

***EL CLUB DE LAS CUATRO EMES***

***(The Four M Club)***

**by Juan Ramón Santos**

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## Chapter 1: Madam Beck's

Like every self-respecting shopkeeper who sells things for young people, Madam Beck despised children.

As a teenager she'd gone to secretarial school at the Ramiro Academy, where she studied a little bit of French and a lotta bit of typewriting and shorthand, skills she endeavored to master only to see them quickly become superfluous in a world filling with ever-more tape recorders and, later, computers. Her dream had been to move to Paris to work at the offices of some important global organization: she'd wear tailored pantsuits and smart high-heeled shoes and drive down the Champs-Élysées in one of those tiny little French cars. But then she found love in the form of a traveling salesman with a poet's soul. He wrote her ballads during their courtship, but after the wedding, he rarely achieved more than the occasional rhyming couplet, and even that only lasted the first few marital years.

Then came children, diapers, bibs, kneepads... before she knew it, her babies were school-age and she was left with nothing to fill her long, lonely weekdays, which were followed by heaps of washing and ironing on weekends. To ward off the boredom, she and her husband used their savings to start a little shop that sold newspapers and magazines, but also fresh bread and, most importantly, candy, ice cream, trading cards, toys, coloring books, and all sorts of shiny distractions for kids. From her wistful time at the Ramiro Academy, she had retained only a quick and convoluted technique for taking notes, a somewhat tacky fashion sense, a strange grimace she made when speaking, and an unmitigated love for the French language, which led her to call her shop—bedecked with countless flowers and ungodly amounts of pink—*Madame Bec Sucré*, which, in a city that was barely more than a glorified small town, everyone ended up calling “Madam Beck's.”

Like we said, Madam Beck hated children, even though no non-child would have ever thought so, as she was extremely hospitable and polite with grown-ups, always saying hello,

how's your morning going, how's your afternoon going, asking adults about their vacations or their jobs or their sick mothers and speaking sweetly to their kids or grandkids, throwing the doors of her shop open wide as if it were a temple to joy, a place where they could make themselves at home and eat sweets until their bellies ached.

On the other hand, when kids went in by themselves, without their mother or father or grandmother, Madam Beck would frown, swap her soft voice for a hostile one, and skeptically scrutinize each and every young miscreant who came through her door, all of whom she knew for a fact were unfeeling criminals despite a lack of evidence. She was no fan of technology and there were no cameras or wires or computers in her shop, but in every location she had shrewdly installed small, discrete mirrors, which she used to expand her line of sight on the sly. So as you used the tongs to capture a piece of red licorice, a chocolate-covered blackberry, or a banana-flavored gummy, it wasn't uncommon to find yourself suddenly facing the reflection of Madam Beck's distrustful gaze, her eyelashes stiff with mascara, her teeth clenched, ready to denounce even the most minor act of candy thievery.

Deep-down, she seemed to hope the kids would steal something so she could shout in their faces, tell their parents, and watch them cry inconsolably after they got their punishment. Maybe that's why, after children had selected their candies one by one so they wouldn't exceed their allowance, as they carefully counted their coins to make sure they had enough, Madam Beck would grow increasingly agitated and, if no other grown-ups were watching, grab the coins out of their hands and rudely slap them against the counter, probably hoping one or two would fall and disappear through a crack in the floor.

She relished in banishing little girls on roller skates back to the park the instant they poked their stubby little noses through the door. She'd say they had to put on shoes or at least flip-flops if they wanted to buy candy, because those atrocious gizmos on their feet would scratch the wood floor. And if those exact same little girls came in wearing those exact same

roller skates, but this time they were with their parents, she would affectionately welcome them into the shop and say the skates were no problem, please just be careful, she wouldn't want them to slip and hurt themselves. It was the same if a boy came in with a basketball or soccer ball: if he was alone, the ball was a deadly weapon that under no circumstances would she allow through the threshold of her shop, but if he was with his mother, the ball became the perfect complement for the handsome young man. Madam Beck would pinch his cheeks and then exclaim, with a mastery of the dramatic arts that would put many professional actors to shame, "Oh, it's so important for young people to play sports!"

These were just a few of the wicked acts Madam Beck committed in her shop on a daily basis, all of which were witnessed only by children, whom no adult ever took seriously. For these and many other reasons (including urban legends of children receiving lashings at the hands of the sinister shopkeeper), Matilde and her friends concluded that Madam Beck must be the very embodiment of evil.

