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## La Pachacha, Rafael Maluenda

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## LA PACHACHA

*Rafael Maluenda*

Translated by Edmundo García

**S**HE WAS gray, fat, short-legged, and stupid. Her arrival at the chicken yard was a stroke of fortune. Born and raised near a smelly ditch in a corner of the orchard, her lot would have been that of ordinary chickens. She would have resigned herself to the despotic concubinage of the old rooster who ruled the orchard; she would have laid her eggs, hatched them herself, and led her clucking brood among the water cress growing on the edge of the ditch; and finally, she would have died an ignoble death merely to make a Sunday dinner.

But the wife of one of the tenants, eager to ingratiate herself with the owners, gave the hen as a gift to the youngest son of the owner of the estate, and he, in turn, placed her in the chicken yard, where his parents kept a collection of fine specimens.

Thus *la Pachacha* found herself one afternoon among a select group of cultured and aristocratic chickens.

The servant dropped her over the wire fence into the yard, Pachacha spread her heavy wings, and after a short, awkward flight landed near an elegant brass water trough. She stretched her neck and looked at the new surroundings, while the rest of the chickens clucked noisily and in unison. To Pachacha, their clucking sounded like a mocking guffaw.

Pachacha may have been as coarse as you please, with her clumsy fatness and her dirty gray color, but her plebeian blood contained a strong dose of shrewdness and sound common sense. She immediately realized that an attitude of humility would be most appropriate in such an emergency, so she walked away from the water trough, slowly, trying to keep her short steps as light as possible. Panting and motionless, she

huddled against the fence, surveying the activities of the yard, jerking her head in all directions, still puzzled by the strange place.

The yard was long and wide, with a row of cherry trees on one side. In the center were three brass troughs, and at the end a wooden division with small doors flush with the ground, from which wisps of straw peeped. Gathered under the cherry trees, about thirty hens, chickens, and roosters stirred with curiosity and stretched their necks toward the newcomer.

Pachacha admired the brilliant gathering with all the warmth of her plebeian blood. Only in her daydreams, near the muddy ditch of her native orchard, had she ever imagined such blue bloods existed.

At this point an extremely handsome white rooster, with long and curved tail feathers and a wide red comb, left the group and strutted towards her. Trembling with fear, Pachacha shrank against the fence, not without admiring the cock's graceful manner as he approached her. None of the clumsy running of the orchard rooster! That running which had too often ended in pecking preliminaries and even less subtle consequences. The white rooster approached her slowly, pecking at the ground and clucking softly as if he were trying to convince her that her fears were unfounded. When he was close to her, he bowed his red crest, stretched his white wing, and with a charming murmur circled around the timid hen.

Merciful heavens, what a graceful turn!

With a cultivated accent, the rooster introduced himself: "Leghorn."

Dazzled and submissive, Pachacha recalled her previous experiences, and coweringly awaited the inevitable assault. But the rooster courteously allowed her to arise, confused and embarrassed by her untimely gesture.

Knowing that she could not now state her pedigree with any composure, Pachacha made a few nasal clucks, perhaps hoping that she would be mistaken for a foreign hen. But the Leghorn, who took pride in being something of a polyglot, could not place her nasal twang among any of the dialects he knew, and turning his back to her, walked away disdainfully.

Three white hens, members of his family, came out to meet him. "Who is she?" they asked.

The rooster shrugged his wings.

One of the hens remarked angrily, "Imagine mistaking a greeting for a proposition! What boorishness!"

The Leghorn, self-satisfied and conceited, bristled his tail feathers and said, "What did you expect?"

That same afternoon the rest of the chickens approached the confused Pachacha in turns. First, the Rhode Islands, reddish and smug, with the measured tread of fat people; then the Plymouth Rocks, plump and stately in their Scotch plaids; the Paduas, smart and nimble, wearing feathered hats; the Orpingtons, somber in their widows' weeds; and the English hens, nervous and thin, but full of dignity and pride.

All of them came up to Pachacha, now cackling with curiosity, now with disdain; and then they walked away as if they did not want to contaminate themselves with her vulgarity.

