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Extract from the novel *Geografía de lo inútil*

#### PEDERASTS ALSO FALL IN LOVE

In Puerto Rosales there is a small toy store not very far from 41 Avenue Phillipi. In the window display stand three half-meter soccer players constructed entirely out of Legos, two short cloth roulette tables with professional chips, and a plastic castle - home to a miniature pink princess and a miniature blue prince. Not to mention bouncy balls, seven-hundred (and also fifty, three-hundred and five-hundred) piece puzzles, Playmobile pirates and other fantastic curiosities that would take too long to name.

The Avenue Phillipi toy store provides the ideal place for losing time - at least for a couple of hours every few months. It's great therapy for relaxing the mind and reviving your inner five-year-old. Especially at Christmastime when red and white-striped ribbons crown the windows, simulating an impossible snow. During the month of December, a stout man plants himself next to the entrance dressed in a festive coat, hat and beard. If it weren't for the layer of sweat coating the smile of the stoic Santa on duty, this scene could easily be a tender South American Christmas postcard - the sort of image that evokes a memory of lukewarm soda with a sweetener aftertaste.

For years, each Christmas, they've installed a pedestal outside of the toy store with a battery-powered teddy bear atop a wooden seat that blows soap bubbles from its mouth. Anytime you pass by Avenue Phillipi dozens of bubbles fly around the toy store. Few people are bothered when a bubble bursts over their heads, releasing the subtlest sheen of water and soap. Instead, for the majority of passersby, the spectacle proves to be enchanting.

At Christmas a while back Señora Lohmiller was seen dragging her miniature Chow Chow on a leash just in front of the toy store, hardly a few steps from the building where she lived. This Chow Chow was, in fact, the very same dog that her husband had given to her after the only son of the Lohmiller marriage left home. His name - the son's not the dog's - is Jonas. He now lives in Santiago with a half Chilean, half Uruguayan girl and works in a language institute teaching German. Her name is N and she also teaches classes, but only during winter. N's a ski instructor who dedicates her summers to, among other things, walking other people's dogs for money, reading novels that she never manages to finish and polishing her tan on the roof of the building where she and Jonas live. Her sufficiently rich family supports her caprices and ensures, although with more than a sideways glance, that N's autumns and springs pass as placid interludes meriting little attention on her part. Jonas, for his part, has no problem with his girlfriend deciding to take a few months off; of course she doesn't mind either. To the rest of the world they can give the impression of being one of those insubstantial and comfortably happy couples, as easy to hate as to envy. Fortunately Jonas and N don't worry much about the rest of the world. They did worry about something once however: that they might, when they still did not have one, be happier with a pet. One of those big, clumsy shaggy dogs - maybe an Afghan or a German Shepherd - but they didn't have the time or space to integrate such a thing into their lives. Jonas and his girlfriend discussed the matter of the dog on more than

once. The truth is that she wanted a child, but resigned herself to a bigger, furrer animal, while he only wanted someone that would greet him when he arrived home to an empty apartment – especially during the coldest months, since in high season N sometimes passes entire weeks without coming down from the mountains. They finally decided that as soon as they find a bigger place they will get married, she'll stop taking contraceptives, he'll visit a pet store and they will truly be happy once and for all. Their ceremony would be private - only an official from the civil registry and a few friends to act as witnesses. No version of their hypothetical wedding included parents, though not because the couple consciously wanted to exclude them. It was simply that, while fantasizing about the idea, N and Jonas imagined a simple ceremony, something austere in both gesture and social commitment. In the end, a party no less private than their caresses and “loveyou’s.”

That summer, while walking her miniature Chow Chow through the streets of Puerto Rosales, Señora Lohmiller was a little less – or perhaps a little more – than sixty years old. She believed in the possibility that more-or-less-sixty years could amount to just a few. Admittedly, while pretentious, Señora Lohmiller was a rather attractive woman and although she did not draw as many looks in the street as before, the almost sexagenarian would occasionally succeed in turning the head of an innocent bystander.

On the evening in question the whole town was walking around in as little clothing as possible. Many girls and women in short skirts and loose, backless dresses, boys in shorts, men in thin shirts with short sleeves, more than a few rubber and leather sandals, as well as a few hats and colored visors, but of the last not quite as many. In their defense, those who preferred to walk around in a visor had an obvious reason for doing so: when you sweat a lot – and in Puerto Rosales you definitely sweat in December – wearing a hat, regardless of how light it may be, means you're going to fry your brain. But if this evening there happened to be fewer hats and colored visors than usual, it was because the transparent sky carried not a single cloud that could ruin perfect blue overhead – and it's always agreeable to let oneself enjoy those skies, that hypnotize without dazzling. In part because of this it was strange that Señora Lohmiller had not been looking upward; that she paid no attention to the soap bubbles suspended in the air or the electronic bear that spat them out. Or perhaps the fault lies with a particularly asymmetrical cobblestone or frequent memories of Jonas, which, at that time, used to hound his mother practically every day. Many things happened on the day in question, but the one certainty is that the explosion of a bubble just in the middle of Señora Lohmiller's face sent her tumbling next to the toy store's front window.

