

Bats & Dogs

Emma-Lou sat with her friends, sipping their tea at the local café. She wrapped her sweater around her shoulders, as it was a bit chilly that day. Gertrude laughed at her own story as she pecked at the tea cakes shared by the table. She was wearing that ostentatious hat again; bright yellow with pink flowers painted on the wicker. Emma-Lou would never say it to her face, but she thought that hat was only appropriate for showing off at church on Easter Sunday.

Rosemary held a compact mirror in her hand, reapplying her lipstick after nibbling on the pastries they ordered. She had invited the girls out for their weekly meeting. Being the co-presidents of the homeowner's association, they needed to update each other every so often. However, they often only used it as an excuse to catch up on gossip in the neighborhood.

"You know," Gertrude sighed. "I haven't heard much from that odd couple in a while."

"Which one?" Rosemary joked.

"Oh, what are they called?" Gertrude grumbled. "They have some fancy European name that I can't pronounce."

"That Romanian couple?" Rosemary asked.

Emma-Lou prided herself on remembering people's names easily. "You mean the Vladislav's?"

"Yes! Those two," Gertrude nodded. "They've been strangely quiet lately."

"Well," Emma-Lou started. "They do keep to themselves often. They're just a bit," she searched for the right word. "Peculiar."

"If by peculiar, you mean freakish," Rosemary said, cutting her eyes over the brim of her drink. "That Lucy is such a weirdo. Always trying to strike up a conversation with anyone who walks by that house of theirs. She's like a dog with a bone! And what is she always digging in the front yard for? Is it just an excuse to harass anyone who gets too close to her house?"

"Well," Emma-Lou reasoned. "Lots of women in the neighborhood are into gardening."

“But have you ever seen anything grow out of it?”

“And what is the deal with that house?” Gertrude added. “It was such a nice home before they moved in, and I just know it’s falling into disrepair. I’ve seen bats flying out of hinges in the roof! I know you can’t prevent everything but,” she paused. “Oh, why on earth did the HOA not have rules against painting your house such an ugly color?”

“We never had a need for it,” Rosemary shrugged. “Not until those two moved in.”

“I’m willing to bet that was Estefan’s choice,” Gertrude said. “Have you seen the guy? He’s, what? Thirty? And still in one of those goth phases?” The three women laughed. “I mean, we all dressed ridiculously in high school, but I left that behind once I hit my twenties. I’d never paint my house black like some troubled teenager scribbling in a sketchbook. And that wrought-iron fence? Ugh, it’s putting a hat on a hat.”

Emma-Lou choked back laughter as Gertrude’s comment reminded her of that ugly Easter sun hat. But she kept it to herself long enough to continue the conversation. “It’s a shame, too,” she sighed. “He’s such a handsome man, he doesn’t need to dress and act so drab all the time! You know, if Richard and I weren’t happily married, I’d have a bit of schoolgirl crush on Estefan.”

“You would, or you do?” Rosemary sneered. Gertrude laughed as Emma-Lou glared at Rosemary. “But I will admit,” she snapped the compact mirror shut in her hand. “I have no idea what he sees in that wife of his. He could do so much better.”

“Oh, Lucy’s such a slob,” Gertrude commented. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her with brushed hair. And she dresses like she’s homeless! Ripped jeans are one thing, but it’s all her clothes. How does she even tear them up like that? It’s almost obscene.”

“It *is* obscene,” Rosemary scoffed. “Maybe if she shaved those hairy legs of her’s now and then, those tattered sweatpants would look more laid-back and less careless. Plus, she’s always dirty from digging around in that supposed garden.”

“It’s not like she doesn’t clean up well.” Emma-Lou dropped another sugar cube into her tea. “Remember that little black dress she wore to the New Year’s party?”

“Oh, with that lovely ruby choker,” Gertrude remembered. “It was so pretty! I wonder why she doesn’t wear it more often?”

“Her and Estefan were both acting strange that night,” Rosemary said. “Remember how Estefan stood outside for an inappropriate amount of time before someone told him to come in? What a weirdo.”

“He was probably just shy,” Emma-Lou defended her crush. “He doesn’t know a lot of the neighbors.”