## **Chapter 2: Caught Red-handed**

Like every self-respecting group of smart young children, Matilde and her friends resolved to make life impossible for Madam Beck. That might sound like an impressive mission, but it was really more of a theoretical goal, since most of their mischief went unnoticed by the shopkeeper. But they never stopped trying.

Their strategy was more or less the same each time. Manuel would fill a big bag with candy, then plant himself in front of the counter and chat with Madam Beck as she counted his purchases one by one. Matilde's father always said Manuel had the demeanor and conversational style of an old man, so maybe that—the fact that he had no childlike characteristics whatsoever—was why Madam Beck adored him. She was charmed when he asked about the weather or the road work outside, or when he'd remark on some bit of news

from the paper. Manuel never ran out of sensible questions and comments, and Madam Beck would stand there spellbound, wondering how so much prudence and maturity could be found in a child, seeing as how in her eyes, children were stupid and odious by nature. What she didn't suspect was that, as Manuel created this diversion, Matilde and the two Marías silently roamed the aisles switching price tags, hiding newspapers, and precariously stacking boxes of candy so that they would all come crashing loudly to the floor at the slightest touch. Afterwards, as they slipped out unseen, Manuel bid Madam Beck a theatrical farewell, departing with the formality of an ambassador. Then the four would cackle with delight as they sprinted to the park, where they talked about all the tricks they had prepared and imagined the moment Madam Beck discovered their sabotage.

They succeeded with this formula over and over until, one Sunday, when Manuel was sick and stuck at home. Matilde and the two Marías, bored of out of their minds, tried repeating the ruse without him. It wasn't the same. Even though Matilde had no shortage of conversational material, and she was big enough to generally obscure her friends' misdeeds, she failed to charm Madam Beck, who immediately smelled something fishy in the incessant chatter and shot an inquisitive eye from mirror to mirror throughout the shop.

Thus, she caught the saboteurs red-handed as they wantonly mixed the hunting and fishing magazines with the craft and fashion magazines. Madam Beck's angry cry was loud enough to make the gummy bears stand at attention, to crumble the potato chips in their bags, and to drive the sour worms underground. Ten minutes later, after she had run out of possible synonyms for shameless, insolent, and despicable, she refused to let the two Marías leave until their parents came to get them.

And so Matilde, shamefaced, had no choice but to cross the street and bring all the moms and dads to the shop, where Madam Beck—who had curtailed her insults and was now giving a stellar performance in her role as wronged woman—gave an exaggerated account of

the children's villainy, astounding their parents. Without a doubt that the kind, polite, distraught woman's version of events was truthful, they sent the girls home. But as María, María, and Matilde shuffled back to their houses, heads hung low, through the shop window they could see Madam Beck's wicked, self-satisfied grin.

### **Chapter 3: The Gang Gets a Name**

Two weeks with no allowance and no going to the park was the punishment unanimously doled out by the girls' parents for their candy shop mischief.

Fortunately, even without their allowance or the park, they could still meet up with Manuel in their favorite corner at school, where they spent recess after recess talking about Madam Beck, rehashing the details of that fateful Sunday, and reflecting on all the injustices she had perpetrated against them. And allegedly against so many other kids, as well. After extensive deliberation, they concluded the person who really deserved to be punished was her, the evil shopkeeper, and they—Matilde, Manuel, María, and María—would make her pay.

Before deciding on where, when, and how to do that, they agreed they needed a name. They already had the team—the four of them—and they had proven their efficacy through months of discrete sabotage at Madam Beck's shop, but they still needed something to call themselves, since any self-respecting gang has a name or at least some initials that can be used to describe them on the news, if necessary.

It took several recesses to agree on a name. Manuel slyly suggested they call themselves "The Manuel Gang," but Matilde and the Marías immediately rejected that option and called Manuel a sexist who wanted to hog all the spotlight for himself. Manuel argued that he didn't want the spotlight, it was just that naming the gang after himself highlighted the group's unique makeup: a group with a strong female presence that consisted of three girls

and only one boy. His friends went on to reject similar proposals such as “Manuel and the Girls” and “Manuel’s Angels” (after an old TV show he’d heard his father talk about). They said they weren’t his angels or anyone else’s, they weren’t angels at all!

They tried out a few more generic names, but none was quite right. The rejected options piled up the recycling bin: “The Avengers,” “The Fantastic Four,” “The Smarties” “The Clever Kids,” and “Code Red.”

When they were just starting to worry they’d never find a good enough name, María Alcón (the more softspoken María) suggested that since they’d always thought it was cool how all of their names started with M, maybe they should call themselves “The Four M Club.”

