

Tito and Me

I never thought I'd have a pet at all, not to mention one with the dimensions mine has.

But here I am.

I have the chance to travel all over the world in my work as a minor functionary in the intelligence community. No Jason Bourne stuff. Just sorting through reams of files (I could tell you, but then I'd have to wake you up).

I found Tito after I'd been here in Santiago maybe two, two and a half years.

I'm out with Gabi and Paco at *La Mariposa de Cobre*, knocking back a couple of pisco sours, and Paco says he needs help with a little problem.

His *tio* has a farm, and can't maintain it anymore with his arthritis and gout, and has to move into the city. He's sold all the animals to his neighbors, except one.

I can see it coming.

"What's wrong with it? Temper?"

"No, no," he insists. "Sweet *disposicion*. That's not the issue."

"But?"

He's sweet as *sucre*, really. And he's got a beautiful coat. He's just, a little, you know, *especial*."

Gabi sniggers.

Not even knowing whether the animal in question is a dog, or a cat, or maybe a parrot, I'm wondering what strange characteristics constitute special. Whatever it is, it's clear Paco has an agenda.

"First question, *compadre*. Why me for an animal that's different? In fact, why me at all. Why am I such a fit?"

"*Si, si, amigo*. He is *perfecto* for you. Let me tell you why."

I'm not sure I'm going to like this. At all.

Paco elucidates, with occasional support from Gabi, that I'm special too. He takes time to explain that he doesn't just mean the 1920s Gangster-style suits (though that's one reason), or the Spectator shoes (another fit), or the pocket watch and fob (ok, maybe those are all good justifications).

No, the big one is that I need a companion, someone who will appreciate me for who I am.

"You and Gabi appreciate me."

"We do, we do. Very much. But..."

“But what?”

Gabi interrupts.

“You need some love in your life.”

So, that Saturday, I’m headed off to Tio Pedro’s farm. Paco is there, standing in front of a horse trailer hitched to the back of an old flatbed. Gabi isn’t with him, but there’s an old man with as many wrinkles in his face as a raisin that’s been too long in the sauna.

I greet this man who could have been birthed by the earth itself, and he asks me, in rumbled Spanish that could be coming out of a broken-down cement mixer, just to call him Tio.

I do, and look over my shoulder at the horse trailer. I see the back gate of it is down, and it’s empty.

Not a dog or a cat, I surmise. Wouldn’t need transportation that big.

“Excuse me, but where’s the animal?”

Tio goes back behind the barn.

I cast a wary glance at my friend.

“Um, Paco?”

“Si?”

I look at the horse trailer again.

“I live in an apartment. I don’t have room for anything over about a dozen kilos, never mind a horse.

Paco shrugs.

“Not a *caballo, amigo.*”

I’m still glaring. OK. Not a horse. He shrugs again.

“Sure, he’s a little big.”

He brightens, a used car salesman with a sucker on the hook.

“But it’s OK. He’s house-trained.”

He’s practically beaming as Tio rounds the corner, a long rope in his hand.

I wait to see what’s at the other end of it, and when I do, I understand the need for a horse trailer.

I gulp

“He’s huge!”

“*Si. Muy grande. But...*”

“Yeah, I know. House-trained.”

His smile returns, and he nods his head enough that I think it might fall off.

“*Si!*”

And it’s as simple as that. We pack him into the trailer, and I take him home. Within a week, we’re fully acclimated to each other.

I’m glad I have an apartment on *La Planta Baja*, what in the States we’d call the first floor.

I’m also happy that I back up more or less to the *Club de Golf*. I can’t get on the course itself without a really exorbitant membership fee, but there’s fringe I can reach early in the morning before most everyone is up, and the two of us can walk.

I don’t really want people to see him. We’ve been spotted once or twice, but it’s usually followed by a double-take and a passerby rubbing a little extra sleep out of their eye and wondering why they drank so much the night before.

We just go out in the morning for the exercise.

Fortunately, I don’t need to clean up after him, even though he’s the biggest one I’ve ever seen, at least by half. He really is house-trained, just as Paco told me. Not just ordinary house-trained either. He can lift the lid on the toilet, and flush afterwards. He never leaves a mess.

Though there is some cleaning up after meals.

He’s not a horse, but to abuse the metaphor a little bit, he sure eats like one, both literally and figuratively.

He goes through a couple of kilos of hay a day.

Tio still brings me a fresh supply every week in his flatbed. I’m not sure where he gets it from since the farm has been sold. He must have a connection with an old neighbor.

But I’ve got a new high-powered Dyson vacuum cleaner, and it gets the hay up pretty well.

My new friend sleeps on a battered pull-out sofa in what used to be the living room, but is now his bedroom, dining room, and entertainment center.

He mostly watches game shows, and American movies, with their subtitles in Spanish, and maybe understands a little of both languages. He’s especially fond of action flicks.

I have to find a way to get him out to play somehow. There’s a vineyard about 30 minutes out of the city with several hectares of ranch attached, and Gabi is coming with Paco, Tio and the trailer on Saturday so we can all go.

They love him.

He is big, but he's friendly.

Best of all, he doesn't spit.

Lots of alpacas do, even smaller ones.

And he loves me. I've finally got some love in my life.

I might even bring him into work one of these days, and show him off.

I'm just nervous about how people will react.

Oh, they'll love seeing him, and will call him lots of cute names, and rub behind his ears.

That's not what worries me.

Our job is to look for anomalies, and he is one. They won't be shocked.

But I don't want anyone sneaking up with a pair of shears.

They might.

Because his coat is beautiful, just as Paco told me.

Beautiful, but also a deep gorgeous blue.

And there are a lot of people who might want a new coat in an unusual color.

Not just unusual.

Especial.