SHORT STORY

The Things Our Parents Teach Us

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"Energy" by Vanesa Erjavec

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My mother always said, “No hagas papelón.”

Don’t make a scene. Don’t embarrass yourself. Don’t give people something to talk about.

She said it in the grocery store when I reached for the candy before paying. In church when I laughed too loud. At my own birthday party when I cried because my cousin blew out my candles “by accident.” No hagas papelón, Sofi. Like my name itself needed discipline.

I carry these words with me like a rule written into my bones.

So when the barista says “Vanilla latte for… Sophie?” like he doesn’t recognize me, I smile. Small. Contained. Respectable.

“It’s Sofía,” I say, soft enough that he could pretend he didn’t hear.

He looks at me then. Really looks. His eyes do that flicker, that quick math people do when they’re trying to place a face in a life they’ve already moved on from.

“Oh,” he says. “Right.”

Mateo always did have a talent for saying everything and nothing in the same syllable.

The coffee smells like burnt espresso and overripe bananas. There’s a dog sitting at a table by the window, just… sitting there. No leash, no owner in sight. A golden retriever with a dirty blue bandana, staring straight ahead like it pays rent.

I don’t comment on the dog. No hagas papelón.

Mateo sets the cup down too hard. Coffee seeps from beneath the lid, a thin brown line slipping down the side like it’s trying to escape.

“Sorry,” he says, but he doesn’t sound sorry.

“It’s okay,” I say because that’s what I do. I smooth things. I sand down moments until they can’t cut anyone.

He wipes his hands on his apron, leaving damp streaks like bruises. “You still take it with oat milk?”

I blink. “I didn’t — I ordered almond.”

“Right,” he says again. “Right.”

The dog barks.

Not loud. Not aggressive. Just one sharp, deliberate sound, like a gavel hitting wood.

Everyone in the café turns except Mateo. He keeps looking at me like I’m a question he doesn’t want to answer.

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“You disappeared,” he says.

I laugh, but it comes out wrong. Too high, too quick. My mother would hear it and press her lips together. No hagas papelón.

“I moved,” I say. “That’s not disappearing.”

“You blocked my number.”

“That’s not disappearing either.”

The dog stands up.

No one stops it as it walks — no, struts — behind the counter. Its nails click against the tile with authority. Mateo doesn’t react when it sits beside him, looking up like it’s waiting for instructions.

“Whose dog is that?” I ask.

Mateo shrugs. “Shows up sometimes.”

“That’s not normal.”

“Neither was you leaving without saying anything but here we are.”

There it is. The thing under the thing.

My chest tightens but I keep my shoulders relaxed. I imagine my mother watching from somewhere, arms crossed. No hagas papelón.

“You cheated,” I say, still soft. Still careful. Like I’m placing the words down gently so they won’t break.

Mateo’s jaw ticks. “I messed up.”

“You cheated,” I repeat, because sometimes clarity requires repetition.

The dog barks again. Louder this time. The espresso machine hisses in response, like it’s offended.

A woman near the door gasps. “Is that dog making the lights flicker?”

I turn. The overhead lights blink once. Twice. Then steady.

“Okay,” I say, because now even I can’t pretend this is normal. “What is happening?”

Mateo finally looks at the dog. “You gotta chill,” he mutters.

The dog does not chill.

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Instead, it hops onto the counter, knocking over a stack of brown paper cups. They scatter, clattering like applause. Someone claps for real, like this is a street performance.

“Sir, you need to control your —” a man starts, but the dog fixes him with a look so intense he just… stops. Mid-sentence. Mouth open, words abandoned.

I feel something crack inside me. Not loudly. Not dramatically. Just a small, decisive fracture.

No hagas papelón, my mother whispers in my head.

The dog barks again, and this time the front door swings open on its own. Wind rushes in, lifting napkins, receipts, someone’s scarf. The whole café inhales sharply.

Mateo grabs the counter. “Okay, that’s new.”

And suddenly, I am so tired.

Tired of soft voices and small smiles. Tired of making myself digestible. Tired of holding everything in like I’m a jar with a screw-on lid and not a person with a mouth.

“You don’t get to act confused,” I say, louder now. Heads turn; I don’t lower my voice. “You don’t get to stand here like I’m the strange one for leaving when you —”

The lights waver erratically. The dog barks in rhythm with my heartbeat.

“— when you lied to me for months,” I continue, and my voice shakes but I don’t stop. “When you made me feel crazy for noticing. When you said I was overreacting —”

A cup shatters on the floor. No one touched it.

No hagas papelón.

I breathe in.

“No,” I say, out loud this time. To my mother, to myself, to the version of me that learned how to shrink.

The dog goes still.

The lights steady.

The wind dies.

The café holds its breath.

Mateo looks at me like he’s seeing me for the first time, not as a memory he can edit, but as something present and inconvenient and real.

“Okay,” he says, but the word lands differently now. Smaller.

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I pick up my drink. It’s the wrong milk. The spilled coffee has dried, leaving a sticky line down the side. It’s imperfect and inconvenient and mine.

“Get the order right next time,” I say, and I don’t smile.

On my way out, I pass the dog. It sits again by the window, calm, like it never moved at all.

As I push the door open, I almost hear my mother.

But this time, she doesn’t say anything.

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