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TOGLIETTI

... *with cropped hair and enormous solemn eyes.*  
KATHERINE MANSFIELD, "The Doll's House"

We never saw her fight back (although in the end she did fight back), but for us the fatso Toglietti – this is what we called her – was the girl who farted during gym class, when the first-year teacher called her to the front and, perhaps wanting to humiliate her, asked her to do twenty push-ups and twenty sit-ups, and the rest of us, sitting on the stairs and looking at her, would call out the numbers. Until suddenly the fatso tried harder and pffff... We burst out laughing while the fatso stayed still, motionless, blinking her eternal bovine eyes, as if the fart had surprised her too, as a monstrosity that can't conceive of how she got to the center of the yard, humiliated and defenseless. After that Thursday, if I have to think of an image that singles her out, that defines the fatso somehow, she appears among the three vipers. They'd taken her sneakers while she was in the basement swimming pool and the fatso staggered along, an arm up high, her hair slicked back, humbling herself, unaware perhaps that she was humbling herself in front of the three vipers. They were called Rosa, Rosaura and Ramona, and they were the type of popular teenagers hanging out in groups, as if they'd been packaged together, who spoke like smart alecks and wore high heels and tight jackets and ran after the boys. Luz and I called them vipers because of their venomous tongues, and Luz laughed and winked an eye at me while we were smoking in the bathroom, and said, sure, the three of them coil up to sleep. It took them a few months, once we started school, to spot the fatso and start pestering her. The thing is, after that, life was an ordeal for Erica Toglietti. And she would, from her seat, put up with them without a flinch, with her slow bovine gaze, like those untroubled *Holando-Argentino* cows that stand in the middle of the road, eyes lost and glazed, endlessly chewing with moist lips, and slick hair, and buttery skin. *Ball of fat*. She would eat unperturbed, continuously during classes – ham sandwiches, chocolates and pieces of cake. She came from a family of southern Italians, once-illiterate peasants, and was as hard as a hoe; she seemed meant for being pushed around, and falling down and getting up again without complaining. She didn't show off much mental brilliance, I would say, and since there were many decrepit teachers in the historic Colegio Nacional, it was easy for the three vipers to attack her. Actually, all we knew about her was what could be deduced from that huge mass of butter, still and sweaty. She had a younger sister, Laurita, who she went home with. And a mother who had abandoned them when they were children. The father was a Peronist, and it was a time of *gorillas*– or anti-Peronists – at the Nacional and in the city. This about her parents we found out through Luz, who lived in Flores, too, in the block opposite the fatso's home.

—Yo fatso! Your mother doesn't love you?

—What happened, fatso? Your father’s not going to vote?

According to one of the traditional stories of the school, some senior students had once, during a farewell party, brought in a pig smeared with cooking oil after the math class, and let it slide down the marble floor, pushed it downstairs, and when I thought of that story, I pictured the fatso as that troubled pig who screamed and couldn’t defend herself, and hit a pillar head-on to ricochet in the opposite direction. Then the three vipers would staple the pages of her English book, pour some ink inside her bag, and the fatso, with her patient sigh and her still look, would unstaple the pages, one at a time, and wash the bag in the bathroom. On top of this, among all the things Erica Toglietti had to put up with all those years, she’d fallen in love with the wrong person. We used to call this prefect guy “The Toad” because he would appear in the most implausible places. The fatso saw him coming and sighed. She brought him chocolates, drew little pictures for him, and sighed. She laughed when he called her name, and The Toad acted as if nothing happened.

—Why don’t you fight back, fatso?

We were in the basement cafeteria, after the swimming class when the missing-sneaker event had happened, and it was Luz who asked the question. The fatso was wearing an enormous gray t-shirt with two words that read “no stress”, and had bought a portion of cheese. She unwrapped the cheese, took out a slice, rolled it up and started munching it.

—It’s not worth it— said the fatso. There are bigger problems —went on the fatso.

To tell you the truth it didn’t seem to bother her. Laurita had come in and was sitting next to her, and I realized that I’d never seen Laurita on her own, she was always hanging onto her sister’s schoolbag, and the fatso always seemed to be there for her. At the end of the day, we didn’t know much about Laurita either, just that she was a bit thinner, and some said she was a bit cuckoo or a bit crazy, the thing is that we were already in the midst of the *camporista* spring – with a Peronist president – because I can remember quite clearly the fatso going away with her sister hanging onto her bag after school in the afternoon, both of them swinging along amidst the small strips of paper falling over Avenida de Mayo, strips of paper everywhere. Of course, we didn’t know what would come after that and the country was a mess because Peron was coming back, and the hope (we were to see, later in the year, how all we were waiting for would play out) while, smoking in the bathroom, we told the fatso to fight back. For us, although we didn’t know what to call these things, the Left was very serious stuff, a never-ending argument, the chance of a change, of being well at last. It was serious stuff we wanted to do, and it was urgent, it was real and it could only be done by actually doing things. It involved helping your neighbor, leaving the subway door clear if you weren’t getting off, or not torturing a classmate. And that could be done *now*, it was not necessary to wait until other conditions changed.

