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AMIGOS

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There were three, three of them, three of them chasing her, and even though the cobbled stoned street was filled with people talking and laughing, no one seemed to notice or try to stop them. She sped down the garbage strewn sidewalk, across the street with its cracked, uneven pavement, around a bend. The three mangy dogs raced close behind her. She quickened her pace, crossed the next street, evading the flashing cars that honked their horns as she dashed in front, dodged between the uneven hedges beside a yellow wooden house and an abandoned car, its rusted fender dangling from the frame, fled to the back yard thick with overgrown grass and weeds. The three dogs continued the rapid chase, speeding right behind her, faster and faster, just a few feet away now, nipping at her exposed ankles. She should have worn her *tennis* rather than her old open-toed *chanclas* this morning so she could outrun them and get away. Straight ahead she dropped her grocery bags in the weeds and trying to catch her breath, she grabbed a low tree branch full of *tamarindo*, pulled herself up just in time to escape the gray skeletal mutt closest to her. But the branch gave way. Now she was falling, falling, falling, the dogs barking wildly below, their sharp teeth exposed, their eyes flaming against the bright sunshine. Suddenly she felt a tug at her arm, someone was shaking her. “Maria, Maria, wake up, wake up, you’re having a nightmare,” don Cheito, her husband, whispered reassuringly.

Her heart was racing, she was sweating, exhausted, out of breath. Again, the nightmare of the dogs.

The nightmare of the dogs had been an ongoing terror in doña Maria’s adult life. The chase was always the essence of the nightmare, though the mangy dogs, in swift pursuit, never caught her. She could not recall any incident that might have triggered this fear that had followed her from early childhood. If she saw a dog crouching on the narrow sidewalk in the cobbled stoned streets of Old San Juan, she would quickly cross to the other side, even if the dog were on a leash. The dog’s size was irrelevant to the magnitude of her fear. Large or small, it was all the same to her. And if a dog looked directly at her, she would avert her gaze. She knew they sensed her fear and were emboldened by it. Why would they bark only at her and not at others who passed them by?

It didn’t help doña Maria that the dogs in her barrio were often left to fend for themselves. People had been hungry during the war, but dogs were famished. Barrio families didn’t have leftovers. Meat was scarce and so were bones. Starving dogs were angry dogs, running in packs and scavenging for whatever they could find. Scavengers were not selective.

The war ended but barrio residents remained poor. Many of doña Maria’s neighbors considered leaving Puerto Rico to look for jobs. “*Mira, en Nueva York hay trabajo.*” they said. “There’s

work in New York!” “*No hay que hablar inglés para trabajar en las fábricas.*” “You don’t have to speak English to work in the factories.” “No necesitas experiencia.” “*Puedes ganar hasta un peso la hora.*” “Forty dollars a week.” She heard these words up and down the streets of her barrio and in the local bodegas.

Forty pesos a week. *Mucho dinero!* Don Cheito earned only 17 a week working at the local print shop, *muy poquito* for a man with three children. Every payday after don Cheito played the *lotería* to try his luck, the money was even less. No wonder ended up in the *barra* drinking rum and trying to cheer up before going home to face Maria. “What’s an *hombre* supposed to do if he has bad luck? Surely, she could understand that! Didn’t she always say she’s had some luck in marrying him?” Only from her inflection could he guess what kind of luck she meant.

Doña Goyita was convinced that her younger sister, Maria, would be better off in Nueva York. She had made the trip herself 5 years earlier, had gotten a *factoría* job sewing brassieres, and managed to make enough pesos to bring her three children and youngest sister Milady six months later. She had even fallen in love and gotten married. Now doña Goyita was living comfortably in *Los Proyectos*, a 3 bedroom clean apartment without rats and roaches and with a toilet and bath inside. Why, if Maria came with Don Cheito he would get a job and clean *proyecto* apartment, maybe even in the same building in “LoSaida”, what Puerto Ricans would later call the Lower East Side.

So the two sisters began to scheme about how Maria and her family could make the move. Doña Goyita could pay for Maria’s plane ticket and don Cheito’s sister Tita could pay for his. They could live with the sisters until don Cheito found a job and an apartment. Sooner or later everyone would live pretty well. All you needed to do was get a job, maybe two, and work very hard.