“Of course!!!” María Romero, the most enthusiastic member of the group, cried out. “The Four M Club!!!”

All four immediately agreed on the solution, but Manuel thought they needed more: they had to create an emblem, logo, or drawing they could use as a calling card wherever they carried out their acts of revenge. Immediately, they began workshopping options: in Social Studies and Science class and, the next day, in English, Literature, and Religion, they furtively sketched in notebooks and used sheets of looseleaf, drafting logos and passing them around behind the teacher’s back. But they couldn’t come up with anything spectacular. Then, one day at recess, Matilde, who was the best of the four at drawing, folded up a sheet of paper on which she had written four Ms so there was one M on top, another upside-down below it, and one on either side; all four were connected at the feet to create a sort of cross. Everyone agreed this was undoubtedly the perfect sign for their gang.

“*Vendetta!*” Manuel cried with his fist in the air when, for the first time, they used a piece of worn-out brick to scratch their symbol into the school wall.

## Chapter 4: Drafting a Plan

It's possible that, deep down, the real reason the Four M Club spent so many recesses discussing a name and emblem was because they wanted to postpone a harder decision: how they should punish Madam Beck.

Because... what kind of trick could four eleven-year-old kids play on an old woman when they couldn't even enter her shop without rousing suspicion (or at least, Matilde and the Marías couldn't), when they couldn't walk through the door without raising red flags and attracting Madam Beck's untrusting and ruthless gaze?

"The first thing we have to do is get a thorough lay of the land," Manuel said with conviction. Even though he hadn't managed to get the gang named after him, he insisted that he was the leader and the brains of the operation.

On this topic, all four were in agreement. The problem was that Matilde and the Marías were still grounded, and they wouldn't be able to return to the scene of the crime for about ten days. Thus, for the time, reconnaissance was entirely in Manuel's hands; he promised to take photos with his cell phone so that later the four of them could meticulously analyze the situation together.

Beginning that morning, Manuel became uncommonly helpful to his mother: every day after school, he offered to buy bread to serve with dinner, but instead of going to the usual bakery, which was right next-door, he bolted all the way across the park to buy it from Madam Beck's. He claimed he could pull it off because he ran as fast as lightning; but the girls knew how slow he really was, and it was hard to imagine him racing at the speed of light, or even the speed of sound. Fortunately, his father wasn't usually home for dinner, and his absent-minded mother was always preoccupied with problems from work; otherwise, both parents would have immediately noticed Manuel's extended absence. From each expedition, Manuel returned with dozens of images that, the next day, the four of them would secretly



study from their corner of the school playground: photos of the outside of the shop covertly taken from behind a park bench; photos of the inside discretely shot when Madam Beck had her back turned as she retrieved the bread for Manuel; and finally, more outside photos, this time of her closing shop for the day. Manuel had even recorded a video in which you couldn't see anything, just flashes of light and the occasional hint of color, but you could hear him and Madam Beck having a friendly conversation about his schoolwork.

The four were immersed in their analysis, sitting around the cell phone, trying to find some clue on the screen that would help them devise the best plan of attack. But just then, Señorita Nieves, the English teacher who was playground monitor that day, appeared in front of them.

“You are playing with a mobile device. Mobile devices are prohibited at school. The administration has clearly communicated the prohibition of mobile devices. I will now confiscate the mobile device,” she said like a robot, with sharp breaks between each syllable, being very clear about both the crime and the consequence. “Give me the mobile device, Manuel.”

“But it doesn't have a SIM card and it can't make calls or anything—” Manuel protested, trying to fib his way out of the punishment.

“You are playing with a mobile device. Mobile devices are prohibited at school. The administration has clearly communicated the prohibition of mobile devices. I will now confiscate the mobile device. Give me the mobile device, Manuel,” she said again. It seemed like someone had set the robot on loop, because she repeated the message twice more before Manuel finally turned it off and handed it over.

“Shoot! Now I don't have a phone!” Manuel lamented as soon as Señorita Android (as her students sometimes called her) turned the corner. And he didn't even realize how long

he'd have to go without it: when his father learned what happened, he took the phone away for a whole month.

