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## Macho Mama

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The last straw was the pee-rimmed toilet seat on Saturday. But it all began on Wednesday, or maybe years earlier...

Lalo's deep brown eyes follow the shiny half-balboa coin intently as his father snakes it through his fingers until it disappears, only to pull it out from behind his ears, seconds later.

"Again!" Lalo demands, for the fifth time, hoping to discover the ruse. Juan laughs heartily and begins the magic trick all over again.

"Ok... now, concentrate carefully on the coin."

"Papá, go slower this time."

Estela smiles at them from the kitchen, where she's chopping a wilted head of lettuce, trying to save as much of it as she can. Beside her, a small electric fan provides some respite from the early afternoon heat and humidity, whirring almost loudly enough to drown out the wailing of police sirens in the distance.

At the dining room table, Gabriela plays with her golden-brown ringlets and bites the fleshy eraser on her pencil while staring pensively at her math homework. Her older brother, Diego, sits across from her, ogling the online game updates popping up on his cellphone, while his unopened books lie sprawled across the table.

In the corner, Grandma Rosa murmurs to herself while inspecting the houseplants for aphids.

Juan's cellphone rings that drumbeat tone announcing he has a fare.

"Looks like I need to take this one to the airport," he says, after checking the pick-up location. "I might be a bit late for lunch, my love."

Estela shrugs and shoos him towards the door. Lalo follows him down the rusted flight of stairs from their second-storey apartment to his taxi in the back lot, to see if the neighbours' kids are outside and want to play.

"Please pick up some milk on your way home," Estela calls out the window after Juan.

"Have you noticed that Mamá always asks Papá to buy something whenever he has a fare?" Diego whispers to Gabriela.

"Not really," she says distractedly, trying to focus on her equation.

"Think she suspects he's not actually going to work?" he asks, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

Gabriela looks at him dismissively and shakes her head.

"Gabi, time to set the table," says Estela. "Can you give Grandma Rosa her medicine when you're done?"

Gabriela finishes her last equation and packs her homework into her book bag, motioning for Diego to do the same with his so she can lay out the tablecloth. After setting six sets of utensils, she pours a glass of water and leads her grandmother gently to their shared bedroom, where she keeps the plastic medicine container with the rainbow assortment of pills. Gabriela hands her two of the blue ones and one of the white ones and watches her wince as she gulps them down.

Back in the kitchen, Gabriela helps seat her grandmother at the table before noticing Lalo's muddy sneaker tracks trailing from the front door. She sighs, knowing she'll be the one to have to clean it up.

She sits down to her plate of black beans and rice, with vinegar-splashed lettuce in a small side bowl – their usual Wednesday meal.

"So, were your friends downstairs playing baseball?" Estela asks Lalo.

"Yeah. I was catcher, again... I don't know why they won't let me bat," he pouts.

"Probably because you're a midget," scoffs Diego, as Gabriela kicks him under the table.

Estela darts Diego a scolding look then says: "Lalo, those boys are a bit older than you so if you want to play with them, you're going to have to play the position they choose for you."

"I know, I know."

"So, how did you do on your history test today Gabi?" asks Estela, changing the subject.

"Not bad. An 8. I made two stupid mistakes I'm not too happy about."

"Well, just keep those grades up so you can get accepted to a good high school," says Estela, a high school teacher herself.

Gabriela nods, tightens her lips and looks down at her plate. Diego didn't get into a good school so her parents' expectations are riding on her. They didn't even ask him about his grades anymore.

Diego, a vacuum-eater, butts his chair out from behind him and retreats to his bedroom, and his videogames.

Having eaten about half his meal and let nearly a quarter of it fall over the edges of his plate, Lalo announces "I'm full," then runs out the door and down the stairs to his unfinished baseball game with the neighbours.

Grandma Rosa's plate is still untouched as she stares across the room, lost in thought. So, Gabriela decides to leave it a while longer, along with her father's empty place setting.

She scrapes and stacks the rest of the dishes and utensils, dumping the uneaten morsels from the top plate into Whiskers' scruffy red bowl by the front door. At the sink, Estela already has her hands in the sudsy water so Gabriela helps her dry the ones she's placed on the rack.

They've just finished when Juan returns, smiling. "It was a tourist. I got a nice tip."