The only family that did not show any curiosity and remained indifferent to the excitement was a family of Oriental chickens. And Pachacha, desperate for support, and attracted by their ash color, which she fancied was very similar to her own, walked toward them. But when she was close to them she was almost speechless with surprise.

What shapes! Their skinny red necks, completely devoid of feathers, stood out from their stocky, ungraceful bodies. The characteristics of the females were exaggerated in the Oriental rooster. His color was a darker gray, he had even fewer feathers than the hens, and his tail was short, sparse, and lusterless.

Pachacha would have liked to make friends with any of the other families, but since she had been rejected by them, she resigned herself to accept the company of the Oriental chickens. She could ill afford to be cold or haughty in such a predicament. Besides, these chickens were undoubtedly a family of high quality. Although they did not appear to be infatuated with themselves, like the other blue bloods, it was obvious that they were not of common stock.

When she had found a place among them, the Oriental hens rose in deference (blessed be the chickens that are modest and cultured!) and started a friendly cackling with the stranger. They asked her discreet questions and invited her for a walk around the yard.

Two hours later, when the servant came and led the chickens to roost, Pachacha followed, escorted by the Oriental chickens.

At daybreak, Pachacha hopped off the bottom rung where she'd slept, shook her feathers (the occupants of the upper berths had been

maliciously careless), and went out into the yard. One of the Leghorn hens startled her with an affable and courteous greeting.

"Good morning. How did you spend the night, dear?"

"Quite all right, thank you," Pachacha answered, trying to be casual.

And as the timid sometimes turn bold out of sheer embarrassment, she lied: "I'm used to better coops, but I suppose one has to learn to put up with things as they are."

The Leghorn pretended to believe her. "That's right," she agreed.

She invited Pachacha to the water trough and proceeded to explain the advantages of brass.

"The water is always clean and fresh, you see; otherwise we should get sick."

Although she was not thirsty, Pachacha drank a little, holding her beak with studied refinement. Then the two hens started on an inspection tour of the yard. The Leghorn pointed out the objects to her.

"Our nests are behind that partition. We use straw exclusively, and the nests seldom have to be sprayed; there are very few lice among us, you understand."

"Of course. I'm terribly afraid of them." And Pachacha bristled her feathers with an exaggerated shudder.

The rest of the hens, coming out gradually into the yard, were greatly surprised to see the stranger on such friendly terms with the Leghorn. The day before it had been a case of aversion, but now there seemed to be a note of spite in their actions, as if they were resentful that someone had beaten them to a noble gesture that should have been theirs by birthright. One by one they joined the friendly couple; and Pachacha, her fears forgotten, gradually recovered her country wit and volubility.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo," the Leghorn rooster crowed.

Pachacha, full of admiration, turned to the hens, and said, "I've never heard a finer tenor."

The conceited cock immediately joined the hens and executed a graceful turn for the new hen. Spending praises and compliments recklessly—the more flattering as they were exaggerated—he watched Pachacha eat more than her share of corn without being molested.

The hens who had snubbed her the day before now ardently sought her company. "Don't let them take you in," the Orpingtons warned her; "those Leghorns give themselves airs just because they're egg-factories, as if that were any great merit."

"You'd better watch your step with those English hens," the Rhode Islands advised her; "their instincts might get the best of them and they might peck out one of your eyes."

The Paduas ridiculed the Orpingtons and the Plymouth Rocks. "What huge bodies, don't you think? Their only claim to distinction is in their fatness."

Pachacha, confused by all these confidences, answered with discreet clucks. She understood that a certain amount of diplomacy was necessary if she were to keep on good terms with the whole yard, so she agreed with everyone in turn.

The Oriental hens alone showed discretion, and when they joined Pachacha, they very courteously advised her: "If you should suddenly feel yourself with egg, remember that the last nest on your left is the most comfortable."

Pachacha spent a very pleasant week in the midst of the hens' clucking and the crowing of the cocks, commenting upon the incidents of the barnyard, and enjoying the privileges conferred upon her by the noble birds.