Fortunately she escaped her stumble unscathed. Señora Lohmiller only broke the nail on the big toe of her right foot and shocked a pair of schoolchildren who witnessed the incident and managed to hear her drop a few choice words. If only we could say the same of her pet, but the unfortunate little Chow Chow fractured his paw when his mistress cast the full force of her weight upon him. The dog's shrieks were so pitiful that one of the cashiers at the toy store went out onto the street and, seeing the source of the noise, promptly blurted out:

“They're gonna have to put that poor animal to sleep.”

But the cashier was incorrect in his diagnosis. After two weeks of immobilization and three months of therapy, Ludwigvan – this was the name of the dog – was already on his feet once again, running through the Lohmiller apartment, chasing spiders and barking every night at light bulbs. Although its limp worsened with time, the animal still trotted contentedly around his metropolitan and exclusive neighborhood and managed to survive his original owners because Señora Lohmiller,

not long after the accident in front of the toy store, died of a cancer that first rapidly devoured her thyroid and then her will to breathe.

Unable to stand how much the strange dog reminded him of his wife, Señor Lohmiller asked his son, as they drove to the cemetery, if he would mind taking charge of Ludwigvan. Before Jonas answered he checked the rearview mirror for an excuse reflected in N's face but she hastened to say from the backseat that oh my god yes of course – and the sentence sounded as if it were a single word: ohmygodyes – putting an end to the conversation with a mute hug that encompassed both Jonas' father and the back of his seat.

But Señor Lohmiller continued to breathe a melancholy that the absence of his pet did nothing to dissipate. On the contrary, it only condensed the atmospheric weight that inundated his living space. He discovered immediately that he didn't have the strength to stand the silence of his vacant bedroom. Only a few weeks after burying his wife they found him inert on the bed. The nightstand held a bottle of sleeping pills, a cup of wine, two half-eaten saltines and a photo of his wife and son holding hands. The Jonas from the photograph seems to be eight years old, in a clown costume and forcing an enormous smile; his mother accompanies him dressed as a witch, attempting to imitate the grin of the boy and failing to set her own lips in a pretty pout.

Jonas received this photo in the mail three weeks after the death of his father. Señor Araos, administrator of the Lohmiller building, had the idea of sending the portrait of Jonas with his mother along with a report of the tragedy. Before sending the card, Araos picked his brain for an entire night in an attempt to give, laconically, what he intuited to be the most adequate response. Jonas did not appreciate his efforts, however, which seemed of poor taste in the introduction (Esteemed Señor Jonas Lohmiller, / your parents, adorable tenants and tender human beings...) and continued poorly up until the affectedly exaggerated postscript (My heart, as torn as yours from the disastrous events that have occurred / hurts and accompanies you in this tragically difficult time. / Sincerely yours, / I bid you farewell, / Roberto Araos). He read the card alone in the bathroom – Jonas refused to give his correspondence more time than the minimum required by his intestines to carry out their work – while Ludwigvan whined on the other side of the door. The animal still had not grown used to the place or voices of his new masters. Each time N or Jonas came across him, Ludwigvan took off and dove behind a piece of furniture, under the bed or in some corner of the apartment that made a useful hideout. Listening to the cry of the dog, Jonas knew right there, sitting on the toilet, that it was not going to be easy to return to Puerto Rosales. Not while this miniature Chow Chow reminded him of the sadness his father must have felt to find himself completely alone. This sadness contrasted with the absent sorrow of coping with Señor Lohmiller's previous phone call:

“She died, Jonas, finally and like everyone, your mother died.”

Who knows what was going through his father's head that led him to such an entanglement of words. Maybe he had the senile idea that Señora Lohmiller had been exempt from the process of dying simply because she was his wife. Or that at the last instant a miraculous heart attack would help him avoid surviving her cancer. Perhaps he simply did not want to understand that every biography, without a single exception, ends with an obituary. Anyway, because of the way his father gave him the news, the fact seemed so trivially certain to Jonas that the death of his mother turned into an event no less necessary than a sordid tautology. She had cancer and was old; she was going to die at any moment. It was a logic that left no room for surprises. And, just as there are people who refuse to admit that pederasts also fall in love, Jonas' father also resisted reconciliation with the bitter truth of facts. It sufficed to hear it: Stupor echoed in the voice of Señor Lohmiller. At some

point during the course of that phone call Jonas discovered that the will of the world, when it reveals itself plainly, is blind and indifferent, leaving no room for crying or laughter, enjoyment or pain. Although never losing its force, the order of things has empty authority when sadness (and sometimes also happiness) changes the sense that we try to trace on our small lives.

“I’m so sorry, Papa,” he said after listening to the silence come and go from one receiver to another. But Jonas couldn’t feel much sorrow, neither half as much nor a little. At least, not like Señor Lohmiller felt it. The truth was that Jonas, in comparison with his father, felt nothing at all.

*Translated from the Spanish by Álvaro Campos and Macarena Fabry  
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