



Photo by José Briceño

Manhood

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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 gutural 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. 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 rolled down from his widow's peak to the tip of his nose. The drop dangled there, hanging and waiting to freefall towards the ground, like Don José had.

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, the 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!" Fernando 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 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," his mother replied when Conchita threw coffee beans inside a blender.

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

"Conchita, what do you think?" María asked.

"A job would be good for the boy."

Flavio, across the street, was a stocky leather maker with a small family shop that remained open 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 gestured to Fernando to come in. Unlike most people in town, Junior was aloof to other's comments, even his father's. 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. 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 Junior a kiss on the cheek, like he'd seen him do to Flavio, and he ran outside to find his mother.

María 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 and sat next to María in silence staring at the reflection of the 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 handkerchiefs against her eyelids and typed the message.

"Write soon," the man added. Something about Fernando's big brown eyes and his soft expression made the gentleman tear up. The man cleared his throat, placed a few bolivars on the counter and walked outside.

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

Fernando tapped him on the shoulder.

"Why did your son leave?" he asked.

The man knelt down in front of him.

"I hope he fell in love."

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

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 plastic soldiers but when she opened the window, she heard the boy 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. 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 Don 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 grabbed 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 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 and waited for María. She flipped through a magazine, trying to make out the words while looking at the pictures on the pages with her shoulders hunched high, closer to her ear lobes than usual. Shortly after seven, María walked in. 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 closer to the girl's school so instead of waking up at four thirty in the morning to ride a minibus and transfer at Plaza Bolivar, 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 La Negra. They rode past 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 with her parents and two boys a few years younger than Fernando. Every visit, the children ran outside and welcomed Don José with a playful disposition. He handed off blessings and chocolates wrapped in cellophane and later disappeared into a room.

On their last time there, 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?” she asked Fernando.

“He’s being a fag,” the boy yelled and ran inside his father’s car.

On their way back, Fernando and Don José picked up fresh fruit for Conchita and colorful flowers for María. At home, they dropped off the goods in the mantle next to the kitchen. 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 and laughed.

Junior looked at Fernando and rolled his eyes and the unspoken exchange between them felt bright. It was that sense of closeness along with the smell of tannins, oils and glue, that brought the boy back to the store every week. He didn’t mind brewing coffee for customers and restocking the toilet paper in the bathroom. 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 ask unanswerable questions about mourning.

“Emilia’s pretty, huh?” Flavio told him and Fernando looked up from his book and nodded.

At that moment, Conchita walked inside the shop and put tired mocasines on top of the counter.

“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?” she 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 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 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.

“Fix the ones I brought,” she said and looked at Fernando. “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 her dress.

Rumors and *chismes* didn’t bother Conchita, it was the unsaid 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 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 Cochita 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 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 flipped 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.”

One day, Fernando heard his mother crying inside the bathroom. He knocked on the door but she didn’t answer so he sat in the hallway reading a passage from his book for 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 and stood looking in his direction focused on something inside herself. Fernando sat up and covered his underwear with the sheet but she didn't seem to notice.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

As a ninth grader, Emilia was indifferent towards him both in school and at home. People called her prudent but 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. At last, he 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 like a fisherman holds a catch.

The fan spun slow in the corner. When Fernando stood up, the sheets fell to the ground and his hands were shaking. He put a leg through the pants while Emilia moved closer to him and when she grabbed his arm to help him balance, her touch made him stiff and the pants dropped to 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 and pressed her mouth gently on his. Her lips were soft but her tongue was thick and flavorless. Fernando offered his own which felt foreign inside the darkness of her mouth. At that moment, the door of the bedroom clicked shut, as if someone had been out in the hall watching.

Emilia took off her dress and sky-blue panties, folded them and placed them on a table. Her naked body looked 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 moved closer to him and placed his left hand on her left breast. Under the plumpness that filled his palm, her heartbeat was steady. Her skin was warm, the color of cinnamon, like the handsome briefcase hanging behind the door. Fernando touched Emilia's neck and her cheeks and her breath landed on his

hand like the steam that rolled down the hall after his father's late night showers.

When Emilia touched his member, Fernando's 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 and rested his head on her shoulder. Her coconut hair rested easy and wet on his back and together, the kids stood naked and immobile, embracing each other as two.

Emilia grabbed Fernando's hand and led him to the bed where they laid side by side in silence. 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.

Fernando wanted to say more but his voice quivered and on the exhale, he released a deep sob he'd been holding back since his father's passing. Resting their heads on wet pillows, the children faced one another with their lips almost touching and their fingers interlaced. Just like that, they fell asleep.

Emilia went home the next day.

Conchita stood by the front door while the girl loaded suitcases into her father's small, multicolored 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.