"And the milk?" asks Estela.

"Ay, sorry my love, I completely forgot. I guess I was getting hungry," he says, biting his lip as he sits down at the table. "It smells fantastic."

Estela slides him a hearty serving and plants a kiss on his cheek.

Gabriela retreats to her room with her bookbag, returning a half-hour later to find her father in front of the television. His chair is ajar and a fly is circling the leftovers on his plate, still on the table.

"Where's Mamá?" asks Gabriela, picking up his plate.

"Oh, she went out to buy some milk at the corner store," Juan replies.

\* \* \*

On the bus ride home from school on Thursday, Gabriela laughs out loud while staring at the cracked screen of her hand-me-down mobile phone. Having managed to open her direct messages and download all the media files before leaving the Wi-Fi at school, she now has a fleeting 15 minutes to check out the memes her friend forwarded. This one has a photo of a teary-eyed blonde woman yelling and pointing at a white cat seated before a plate of vegetables at a dinner table.

Her friend Erika peeks over her shoulder.

"This one is hilarious," says Gabriela, pointing the screen towards Erika. "But I would change the punchline... Maybe: 'Do you think I like making these vegetables any more than you like eating them?'"

Erika mouth-farts a laugh. "Good one Gabriela! I get stuck doing the cooking whenever my mom works the afternoon shift at the hospital."

Gabriela gets off the bus just as her father's taxi is passing. He pulls over and she opens the back door.

"Gabi!" yelps Lalo, moving over his lunch bag and toilet-paper-roll crafted animal to make space. It's a short three-block ride through their relatively quiet nook of San Miguelito.

Estela and Diego are already home and Lalo runs to the kitchen, where Estela is kneeling with the refrigerator half open. He near-

ly topples her over with his hug before heading for the bathroom. Also feeling the need to go, Gabriela heads for the other bathroom, closer to her room, but is annoyed to find Diego is already using it. Through the door, she can hear the distinctive swooshing of text messages on his phone.

"Hurry up Diego," she pleads, rapping her knuckles on the door. "I have to pee!"

He emerges a couple of minutes later with a mischievous grin. She notices immediately that he hasn't replaced the empty toilet paper roll and grabs one from under the sink before sitting. Typical. He was always doing little things to annoy her.

Gabriela emerges from the bathroom to catch Grandma Rosa wandering confusedly through the hallway.

"What are you doing *abuelita*?" asks Gabriela.

"I can't find my room."

"It's right here," Gabriela says sadly, leading her towards their shared bedroom. Grandma Rosa stares blankly for a moment, then looks back at her and smiles unconvincingly. "Where is Juan?"

"He's in the living room watching TV," answers Gabriela, knowing full well she isn't referring to her father but to her long-deceased grandfather with the same name. "Rest *abuelita*. It will be time for your medicine soon."

Gabriela heads to the kitchen to help her mother finish making lunch – soy-soaked chicken and cubed boiled potatoes mixed with mayo, canned carrots and peas. She peels and puts the potatoes on to boil while her mother handles the raw chicken.

Lalo strides into the living room wearing his beat-up magician's hat and cape, a deck of cards in his hand. From their worn blue sofa, Juan holds his index finger up in his direction, warning him not to be too loud while he finishes listening to the television sports news roundup.

"Aajh!" he grunts. His favourite soccer team has lost, again.

Noticing that his father's finger is no longer raised, Diego announces: "Papá, I'm going to show you a magic trick!" Dividing the deck of cards in two, Lalo takes the second stack and fans out as many as he can without dropping them. "Pick a card."

Juan looks pensively at the decks, then picks up the first card in the fan – the ace of diamonds.

"Ok, now, remember your card Papá, then put it back in the deck," instructs Lalo, his eyes fixated on the card while trying discreetly to keep one finger on it as he shuffles. After three awkward shuffles of the deck, he pulls out a card.

"Is it this one?" he asks, face beaming as he proudly presents the ace of diamonds.

"Yes!" Juan exclaims. "You're getting good at this Lalo!"

Lalo bows deep as Estela and Gabi stop their meal prep momentarily to applaud in tune from the kitchen.

"But what was the other deck for?" asks Juan.