This forced the Four M Club to rely on memory and other, old-fashioned, analog methods. The next day, they brought a few notebooks down to the playground, and Manuel, with the loquacious assistance of María Romero, drew a map of the shop's surroundings (benches, streetlights, the park, the street, the crosswalk, the café on the corner) and sketched a rough blueprint of the interior (the magazine aisle, the candy aisle, the freezer, the fridge, the bread shelf). Meanwhile Matilde, under the silent gaze of María Alcón, drew a dubiously useful portrait of Madam Beck behind the cash register, with bright red lipstick and wide eyes, ringing up a man for a newspaper. When they compared their drawings and Manuel—ever the tactician—saw that Matilde's wouldn't help them devise meeting points, lines of attack, or escape routes, he couldn't help but disdainfully cry:

“But we won't be able to use that picture for anything!”

María Romero, breaking character, remained silent. So did Matilde, who was a little hurt to see Manuel slap his blueprint down on top of her drawing. It was María Alcón who slid it away and insistently gestured at a corner of Matilde's skillful and humorous caricature of Madam Beck.

“What?” Manuel asked, annoyed, and about to lose his temper.

“The dog,” María Alcón muttered, resolutely pointing to the hastily sketched figure at the bottom of the portrait, sleeping by Madam Beck's feet: her mangy, slobbering, gnarly mutt, Lulu.

## **Chapter 5: Lulu**

Madam Beck's weepy-eyed dog, Lulu, would spend hours under the counter at the candy shop, gazing at her own sad reflection in the glass door. For her, every day was the same: she

walked from the house to the shop and from the shop to the house, doing her business along the way. It was only on the weekends, when Mr. Beck came back from traveling all around Spain on business, that she'd occasionally get taken to the park. On those occasions she seemed happy enough, barking and sniffing other dogs' pee with subdued enthusiasm.

"My light! My joy! The great pleasure of my home!" Madam Beck would occasionally cry, causing those around her to cringe a little, since rarely has the world seen an uglier, sadder, duller creature than Lulu, the candy shop's apathetic guard dog.

In any case, the Four M Club had decided Lulu would be the means by which they would punish Madam Beck. At first they considered shaving off all her hair or dyeing it purple, and the fiendish Manuel even suggested poisoning the dog or at least giving her unstoppable diarrhea that would fill Madam Beck's home and shop with odious fumes, but the group dismissed all of those options immediately. Then they began to consider kidnapping the dog and holding her hostage, though no one really knew how to do that or what their demands would be. Money didn't interest them, and soon they began discussing a ransom of candy in exchange for Lulu's release, which they would request a few days later on a note they would pin to the dog's collar, raking the shopkeeper over the coals for her misdeeds.

Finally, two long weeks were up, and the girls' punishment was over. After countless indecisive conversations at recess, the Four M Club met in the park across from the candy shop with the vague notion that they would focus their efforts on Lulu. They spied on the shop for ages, but they couldn't even see Lulu's tail. When customers came and went through the door, they were unable to catch so much as a glimpse (from behind a bench or a tree, or from the top of the slide on the playground) of the dog's curly, abundant, ash-colored fur.

After an hour or two, they decided they had no choice but to go into the shop. The girls didn't dare cross the threshold, fearing they would again suffer Madam Beck's wrath, so

they gave Manuel their money and a shopping list. From a distance, they watched as he unhurriedly crossed the street and went inside, and from there he reassured them with a stiff thumbs-up that everything was going according to plan.

He took his sweet time shopping, picking out candies one by one with the tongs, spending an eternity contemplating the shelf stocked with potato chips, onion rings, and fluorescent-orange snacks, as if he were unable to decide. All the while, he never quite took his eyes off of the dog, who didn't stir or even move her face, which might have been the most splendid representation of canine ugliness in the history of humankind.

"She's so cute!" Manuel exclaimed, petting Lulu so the dog would like him, her future kidnapper, as Madam Beck rang up his candies. "What's her name?" he asked, as if it weren't common knowledge.

"Lulu," Madam Beck replied proudly. "It's a French name."

"Just like the shop's! It sounds very sophisticated," exaggerated Manuel, a true expert in sucking up.

"Precisely. I studied French when I was a girl," Madam Beck said tidily, and for the forty-thousandth time, Manuel feigned interest as she described her memories from the Ramiro Academy and her vainglorious fantasies of Paris, as a long line of boys and girls formed behind him, bored out of their minds and eager to hurry up and buy their candies so they could gobble them up in the park.

She droned on for several minutes, but when she was finally finished, Manuel still had it in him to make a few exaggerated comments about Lulu's gracefulness and Madam Beck's wonderful disposition as a dog-owner. Then he bid her farewell and returned to the park with his purchases.

"Did you learn anything useful?" his friends asked as soon as he made it out.

“Nothing at all,” Manuel lamented, and the four of them choked down their frustration by devouring the whole bag of candy before going their separate ways for dinner.