But all that was framed in a midday, like the time I was getting out of the first floor library and a guy came to me and put his gun to my tummy (I remember that quite well, it was a man with hairy arms, he pushed me with the jacket that was covering the gun and asked me, “What book are you carrying here?” and I showed it to him, it was Roman law). Later I told Luz and she opened her eyes wide, and said, pretty scary, indeed, and whistled. And since we didn’t know what to do when these things happened, we let them be and tried not to be scared, then Luz told me, you didn’t get the latest: the fatso is writing a letter to The Toad. The Toad had told her that he’d take her dancing if she handed him a letter. And the fatso, obviously, bit. Instead of defending herself, instead of

suspecting something unusual, we saw her writing during geography class, and drawing class, while the three vipers put strips of paper on her head or hid her scarf away.

My little bear, my floweret, as my mum called me. That was the beginning of the letter. We knew it because we all read it a week later: it was screened in a micro-theater during art history class on Wednesday. The art history teacher was a good-natured woman but she'd not inhabited this planet for some time. I remember that Esteban, just to bother her, would go out of the class several times and then he'd come in again, twice or three times during the same class, before her slightly amazed eyes, who greeted him as if it was the first time: "Late again, Lopez". We were in the middle of medieval art, the three vipers had offered to operate the projector and I remember a painting of John the Baptist with a dove on top, until suddenly, between two paintings, the fatso's clumsy handwriting started to appear. My little bear, my floweret, as my mum called me. Careful, she had really been careful, the fatso, because after telling him about her mother and her departure, she set off to conquer him in earnest with borrowed verses on your eyes and the sea. Those phrases appeared on the screen, while the teacher explained John the Baptist and the holy water, and we roared with uncontrollable laughter (stifled guffaws, hand-blocked hiccupping in the dark), and we dug deep in the seats, someone nudged another, shut up, asshole, don't laugh at her, poor fatso, when the fatso plucked up courage and jumped from her seat. This was high treason and she'd been hit hard. Esteban stepped into the room and the teacher said, "late again, Lopez", while we read the words and laughed out loud – I love you madly and I want to dance under the stars. The fatso got to the back of the classroom, to the table where the projector was and pounced on the cable to unplug it. But she couldn't. She didn't give up though: she stood up and placed her enormous body, the whole ball of lard, rashly, in front of the projector. The screen went black at once, but the click click of the slide carousel continued. Then, the good-natured art history teacher, the absent-minded and good-natured art history teacher, sensing something was wrong, turned her head to the screen and saw black and shouted, with the weight of her authority:

—Stop it, Toglietti, or would you like me to send you out of the class?

But it wasn't necessary to do so because the fatso heard the threat and burst into tears, slowly and silently. Yes, the tears could be seen in the darkness, and the shake of her shoulders, and her wet face, although she stayed on her feet, while the humbling click click continued, and the letter, black now, which we couldn't read any more was still there and the fatso stood up with all her strain and all the resistance she was capable of, the fatso stood like this until she couldn't bear it anymore and ran to the bathroom.

And maybe because of the defeat Erica Toglietti suffered that afternoon, her image connects with her sister's image hanging onto her bag, always watched from behind, both of them walking home down Avenida de Mayo, and with what was said those days on the street, that Peron was not the same, that we'd waited for him and had waited for something during all these years and when he arrived we realized that that something was different. I wagered that the fatso wasn't coming to school after the winter holidays; I made a bet with Luz that now Erica wouldn't take it anymore. But she came back. I don't know how she managed to recover, but she came back.

We saw her study during the rest of 1974; she was more quiet, more silent. She didn't laugh when The Toad called her name on the roll, nor did she make eyes at him, or talk to him. She seemed to have lost all interest in him. However, she never stopped eating (or eating in class),

despite being a bit paler and more transparent. During those weeks we saw her clean the jam from her jean jacket without uttering a word; we saw her look for her bag all over the school, but without any enthusiasm, like someone who does a task and that's it. The thing is that she put up with it the few months to the end of the year without any grace or spirit until the day Luz came up with the news and said that Erica had finally fought back.

Busy with exams and our December escapades, at the beginning we didn't realize that the fatso was missing. But after three days, in the bathroom, Luz told us what was rumored in the neighborhood, while we were smoking during the first break on Thursday. Luz told us, half leaning on the white tiles, blowing the smoke sideways through her mouth; Luz told us, in all its bitterness, the end of this story.

She fought back, Luz said. In the end she fought back.

Last Saturday night her father had gone out to a meeting and the fatso and Laurita stayed in the flat. There was nobody else. The neighbors heard nothing, or they heard nothing at the beginning. Much later, after midnight, the *milicos* showed up. As usual, the military kicked their way in, screaming their heads off, and throwing out papers from the drawers. They dragged the girls out of bed and made them stand in their nighties in the middle of the room. They yelled at them and stomped around. Until one of them caught Laurita and, with a gesture of great naturalness, put his hand on the girl's breast. Laurita protested a bit, but she was too tense about what could happen. Then, the fatso, performing the role of big sister, the fatso, with her never-ending grazing and her long look, saw and jumped on the *milico* to protect Laurita; she jumped and pushed him back, and the guy picked up his gun and shot her in the head.

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