Lalo looks confused then bats his hand over his forehead. "Oh no... I did it wrong!"

"Lalo, come here," calls Gabriela. "I have a magic trick that I

can teach you. Come closer. You see this can of peas and carrots. It's closed right... Well, I'm going to show you how to open it with a magic tool."

Then she produces the metal hand-held can-opener and theatrically shows Lalo how to place the hooked part onto the rim, puncture the lid, and turn the handle slowly.

"Wow," marvels Lalo while Estela snickers.

"OK Gabi, nice try," she says. "But a male's place is not in the kitchen. Go back to your real magic, Lalo."

\* \* \*

On Friday afternoon, after lunch and once Gabriela and Diego have finished their homework, Juan announces that they'll be spending the afternoon with their cousins and having dinner at their uncle Pedro's house in Burunga.

"It's more than a half-hour drive across town if we leave now but it will be more than an hour if we get stuck in rush hour, so we need to leave early."

Gabriela rushes off to change into her favourite jeans and the orange crop-top she wants to show her fashion-savvy cousin Sandra. Two years her senior, she always notices what Gabi's wearing.

Lalo stuffs a small backpack full of toys cars and superhero figurines, since he knows he'll have to entertain himself.

Diego is ready to go as-is, smartphone in hand.

But they have to wait for Estela to get ready herself, then help Grandma Rosa brush her hair, change her clothes and apply her perfume.

They pile into Juan's yellow taxi. Diego – the biggest in the family by far – gets the more spacious front seat, while the three women ride in the back, with Lalo on Estela's lap.

Lalo ducks as two police cars race past, sirens blaring. As Juan enters the Northern Corridor, he turns up the volume on his transmitter: *An accident on Centenario bridge is holding up traffic...*

"Looks like we'll need to take a detour through the city and along the Panama Canal," he announces.

After exiting the highway into town and passing the big mall and fancy hotels, they notice a mass of people carrying signs and circling the Port of Balboa. Juan turns in their direction and rolls down the window. Hoisting his arm out, he lifts his thumb up triumphantly.

As they draw nearer, he honks intermittently to show his support. The people are mostly men clad in orange vests and hard hats carrying hand-painted signs with messages like: 'No more exploitation at the locks' and 'Port workers strike for better wages.'

"What's that?" asks Lalo.

"The cargo workers at the port are on strike," Juan replies.

"What's a strike?" Gabriela and Lalo ask, in concert.

"It's when workers get together and agree to stop working for a few days, in protest... Usually to ask their bosses for better wages or working conditions. Most of the time, they do it as part of a union."

"What's that?" Lalo repeats.

"It's a group that fights for workers' rights. I'm part of the taxi drivers' union for example," Juan says proudly.

From where Gabriela is seated, it looks like the line of workers stretches all the way from the port to the *Puente de las Americas* bridge.

As they're about to enter the bridge, Juan shouts a final "*Suerte!*," to wish them luck, before closing the window.

"You know, a few years ago, the taxi drivers organized a strike to stop Uber from coming to the city," says Estela.

"Did it work?" asks Gabriela.

"Well, it stalled it for a time, which was good," replies Juan. "But eventually, they made their way in anyway."

"But when they did, at least it was with controls to keep things fair," adds Estela.

They arrive at their cousins' house a few minutes later, rolling into the mango-tree-shaded driveway of her father's familiar childhood home. Grandma Rosa smiles widely, recognizing her old house instantly, despite the new yellow paint.

"We're home," she sighs, making her way out of the backseat with Estela's help.

Uncle Pedro comes out to greet his mother and brother, with kisses on either cheek for his mother and a half hug followed by a firm pat on the shoulder for Juan. He's followed by his two daughters, both older than Gabriela.

"I love that top," purrs Sandra, running over to greet her. "And did you do something to your hair? Your curls look more defined than usual."

Gabriela smiles widely and follows Sandra into the house, heading straight for her bedroom. Sandra pulls up a second chair at her desk and motions for Gabriela to sit. Her laptop is open to a video paused in an editing app. She's lucky enough to have unlimited Wi-Fi, unlike Gabriela.

"Check out my latest video," says Sandra, hitting play on her make-up tutorial using her sister as her canvas. "Want me to teach you how to edit?"