So this is how doña Maria became acquainted with dogs in Nueva York. Those dogs were different from the mangy strays crouching on the corners of her Old San Juan barrio looking for a handout or chasing her in her nightmares. Nueva York dogs led the good life, strutting down the streets on a leash with a rhinestone collar, wearing a crocheted wool coat in winter to keep warm. Imagine that! People really made coats for dogs! No wonder there were so many *factoría* jobs in Nueva York if even the dogs had to have coats. And no wonder Nueva York dogs behaved so well – they rarely barked at passersby. They weren’t hungry, so why make a fuss?

Nueva York was filled with surprises. Even shopping at the huge, brightly lit *supermercado* nearby was an adventure. Maria’s children loved those stores where people filled carts with their groceries. Products were displayed looking so fresh and attractive that Maria wanted to buy a little of everything. And, oh, the choices! Even if you just wanted to buy oatmeal, what her family usually ate for breakfast, there were many different kinds to pick from: instant or regular, with or without sugar, with cinnamon or pieces of dried apple, in big boxes or individual packets. The bread aisle was also a wonder. There were breads in all colors and shapes, white, brown, black, round or long, sliced or whole, sweet or sour, mixed with nuts or raisins. In Maria’s barrio she could buy either *pan de agua* or *pan dulce*, both of which she loved, but you had to eat them in one or two days because they would quickly get stale. American breads would last for weeks, packaged in nicely decorated sealed wrappers, sometimes with pictures of healthy-looking athletes. Unfortunately, the *supermercado* didn’t have many *boricua* foods. For that you had to go to *La Marqueta* under the Williamsburg Bridge, where you could buy *plátanos*, spices for the *sofrito* to season her Puerto Rican beans and other

dishes, really good Goya rice and Bustelo coffee for surviving those frigid New York winters.

What Maria couldn’t understand was why *Americanos* ate dogs or cats. A large aisle in the *supermercado* had cans with pictures of dogs or cats on them. In Puerto Rico even hungry people never ate dogs or cats. Dogs and cats could be pets but if they were abandoned strays, no one would even want to go near them. But here in Nueva York she heard people order hot dogs on the street. They looked like sausages and must have been made out of dog meat or why call them hot dogs? The men at the pushcarts would put a sausage in a long roll of white bread, add onions, some green stuff, ketchup and mustard and sell the hot dog to hungry customers who were always in a hurry. Those hot dogs were especially popular with *Americano* kids who bought them from the carts rather than eat the lunches served in the school cafeteria. Maria couldn’t understand why so many *Americanos* loved hot dogs. She also found it strange to see so many well-dressed *Americanos* filling up their grocery carts with cans with the pretty smiling dogs or cats on the labels. How cruel to put pictures of happy animals on the cans and boxes. *Americanos son locos*, that’s for sure. They had crazy ways of doing things. But who knows? Maybe that meat was nutritious. *Americanos* were much fatter than *Puertorriqueños* and always looked hearty and well fed. Look at how tall the teenagers got! Few *Puertorriqueño* kids got to be that tall and husky. It had to be the *Americano* food, including the cans with the pictures of the cats and dogs.

Doña Maria hesitated to buy any of that meat for quite a few months. Sure, she was adjusting to the winter weather, to having to wear a coat, hat, gloves and boots whenever she went out in the frigid cold and snow. She was also learning English, important words like *pliz*, *Sank you*, *esquiza mi*, *I sorry*, *bery nice*, *mucho money*. But eating cats and dogs was going to take more time. Maybe one day she would buy a can with a pretty dog on it and make a *sofrito* for it like she did with pig when she cooked it for Christmas in the *campo* where she grew up. She would mix it with a little onion, salt, garlic, pepper, olive oil, oregano, cilantro, and tomato sauce. That should make it taste pretty good, maybe almost like pork. She’d have to experiment first before feeding it to her family. Fortunately, Don Cheito was not a fussy eater. He was learning to eat what *Americanos* liked ever since he started working at the *factoría*. Maybe it didn’t matter to him if it was Puerto Rican pig or Nueva York dog as long as it was well seasoned and served with rice and beans, topped off with a strong cup of *café con leche*.