“And remember how Lucy had her hands all over him that night?” Gertrude gasped, ignoring Emma-Lou. “Ew! She was sitting in his lap like one of those prissy little dogs that can’t leave its owner. And I’m willing to bet Estefan was embarrassed, he didn’t look happy at all with her sitting on him.”

“In all fairness, Gertrude,” Rosemary laughed. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him with a smile on his face.” The three women cackled as the barista brought their bill to the table, walking away without getting a thank you.

“They left the party so early, too,” Emma-Lou shook her head. “It was a beautiful full moon that night, they would have loved to see it. Lucy must have been drunk if they needed to leave that soon. Of course, she must always be drunk with the way she’s so annoyingly chipper all the time.”

“If not her, then her husband,” Rosemary leaned back in her chair. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him without a glass of red wine in his hand. I bet he’s a nasty drunk - that’s probably why we rarely see him during the day. I’d be hungover every day, too if I were married to someone like Lucy.”

“She’s such a nuisance,” Emma-Lou stirred her tea. “Remember how much hell she raised at her first HOA meeting? Acting like she owned the place, and for what? She wanted the dog park to be open later? Do they even have a dog?”

“They do!” Gertrude blurted out.

“Oh yeah,” Rosemary nodded. “I’ve seen it. Huge ugly mutt. Must be a Great Dane.”

“No,” Gertrude disagreed. “It’s a Husky, those ones that look like wolves.”

“That can’t be right,” Rosemary corrected her. “Huskies aren’t that big. It has to be a mix of some larger breed, at least. This thing is almost as tall as Lucy, herself. Although, I’ve never seen her walk it - only Estefan. She must hate that dog if she puts all the responsibility on her husband.”

“Why haven’t I ever seen their dog?” Emma-Lou asked.

“Oh, the poor thing,” Gertrude shook her head. “They must keep it cooped up inside all day. I only ever see Estefan walk it at night-time - and even then, only a few days out of the month!”

“Speaking of,” Rosemary leaned in. Emma-Lou and Gertrude gave her their full attention, knowing she was about to give them some juicy gossip. “I went to get my hair done last week, and Joanna told me that she sees that Estefan, just, wandering around the neighborhood in the middle of the night. With or without the dog. The creep is probably peeping in our windows!”

“I don’t think he’d do that, Rose,” Emma-Lou waved her off. “Maybe he just enjoys going on night walks? I know I love to go out and star-gaze now and then.”

“I bet you’d like to star-gaze with him,” Gertrude snickered. She and Rosemary laughed as Emma-Lou gave them both bad looks.

“With how desperate Lucy is for attention,” Rosemary smirked. “I bet that’s his only time to get away from her.”

“I honestly feel bad for Lucy sometimes,” Gertrude looked down sadly at her teacup. “I bet he cares more about that dog than he does his own wife.”

“Can you blame him?” Rosemary said, her and Emma-Lou sharing a laugh.

“No, I’m serious!” Gertrude stressed, wiping the smiles off their faces as they turned their attention to her. “I spoke to Marjorie the other day - the one who lives right next to the dog park? You’ll never believe this, but she told me she heard a commotion out there one night, so she got up to see what was happening. According to her, Estefan was playing with that dog in the park. In the middle of the night! She said he was throwing a frisbee back and forth with it, wrestling on the ground with it, and just laughing and having the time of his life.”

Laughing? Emma-Lou thought. She had never seen Estefan smile, much less laugh. Maybe he did love the dog more than Lucy?

“That’s so weird,” Rosemary said.

“Yeah,” Emma-Lou agreed. “Lucy is annoying, but-”

“But that’s not the worst part!” Gertrude interrupted. “Marjorie said that she got a good look at the dog, and it was wearing Lucy’s gorgeous ruby choker like it was a dog collar!”

Emma-Lou gasped.

Rosemary put both her hands on the table, leaning in, in disbelief. “He lets that mutt wear his wife’s jewelry?” she blurted, her eyes wide. “It’s the one nice thing she has!”

“I take back what I said about him being attractive,” Emma-Lou said, disgusted. “What an awful husband!”

“They’re both a mess.”