Gabriela nods and watches intently, then deletes as many photos and messages as she can on her phone to free up enough space to download the new editing app.

"This is where I post my videos so they'll get more traction," explains Sandra, opening a few select web and social media sites. "Last week my make-up tutorial got a reach of more than 3,000 in just 2 days after I uploaded it here."

Gabriela's eyes widen. "That's amazing! Do you make memes too?"

"Sure, they're easy," she boasts, shifting gears to show her cousin how.

Thinking back to the woman-and-cat meme she'd seen on the bus the day before, Gabriela searches for it online. Finding it, she copies the image, but replaces the headline with the one she'd suggested that made Erika laugh. Sandra laughs too.

"Good one!" says Sandra. "Ok, so we'll also need to create a new social media account for you so you can post more anonymously. It helps if you use a theme name rather than your actual name. Mine is 'Make-up Models'. So, think of a fun, short name you want to use to post your memes. It's best if it's related to what you want to post."

Gabriela decides on 'Cat Girl', but immediately resolves to change it once she's thought of something better. Then, with Sandra's help, she posts her first-ever meme.

They spend the rest of the afternoon dancing and recording short dance choreographies and gag videos.

Before she heads home, after dinner that night, Sandra gives Gabriela an update on her meme's reach: "Wow, 1,850 views already – Go Gabi!"

\* \* \*

That Saturday, like every Saturday, Gabriela sleeps in a bit, then sweeps the entire apartment so her mother can do the mopping. After that, they prepare brunch together – *tamales* made with pork, onions, raisins and corn dough wrapped in banana leaves and boiled.

Sometimes, if Grandma Rosa is feeling up to it, she'll help. Afterwards, Estela cleans the kitchen – washing the dishes and scrubbing the stove, sink, counter tops and kitchen table – while Gabriela handles both bathrooms.

That morning, Diego is the last one in the bathroom Gabriela shares with her brothers and grandmother. Before going in, he'd seen her approaching with the bucket, detergent and scrub brushes for her usual Saturday afternoon chore.

So, when Gabriela finds the pee-rimmed toilet seat, she knows perfectly well who's behind it. Gabriela disregarded Lalo's little accidents, but this perfectly centred yellow splatter was obviously done on purpose, just for her.

"Diego! You disgusting pig!" Gabriela yells across the apartment.

A muffled snicker comes from her older brother's bedroom, where he would surely spend the whole day immersed in his videogames.

Storming into his room, Gabriela scrunches the dirty, still-dripping cloth she's been using to clean into a ball and belts it straight at Diego, missing and hitting one of his comic posters instead.

"Gabi, chill! What's wrong with you?" he says, looking dumbfounded. "Can't you take a joke?"

"Joke? Well, the joke is on you, Mr. Macho. You're going to clean up your own piss this time," she says, storming off to the kitchen to tell her mother.

"What's the commotion all about?" asks Estela.

"Mom, Diego peed on the toilet seat, ON PURPOSE so I'd have to clean it up and I'm NOT GOING TO!"

"Calm down Gabi," says Estela, speaking softly and walking

over to hold her by the shoulders. "I'm sure Diego just missed. You know how boys are sometimes."

"No Mamá! Absolutely not. Go see it yourself!"

"Gabi, I'm busy in the kitchen. Just calm down and I'll go clean it up later."

"Mamá, no! Are you serious? Why don't you make Diego go clean it up? It is his mess, after all! And why do we have to do all the housework around here? It's about time the boys – and dad – pitched in, don't you think?"

"Ay, ay, ay... my daughter, you know how it is. Machos don't clean."

Stopping cold, Gabi's expression shifts from annoyance to defiance. Then, she makes a point of exaggeratedly removing her oversized yellow rubber cleaning gloves, and declares:

"Well, they do now. I'm on strike!"

"Gabi," Estela starts to protest.

"No, Mamá, I'm serious! Don't you think it's unfair that whenever Papá is home he can spend his free time doing magic tricks or sitting in front of the television, not even picking up his plate to take it to the sink after a meal? Or that Diego can hide in his room all day playing video games or using his phone without lifting a finger to help? Meanwhile, you and I do ALL the work around here. Don't you think I would rather be reading, or making memes or recording dance videos?"