Then an unforeseen event created quite a sensation and disrupted the luxurious idleness of the yard—Pachacha was laying.

Laying? By Jove! The hens compared dates and were highly incensed when they discovered that she had taken advantage of their hospitality. And—add insult to injury!—several of the hens peeked through the cracks in the nest house and discovered that Pachacha had taken the best nest in the house—the last one on the left.

While fraternizing with all of them, Pachacha had maintained the prudent attitude of a guest, and the hens had been friendly and hospitable; but now that she was laying, even the most naive of them realized that she had been permitted excessive intimacy and had shown deplorable lack of taste.

Pretending that nothing unusual had happened, the hens kept a careful eye on Pachacha and counted eleven trips to the nest! Soon they noticed her absence, and the Rhode Island cook deduced: "Well, two and two make four. Undoubtedly she is setting."

Twenty-two days Pachacha was confined to her task of patience and immobility, suffering the gossip and whisperings of her neighbors. Meanwhile, out in the yard, severe measures had already been taken against the future family. They would correct their error by isolating

Pachacha and her brood. An Orpington hen summed up their thoughts:

"It is perfectly all right that one should tolerate these coarse hens, but that we should allow their children to mingle with ours, heaven forbid! Let us respect differences. The master himself has given proof of her plebeian origin by making her hatch her own eggs, instead of hatching them in an incubator, like ours. Woe to any of my children who disobey me!"

She passed out a few pecks in advance among her offspring, and the other hens imitated her.

It was a beautiful morning in spring when Pachacha came out with her brood. The hens, who had been waiting impatiently for that moment, stretched their curious necks and were surprised.

They expected a homely brood, but instead, Pachacha came out of her confinement leading eleven chicks of different colors, and graceful as fleeces of wool. They peeped and chirped around the fat, proud mother, who walked with an effort, raising her thick legs carefully, and scratching the ground for small worms and tender shoots.

"This way, children," she said. "Try to behave now that the ladies are watching you. . . ."

A few hens made some catty remarks to her, but she ignored them, engaged as she was in the absorbing task of mothering her brood.

One old Rhode Island cock—who fancied himself a roué—congratulated her. "That's a mighty fine brood of chicks you have there, Ma'm. Yes, sir, give me the old-fashioned system; none of these fancy incubators. Congratulations!"

Pachacha did not notice the coldness and indifference of the other hens; she was one of them now; she and her family were high-class, and her chicks had fine feathers.

Even the master had praised her brood. "They're certainly healthy," he had said.

The Paduas said to each other, disdainfully: "Sure, they're healthy; the roughnecks!"

Nevertheless, Pachacha's brood, even though they were not aristocrats, grew up to be fine-looking chickens. The young roosters turned into flashy cocks and the young hens became plump and nimble, whetting the appetites of the noble-blooded cocks. And since males are less scrupulous than females, several fine roosters married the delighted Pachacha's young hens.

No one would now have recognized in the self-assured mother the gauche hen that had been tossed over the fence one afternoon. Pachacha herself, infatuated with her position and quite forgetful, convinced herself that the old orchard, the muddy ditch, the dirty water cress, the scaly "pip" and other afflictions, indeed, all memories of the past, were nothing but part of a bad dream.

Then one day, another stupid hen escaped from somewhere and got into the exclusive chicken yard. As Pachacha had done, months before, the new hen huddled against the fence, embarrassed and confused. The noble hens, more tolerant than before, wanted to offer their hospitality to the stranger. But Pachacha opposed them, trembling with indignation.

"What is this," she said, "a chicken yard or a dung pit? We don't want any stupid hens here to mix with us and defile our sons. Out with her!"

Aided by her offspring, she pecked and scratched the poor hen furiously, leaving her more dead than alive in a corner of the yard. Having accomplished her duty, Pachacha returned to the other hens, ruffling her feathers and cackling.

The hens did not say a word. Pachacha muttered: "Perhaps I was a little too severe, but I can't stand upstarts."

A light breeze shook the cherry trees and blew some leaves on the bedraggled hen. She shivered with fright and pain.