



The Extra Chair

A Comiri Family story



Saturday afternoon was already busy in the courtyard.
Mom carried bowls outside.
Mama Elena tied the tablecloth to the long wooden table.
Mateo carried a stack of napkins.
He counted them twice.
“Do we really need twelve?” he asked.
Mama Elena smiled.
“I have a feeling we will find someone for every one.”



People began arriving with things to share.
Mrs. Patel brought warm bread wrapped in a towel.
Mr. Greene carried a bowl of strawberries.
The twins from upstairs came racing in with a deck of cards.

As Mateo set forks beside the plates, he noticed a boy
sitting quietly on the steps.
A man stood beside him, unlocking the apartment
that had been empty all summer.

“Who is that?” Mateo asked.
“Our new neighbors, I think,” Mom said.



The boy looked about Mateo's age.
He had bright green sneakers and a dinosaur tucked
under one arm.
Mateo liked dinosaurs.
"Do they know anyone yet?" he asked.
"Probably not many people," Mom said.
Then she added, "A hello can be a lovely beginning."
Mateo looked at the table.
Then he looked back at the boy.
He knew what she meant.



Mateo straightened a napkin.
Then he moved a cup about an inch to the left.
Mama Elena watched him and smiled.
“Very important cup work?”
Mateo laughed a little.
“I am thinking.”
“What are you thinking about?”
Mateo glanced toward the steps.
“What am I supposed to say?”
Mama Elena shrugged.
“You could start with your name.”



Mateo walked halfway across the courtyard.
Then the dinosaur slipped from the boy's lap
and landed on the pavement.
Mateo picked it up.
"It is a stegosaurus," he said.
The boy looked surprised.
"I know."
Mateo handed it back.
"I'm Mateo."
"I'm Sam."
Mateo pointed toward the table.
"We are eating out here soon."



Mateo ran back across the courtyard.

"We need another chair."

"There is one beside the storage door," Mom said.

Mateo dragged it over.

The chair scraped loudly across the pavement.

Everyone looked up.

Mateo froze.

Mr. Greene laughed first.

"That chair certainly knows how to make an entrance."

Mateo laughed too and opened it beside his own chair.



Sam came over with his dad, Amir.
Names circled the table.
Mama Elena brought another plate.
Mom made room for Amir's sandwiches.
Mrs. Patel passed the bread.
Someone poured lemonade.
Soon Sam was laughing about a squirrel that stole
tomatoes from a balcony.
Then half the table was laughing with him.
The extra chair did not feel extra anymore.



During dinner, Sam told Mateo about trains running past his bedroom window. Mateo told Sam about the squirrel that stole tomatoes from Mrs. Patel's balcony. Mrs. Patel heard him and smiled. "That squirrel and I have an understanding," she said. "What understanding?" Sam asked. "I grow the tomatoes. He eats the tomatoes." Sam laughed so suddenly that lemonade came out his nose. That made Mateo laugh. Then half the table was laughing. The extra chair did not feel extra anymore.



After dinner, the children found a box of sidewalk chalk.
Mateo drew a road.
Sam added a bridge.
The twins drew an enormous purple lake.
Mateo made a dinosaur crossing.
“That dinosaur needs somewhere to live,” Sam said.
So they added a forest.
Then a volcano.
Then a bakery, because one of the twins decided
dinosaurs probably liked muffins.
By sunset, their chalk world covered half the courtyard.



The adults stayed at the table while the children played. Mateo heard Amir talking about the boxes still stacked in his apartment.

Mama Elena offered the name of the little grocery store around the corner.

Mrs. Patel promised to show him which bus went downtown.

Mr. Greene offered a toolbox.

Mateo looked over at Sam.

Yesterday, Sam had been someone new.

Tonight, he was busy deciding whether dinosaurs could run a bakery.



As the evening ended, everyone began carrying dishes upstairs.

Mateo picked up the napkins that had blown beneath the table.

Then he noticed the folding chair.

Sam had been sitting there all evening.

Mom came up beside him.

“You look thoughtful.”

Mateo touched the back of the chair.

“It was extra before,” he said.

Then he looked across the courtyard at Sam waving goodbye.

“Now it belongs to somebody.”



The following Saturday, Mateo carried napkins outside again. This time Sam came running across the courtyard before the table was finished.

Amir followed with a covered dish in his hands.

Mateo pulled out the folding chair.

Then he noticed another empty chair beside the wall.

He carried that one over too.

Sam looked at him.

“Who is that for?”

Mateo opened it beside the table.

“Whoever comes next.”