"I know Gabi, I would also love to have some time to put together some photo albums. I've been putting it off for months."

"Ok then Mamá ... do it! Don't just think about it. Go on strike with me!"

"Gabi, I obviously don't like it, but I guess it's just part of our culture that machos don't do housework."

Looking at her mother incredulously, Gabriela opens her mouth and pauses for emphasis, before saying: "Well Mamá, if you want to keep believing that, then guess what? *You're* just as macho as they are."

Retreating to her room, Gabriela listens at the door to hear her mother huff and head to the bathroom.

Opening the door a crack, she discreetly snaps a photo of her mother cleaning it so she can use it for a meme. Then she looks through the old photos on her phone for one she'd snapped of Whiskers pooping and juxtaposes it with the photo of her mother cleaning. Think it over, she adds the headline: 'Machos don't clean'.

Although she would normally avoid using their limited Internet for anything other than school, Gabriela is angry enough not to care today and defiantly uploads her meme to the sites Sandra showed her, using the account she helped her create. Then, after some thought, she changes her username from 'Cat Girl' to 'Macho Mama'.

That night, Gabriela overhears her parents arguing in their room but can't make out the words.

\* \* \*

On Sunday morning, Gabriela awakes to a rare sight. Her father is in the kitchen removing the trash bag from the garbage bin, wincing from the smell as he ties it in a knot. Without noticing her watching, he takes it down to the dumpster in the back lot. She decides to hide back in her room, remembering that she's on strike.

A few minutes later, she hears Diego – whose room is next to hers – open his bedroom door and head to the kitchen. She goes to listen from behind her door, expecting him to open the refrigerator, get something to drink and promptly retreat to his room, but she overhears her father telling him to help. A short undistinguishable exchange between them is followed by the clanging of pots and pans. Could it be?

Gabriela smiles to herself and sits back down on her bed. Reveling in her newfound free time, she decides to check how many views her cat memes have received. She's astonished to see that the first one already has nearly 11,000 while the second has reached more than 6,300. And she now has thousands of followers on her 'Macho Mama' account – a far cry from the 110 she'd amassed over her first year of using her own two personal social media accounts, even after inviting almost everyone she considered 'friendable'. Unable to contain her excitement, she sends Sandra a quick text to brag, and to thank her.

Grabbing a notebook, Gabriela starts jotting down ideas for new memes and social media content, resolving to poke fun at her dad and brothers for their laziness.

Nearly an hour later, after the smoke alarm sounds a couple of times, Diego knocks on her door.

"Come eat!"

Gabriela arrives in the dining room to find Diego escorting Grandma Rosa to the table and Lalo carefully placing mismatched forks and knives on plastic placemats. Her father, smiling awkwardly, is wearing her mother's apron and putting the first plate of

overcooked scrambled eggs with two slices of semi-burnt toast on the table.

Estela walks in, teary-eyed, looking as though she is witnessing a miracle.

Meeting her gaze, Gabriela raises her eyebrows and pouts, half-jokingly depicting her concern about eating something her father has prepared. But she's careful to change her face quickly when Juan looks up at them, in proud anticipation.

"Bravo chicos!" beams Estela, erupting into applause.

Gabriela smiles and takes her seat, unwilling to applaud them for something she and her mother have been doing for years without so much as a 'thank you'.

Reversing her fork and knife quickly, so Lalo won't notice, Gabriela digs into the eggs and tentatively places them in her mouth, relieved to find that they don't taste terrible. She smiles approvingly at her expectant father, who seems to be analysing her every move.

"Please pass the salt ... and the pepper," says Grandma Rosa after taking her first bite. Estela and Gabriela exchange a laugh using only their eyes.

Diego finishes serving random plastic cups of water to the kids and places three empty coffee mugs before the adults. Then, he bends over to whisper into his mother's ear.

Estela points to the cupboard and is about to get up, but he stops her.

"No, Mamá, let me do it."

Picking up the empty coffee mugs he's just placed on the table, Diego heads over to the cabinet and pulls out the jar of instant coffee and a pot of brown sugar. He lifts the kettle of already boiling water and pours it into each mug, stirring in a spoonful of coffee and sugar.

"Don't forget the milk," Estela calls out.