Maybe *Americano* dogs taste different from *puertorriqueño* dogs, Maria reasoned. That must be why *Americanos* like the meat so much. Everyone in the *familia* joked about how doña Luisa treated her dog Baby, pampering him and feeding him the best food in the house. Doña Luisa never married but had always wanted children. Instead she got a cute fluffy white puppy to keep her company and fill her empty childless household. Doña Luisa rarely left her 2nd floor tenement apartment on 116th Street in El Barrio because she didn’t want to leave Baby alone. Whenever there was a family party, a taxi would pick her and Baby up and and take them home. Baby was too delicate to suffer the cold and snow, even with the coat she had knitted for him with the fur collar. “Baby eats just like a baby”, she’d say. She even got a machine to grind vegetables and meat real soft so Baby wouldn’t have to chew too hard and his tummy could digest the food well. Doña Luisa prided herself on how *Americana* she was becoming from having lived for so many years in Nueva York. Doña Maria .

thought she was becoming as *loca* as *Americanos*. Luisa had been in Nueva York too long to remember what dogs were really like.

One Friday night about six months after her arrival in Nueva York, doña Maria finally decided to experiment with the *supermercado* cans of dog meat. She prepared her *sofrito* first, mixing up 5 cloves of garlic, one chopped medium onion, 6 peppercorns, and some other herbs that she bought at the *marqueta*, cilantro, *recaito*, *achiote* for color. She chopped it all together, using her *moltero* to grind up the garlic, peppercorns and spices into a moist paste. She mixed everything in olive oil and sautéed it with tomato sauce in her big black skillet, adding 2 oregano leaves for additional flavor. Instead of salt, she decided to use olives and capers, which were already salty. As she cooked the *sofrito*, the criollo smell filled the entire second floor apartment, even seeping out into the hallway all the way to the broken elevator.

She had selected a medium sized can with a cute, smiling, brown dog on the label after watching which cans *Americano* shoppers liked best. She was pleased that it wasn't too expensive since she always watched her food budget carefully. Don Cheito's measly salary didn't allow for luxuries and buying food that *Americanos* liked was not a purchase she could defend.

Would the meat look like chicken, beef, or pork? What might it smell like? She opened the can with great anticipation. To her disappointment, the color was unremarkable. The smell was unpleasant and the brown mushy meat didn't look at all appealing, but she could fix that with her *sofrito*. She might even add a little *pique*, the spicy *picante salsa* she made for special occasions.

For Don Cheito, dinnertime was the best hour of the day. His short, stocky frame and rotund belly attested to his love of a good meal. The aroma of the *sofrito* made him look forward to one of Maria's specialties. One thing he knew for sure, Maria was a terrific cook. He especially liked her *arroz con pollo*, which she always seasoned to perfection. The roast pork and *arroz con grandules* she cooked for Christmas were not bad either. And when Maria and her sisters Goyita and Milady got together to prepare *pasteles* and *alcapurrias*, stuffing them with pork, garbanzos and raisins, he fell in love all over again. That's all a man really needed for a happy and fulfilled life, a wife who could prepare a good spread. Maria was rarely adventuresome with her cooking, sticking faithfully to the traditional foods that she had prepared and eaten in her *barrio*. But that was fine with Don Cheito. He could even be satisfied with a hefty serving of plain rice and beans as long as the seasoning was just right. And Maria certainly knew how to prepare *sofrito*.

Taking a cold beer out of the refrigerator, Don Cheito sat down, anticipating a new treat. He took a large mouthful of this new dish. He chewed a little and swallowed. He took another hefty mouthful, chewed it more slowly and swallowed it, a puzzled look on his face. He could taste Maria's *sofrito* with the garlic, onion, and spices he loved. But, what, exactly, was that texture? It wasn't chicken, pork or steak. He had eaten rabbit and goat stew but this dish wasn't that either. He was also fond of *cuchifrito*, made from various parts of the pig and sold in local *cuchifrito* stands on Delancey Street. He especially liked *tripitas*, sweetbreads his American coworkers called it, as they glanced suspiciously at it when he brought it to the *factoria* for lunch. Though they politely turned him down when he offered them a taste, he was proud of the great variety of dishes that his fellow *boricuas* cooked from all parts of the pig. Those *Americanos* sure didn't know what they were missing. Most of their dishes were rather bland and uninspired.

This new dish looked a little like spaghetti sauce, but seemed to have a different texture than the ground beef that Maria usually used. The whole family had learned to enjoy spaghetti and his coworkers often were impressed with how much better Maria's spaghetti tasted than the kind their own wives made with the bottled Ragu sauce from the *supermercado*. After chewing the 3rd spoonful of this new dish, he stopped. "Maria, what is this? What kind of food are you giving me? I don't think you ever made anything like this before."

"Ay, *amor* it's only some food that los *Americanos* like to eat. I saw them buying cans of it at the *supermercado* and I thought you might want to try something different.

"*Americano* food? Cans from the *supermercado*? What are you talking about? Let me see the can."

