

## Party Dog

Itzel reached to pick the skin below her wrist when she realized her spouse had a point. Emi had come home from his bartending shift late one night, pink cardboard box under his arm, when he pointed out how Itzel had been greatly unfair to him. She had forgotten to do the dishes.

In a vacuum, it wasn't a particularly large mountain in their relationship. Their schedules required an alleviation of scrutiny from time to time. Itzel worked from home. She entered meetings (camera off), picked up socks, scheduled deadlines, took her Adderall, edited copies, and loaded the washer. She walked down the block for groceries by timing when her coworkers wouldn't notice her Slack was idle. She reapplied her fucked up eyeliner after CC'ing her boss and made sure not to mix up indica and sativa because the former would put her on her ass for the rest of the day.

Emi's job was physical. He either stepped out before sunrise or commandeered the bed throughout Itzel's entire workday. If the bar made Emi scrub floors, he updated Itzel on the busboy's new baby. If pouring drinks, he came home with little to say and a decent wad of cash to make up for the silence. Itzel always told Emi that he needed a job that let him sleep at a predictable time, but he insisted otherwise and she knew it was moot to even bring up; though she tried anyways.

From their first dinner date, he spoke about being kept on his toes. He spied between mouthfuls of menudo and sips of cheap beer that he spent far too much time hiding in youth. That embracing unpredictability made him feel alive. He pulled up his shirt in the middle of eating to show her the *Fuck Fascists* ink needled into his stomach, then apologized on the way to their cars because he could be brash sometimes.

*I just have a need for this world to see me* he said before pulling out a cigarette and saying sorry again.

This made her heart flutter. Itzel had always felt unsafe going out, being perceived. Her chest pounded just putting on shoes before walking out the door. Looks and sneers would follow her to bed and keep her from dreaming. But Emi kept that at bay, even when absent. Memories of Mexico and New York hung loudly on their walls. His love for Steinbeck displayed proudly on their shelves even when Itzel had declared the literature drab and tedious. Itzel had most of the say in furniture placement, but Emi was always a good sport about moving things around when she had a sudden glint of inspiration that she promised would make their one-bedroom apartment *oh so much better*. Even when sleeping alone, she could still feel his imprint on his side of the bed.

But now Emi had washed the dishes the last five times they needed to be done, and Itzel had insisted they'd be spotless by the time he returned.

“Look, it’s not even that you didn’t clean the dishes. It’s the fact that you gave me so much shit the other day because I left my sweatpants on the floor.” Emi placed the toes of his right foot on the heel of the other and slipped out from his combat boot, then repeated with the left and kicked them to the side. “You’re so uptight about things as long as they don’t involve you. It’s not cool.”

Itzel’s once crossed arms had now slid into the regulating posture of a self-hug as she tried not to be distracted by her husband’s looks after a long day at work. Buzzed hair, dyed emerald green. A silver bridge piercing penetrated above the slight bump of his otherwise straight nose. Today he wore his Dead Kennedy’s t-shirt. Itzel slept like a baby in that shirt. The

sleeves were cut and showed off Emi's time at the gym. The thought of asking if he was going to put his boots away with the rest of their shoes came into her mind but she bit her tongue and chose to respond,

"Was that last week? I don't remember."

"You can't be serious."

He had, in fact, left his sweatpants on the floor last week - again. Itzel had generously given him three chances to pick them up, cashing each one in silence. In her chamber of a mind, she loaded a round for every strut she made past him and his mess.

*One. Two. Really? Three.*

She loaded three more because he had forgotten trash duty the week before, then fired her shot but wasn't amused when his response to her tossing his sweatpants on his lap was that he couldn't control when his *god damn gooch was too hot*.

"Sometimes I forget, ok? I get real sweaty and uncomfortable. By the time I realize I'm overheating, I'm taking them off on pure survival instinct."

"Emilio, please. I'm not joking." Itzel rubbed her right temple.

"No, I'm serious, it's like an engine running too hot. You know how dangerous that is?" He twirled his finger in the air. Itzel normally laughed at how expressive he was when speaking, but there, in that moment, it was anything but funny. He continued:

"Hell, I'm practically on my knees praising whatever god is out there that I get to live another day once they're off, so I'm sorry I don't think so much about putting them in the hamper right then and there."

Itzel had tried not to yell. She dug into him for what felt like twenty minutes about how much she hated seeing clothes on the floor. She said he acted like a slob and Emi countered that he wasn't a slob and Itzel emphasized that he was *acting* like one.

That made her wince. They had talked about name calling when they argued and there she was, doing it again. Itzel took a deep breath and apologized.

Emi accepted her words and that allowed them to start over. Itzel rationalized her outburst to memories. She talked about how her father would bring the whole house down if he had so much as seen a sock out of a drawer. She hated venting, knowing she had just started a fight. But Emi listened and when Itzel was done, he wiped her tears, held her close and gave her such intense oral that night that Itzel couldn't remember if she had even showered that day. Let alone anything to do with her family.

But now it was Emi's chance to unload because Itzel had promised to do the dishes by the time he opened the door to their apartment – a full eight-hour window with an extra two thrown in to account for traffic and the occasional pit stop at their favorite donut place. “Her” favorite donut place. “Occasional” because Itzel couldn't burden him with getting fried sweets after work. He had brought some home tonight in a pink cardboard box because he liked the way her face scrunched when she took her first bite into a raspberry crème. He prepped for her comeback.

