
While we stand erect  
Because our fate is to be  
Forever untouched

Fernando hoped the words would distract María but when he turned around, Conchita stood behind him, leaning on the wall with a wet mop in her hand staring in the distance mumbling, repeating the words of the poem to herself.

On his thirteenth birthday, Fernando woke up to Emilia standing by his bedside. The soft morning light came in through the window and landed warmly on her bare shoulders. She wore a strappy blue dress that María had bought for her on her fifteenth birthday two weeks prior. Fernando sat up and wished he hadn't slept in his underwear but Emilia didn't seem to notice his embarrassment. She was looking in his direction, seeing past him, her eyes focused on something far away inside herself.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

As a ninth grader, Emily was friendly yet indifferent towards Fernando both in school and at home. People called her prudent even though she had the mischievous smile of someone with thoughts to share. This morning though, she was timid.

Her hair was wet from the shower and even though she was smiling, she didn't make eye contact. She pointed at a stack of clean laundry folded by the door; dark colors at the bottom, light ones on top.

"Auntie wanted me to bring in your clothes," she said and grabbed a pair of pants from the pile. She held them out in front of her, like a fisherman holds a catch.

Fernando stood up and the sheets covering his body fell to the ground. His hands trembled as he walked closer to Emilia with a firm gaze. The fan spun slow in the corner and he stood on one foot and put a leg through the pants. Emilia moved closer to him, grabbed his arm to help him balance but her touch stiffened his body and the pants dropped around his ankles.

Emilia smiled; small bubbles of sweat dampened the freckle on her upper lip. She put her hands behind her back, interlocked her fingers, leaned in forward towards Fernando and pressed her mouth gently on his. Her lips were soft. Her shallow breath warmed his face and for a moment, Fernando relaxed. Suddenly, her tongue entered his mouth and it was abrupt and flavorless; foreign. Fernando offered his own which felt thick and clumsy inside the crowded orifice. At that moment the door of the bedroom clicked shut, as if someone had been out in the hall watching.

After the kiss, Emilia removed her dress and sky-blue panties. Her naked body looked smooth and even, almost waxy. Fernando stood in front of her with limp arms hanging on both sides of his body and a shallow rhythmic breath. She placed his left hand on her left breast. Under the plumpness that filled his palm, her heartbeat was steady. Her skin was warm and the color of cinnamon, not too different from the briefcase hanging on the door behind her. Fernando touched her neck and her cheeks and her gentle breath landed on his hand like the steam that rolled down the hall after one of his father's late night showers.

When Emilia touched his member, Fernando's face and all extremities went numb. He made a fist, tried to bring life back to his body but when he clenched his hands, the memory of his father telling him how to love a woman became hazy. The walls of the room moved, compressed towards him and took the air away from him. The boy leaned forward and with a flash of weakness, he pressed his chest against Emilia's breasts and rested his head on her shoulder. Her coconut hair rested easy and wet on his back. Together, the kids stood naked and immobile, glued to one another, embracing each other as two.

Emilia showed Fernando to the bed and they laid side by side in silence amongst invisible dust. Fernando couldn't hear his thoughts but he felt the weight of Emilia's head on his stomach as the warmth of her tears rolling down his chest.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

When he spoke, his voice quivered and on the exhale he released a deep sob that he'd been holding back since his father's death. Resting their heads on wet pillows, the children faced one another with their lips almost touching and their fingers interlaced.

Emilia went home the next day.

Conchita stood by the front door while the girl loaded suitcases into her father's small car. In the distance, Fernando walked towards green mountains covered by fog, kicking rocks and whistling. Conchita yelled at him to come back but he ignored her. The boy was invisible to the landscape, to the neighborhood, to everything that stood behind. He didn't know if he was a man but the sun was kissing his skin and the wind was brushing his hair and at that moment, he felt beautiful. Fernando thought about his old man and wondered if he'd ever felt beautiful too.