"Here it is. See the picture of the cute brown dog on the label. Every week I saw *Americanos* buy these cans in the *supermercado*, so I figured I'd fix some up with the *sofrito*."

"Ay, *Dios mio* Maria" he groaned after reading the label. "This is not dog meat. This is meat for dogs! Maria, people don't eat it. *Americanos* buy it to feed their dogs!"

"What do you mean what los *Americanos* feed their dogs? Special meat for dogs? You mean *Americano* dogs don't eat the leftovers like Puertorriqueño dogs? You mean people buy special foods in the *supermercado* for dogs? What about cats? I also saw cans with pretty kittens on the labels. You mean to tell me that all those cans are special food for cats too?"

She gritted her teeth, shook her head, and with a look of disgust dumped the meal in the trash. "What a waste of time, money, and *sofrito*! Los *Americanos* sure are *locos* if they have special foods for their pets! I'll never become an *Americana* with their weird ways. Imagine, selling special foods in the *supermercados* for cats and dogs! I'll have to tell Goyita and Milady about this so they don't make the same mistake."

Luckily, Maria had also made rice and beans. She fried two ripe *plátanos* and used the extra *sofrito* for *bacalao*, the dried codfish that she always kept handy for emergencies. Don Cheito and the kids wouldn't go hungry.

Eventually the dog food dinner became a big family joke that got better and more elaborate each time it was retold. It was one of many anecdotes in a long line of events, some humorous and others unpleasant, that were expanded in the retelling, events that Doña Maria and don Cheito experienced as they learned to become *Americanos*.

Becoming *Americanos* came to an end when Doña Maria and Don Cheito decided to return to Puerto Rico in 1970. *Puertorriqueños* in the Lower East Side and the New York Barrio had been saving their *pesos* to return to Puerto Rico, to buy cement houses, not wooden ones, houses that could withstand the hurricanes that often attacked the island. The economic boom of the late 1960s became an incentive for an older doña Goyita who led the return for her family. She wrote Maria letters about the beautiful *casitas* being built in Levittown, Puerto Rico, green lawns in front, gardens in back for *tomates*, beans, *mangos*, bananas, lemons, whatever you wanted would grow there. Don Cheito would buy a printing press and open a print shop next to his *casita*. And now that he had learned *inglés* he could print all kinds of documents, even bilingual ones.

Maria and don Cheito moved to Levittown and Don Cheito built his print shop in the *marquesina*, the carport attached to the house. No need for a carport since he had no car and had never learned to drive in Nueva York. Like many Neuyoricans, he had taken the F train back and forth to work every day for years. Since Levittown was a new community, he anticipated getting all

kinds of print jobs as people opened up businesses in their carports. Maria discovered a clientele for her Puerto Rican specialties and homemade *sofrito*. Younger women had full time jobs and little time to make traditional meals from scratch, Maria would sell her homemade specialties. Between both their incomes, she and Don Cheito would prosper.

Much had changed in Puerto Rico in the two decades since they'd left and Levittown was the place for change. On the main street two blocks from Maria's house was a huge, air-conditioned *supermercado* just like the ones in Nueva York, with aisles lined with many choices of coffees, breads, beans, and other products. Meats were packaged in sturdy cartons or sealed in cellophane with prices and weights marked clearly on attractive labels. The best part, however, was not only did these *supermercados* have *Americano* products, but *Puertorriqueños* ones as well. They even had cans with pretty dogs and cats on them! Of course, unlike in Nueva York, the animal aisle was tiny. *Los Puertorriqueños* were becoming just like *Americanos*, but not quite. Their dogs still ate rice and beans, pork, and other leftovers from their owner's tables. And doña Maria would certainly not make the same mistake she had made in Nueva York. She would not buy one of those cans and cook it, not even with good *sofrito*!

Many homebuyers in Levittown were also from Nueva York. Like in Nueva York, they spoke Spanglish, *español* and *ingles*. They were the *puertorriqueños* who had made it and were coming back home, some bringing dogs and cats with them. Backyards had *casitas* with signs sporting names like "Grande," "Pepe," "Negro," "Macho" or "Superdog". The bigger houses with huge fences had signs proclaiming "*Cuidado Perro!*" "Beware of Dog!" for the watch dogs that wealthy people kept as security against burglars.

Levittown homeowners had quickly figured out that big dogs were good guard dogs for their property. In Nueva York, Doña Maria and don Cheito had never been burglarized. Everyone knew that only poor people lived in the *proyectos*. What could be stolen from the poor? Levittown was a wealthier community than Cataño, the neighboring barrio of people with little money who had never left Puerto Rico. Neighbors often recounted stories about Cataño burglars breaking into Levittown houses to steal televisions, VCRs, microwaves, whatever they could carry.

Maria had long stopped having nightmares about dogs. She rarely saw loose hungry dogs barking at people in the streets as most were confined to their back yards. Occasional a mangy stray wandered the outskirts of Levittown, sometimes around the beach where family outings were popular during hot summer weekends. People cooked their roast pork, their *pasteles* and *alcapurrias*, their *arroz con gandules*, and topped off the feast coconuts knocked down from the palm trees. The leftovers from the *criollo* banquets, piled up in overflowing trashcans, were enough food for dogs to live well.

In the fall, however, the number of strays in Levittown grew. People thought that the dogs were coming from the beaches. Others argued that the people from Cataño were to blame; unable to control the strays, they trucked them to Levittown. They knew Levittown was better able to feed hungry dogs. Moreover, Levittown had good town services, including dogcatchers; if residents got too annoyed with the dogs, they would get rid of them. Cataño had never had dogcatchers. They had bigger prey to catch, drug pushers and gang bangers for example. Dogs were not part of that agenda.

Near the end of December, Doña Maria and don Cheito were expecting their daughter Mima and her husband Bob for the Christmas holidays. Mima had moved to Wisconsin after

marrying a gringo professor who loved to swim and snorkel. Trips to Puerto Rico were a special treat, especially around Christmas when Wisconsin winters made them long for sand and surf. Doña Maria looked forward to preparing the special holiday dishes that Mima loved and Bob was learning to appreciate. Don Cheito would share the story of Maria and the dog food, a story that he always spiced up just the way Maria had spiced up the meat with her *sofrito*.

They were wonderful hosts, cooking Mima's favorite foods, sharing popular tv programs, letting Bob pick ripe *mangos* that had fallen on the roof, and regaling him with neighborhood gossip. Mima and Bob enjoyed listening to Don Cheito's outrage at the neighbor's politics, a fool who favored Statehood for Puerto Rico when everyone in his right mind knew that the Commonwealth was the island's future. Doña Maria would forcefully challenge his arguments. "Puerto Rico needs to be independent," she'd proclaim. Her years in Nueva York had taught her that *los Americanos* were *locos*. She could never be an *Americana*.

For several evenings, Mima noticed don Cheito and doña Maria furtively putting the dinner leftovers into a Ziploc bag and storing it in the refrigerator. Probably, that was their way of recycling since leftovers in outdoor trash cans in the heat would stink, overpowering the sweet smell of the lilacs that lined the front of the patio. One cool but humid evening, Mima went out to sit on the patio to enjoy the pleasant breeze after sundown and hear the singing of the *coquis*. The flowery bushes exuded a sweet smell in the mild evening air. The street was rather quiet. Most families were indoors watching television or preparing for the big feasts of *Nochebuena*, Christmas Eve. Don Cheito came out, followed by doña Maria close behind. Standing erect just behind the patio gate and cupping his hand to his mouth, Don Cheito shouted, "*Amigoos, Amigoos!*" All of a sudden a pack of dogs appeared by the patio, barking and wagging their tails. Doña Maria handed don Cheito the plastic bag with the leftovers. He carefully distributed the scraps in the plastic bowls and set them before the dogs, who greedily attacked every scrap of the feast. Doña Maria and don Cheito watched and smiled.

Then, Don Cheito strolled back to the patio with a sheepish look on his face. "I don't know what I'm going to do with Maria," he said. "I tell her if she's so afraid of dogs we shouldn't feed them because they'll just keep returning. At first it was only one or two dogs. Now all the dogs in the neighborhood spread the word about where to get a good banquet. "Maria, I can't figure you out," he shouted to her, with a somewhat amused grin on his face.

"*Ay nena*" Maria whispered to Mima. "Did you ever look into the eyes of a hungry child? Well, the eyes of a hungry dog have the exact same expression. *Ay bendito!* I feel sorry for those poor orphan dogs that no one cares about or cares for. Now that we have enough food to have leftovers, what else do I want with them? Why should they be wasted and dumped in the trash when I can share them? I don't have to go to the *supermercado* to buy fancy food for these dogs. These *amigos puertorriqueños* eat exactly what we eat. They even like my *sofrito!*"

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