“Can I touch you?” Itzel muttered.

“Why?”

“Please?”

Emi shrugged.

Itzel walked towards him and put her hands on his shoulders. She squeezed them gently until they turned to putty in her fingers. She moved her hands upward to the back of his neck and used her dark brown eyes to stare into his. Emi wasn't exactly sure when he let his guard down.

"You're right, I'm sorry."

"That was quicker than expected. Are you good? Are you sick?" He placed his hand on her forehead. Itzel smiled and brushed it away, then placed her palms on his chest. She could almost feel the two surgery scars through his clothes, under his pecs. The ones he had before they met. The ones that let him take his shirt off in public and feel normal, be treated like how he deserved to be treated. Emi always had trouble taking Itzel into his past. In a way, it didn't matter. But Itzel always wondered how he felt then. Was he scared? The way she was scared when she first decided walk out in a skirt?

Her arms slid down from his chest as she pulled him closer. She thought if she squeezed hard enough, maybe she could reach that part of him too. Provide an embrace. An embrace that closed the abyss that nature had formed for people like them. Of an chasm so deep and soundless that only through memories like this could Itzel find the courage to turn from the ledge and declare to the hands pushing her that she would not go.

"I know I can be quick on the draw. I'm not saying I got it down pat yet, but I'm really trying. And you're so patient with me. I don't know. I mean, I kind of do. And you do too. You know how anxious I get. Not that it's an excuse. I mean, you know how it's like. The way people see us. What they think. What they *can do*. It's scary."

Emi wiped the dew building up in her eyes before they learned to trickle. Itzel continued.

"Sometimes I just feel like a small dog at a party."

“Small dog at a party?” Emi raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, it’s silly. You know how, like, you go to a party and someone brings their dog or a dog is already there at the house. But the dog is small and scared, so it gets real jittery? And some people go up to pet it without giving them space, and other people flinch when it comes near them and puts them on edge and it’s clear that the dog isn’t comfortable with so many people around? So it starts barking and getting loud and disruptive and the owner has to pick them up and the dog almost snaps at them because they’re so scared but then it finally chills out? The point is, the dog is actually nice. Why else would it be there? People just give it a hard time.”

“And you’re the dog?”

“Yes, I’m the dog and the world is the party.”

“And what, am I the owner? Do I own you?”

“God no. You’re just the person who calms me down. You’re like home base.”

“Oh, I get it. And people can’t tell whether you’re a girl dog or boy dog, so they start trying to look at your genitals and shit?”

“Exactly!”

“What happens if I put you down?”

Itzel shook her head and shrugged. Emi looked down to her.

“Can I be a dog?”

Itzel rolled her eyes and thought for a second.

“If you were a dog, you’d be a street dog.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“No, don’t be like that. I mean that in a good way. You’d be like one of those rough and tough dogs. The ones that survived a bunch of crazy shit and paraded the neighborhood, scars and all. No collar. Everyone would be scared to mess with you because they know how scrappy you are, and dog catchers couldn’t nab you.”

“And I get all the bitches?”

“Alright, I’m done with this conversation.” Itzel pushed through him to open the pink box on the counter. Emi pushed back when Itzel swabbed a stray drop of jelly on his nose. They talked about their day and moved from kitchen, to shower, to bed. Emi mentioned how the line cook’s mom was going back to college while braiding Itzel’s hair. Itzel brought up a passive aggressive email chain between her manager and the sales rep. When he told her he was too tired to make love, she responded by spooning him under the covers. When he started snoring, she let the drum of his heart guide her to him shortly after.

Itzel didn’t wake up for the rest of the night. She didn’t let Emi’s tossing and turning stop her from holding him. She didn’t hear the stray dogs fighting outside after midnight nor feel the rumble of the gentle earthquake that shook their apartment. She didn’t feel when Emi’s heart began to beat irregularly nor his last breath. By the time she woke up, he already had been gone for hours. When the EMTs finally got her to stop screaming, they asked if she had noticed anything last night that was *out of the ordinary*. She told them no. But in her mind, she remembered the only thing that stood out was that she didn’t dream for the first time in a long while.

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“Large coffee. Two Splendas. Two half and halves. Don’t forget the stirring stick.”

Paloma tugged the sleeve of her waiter’s shirt and flashed a twenty-dollar bill.

“I’m treating my son-in-law to a coffee soon. When he comes, can you be a dear and take his order?” The red lines that formed her lips bent into a smile. The waiter nodded and scurried into the building, away from the outside patio that sat under the white sun of a cold winter’s day.

Paloma’s smile disappeared. She took a compact from her Michael Kors, adjusted her large-framed sunglasses, and checked for any bits of food stuck between her teeth. The otherwise black monochrome attire she donned was broken by a tiger print scarf wrapped around her head. Neatly tied and tucked into her peacoat so her bangs peeked out while also providing a windbreaker for her cheeks. By the time she looked up, she was no longer a party of one.

“Finally, sit. I can’t give you a hug.” Paloma motioned to her foot. “When I heard about what happened, I fell and hurt my ankle, the doctor said I almost sprained it. Please Ivan, sit down”.

“Itzel.”

“Excuse me?”

Itzel stared down at the older woman across from her. Paloma had seated herself in such a way that her side was the only one under the shade of the table’s umbrella. Itzel repeated her name. She wore a long denim coat, stitched with patches of various bands; Black Flag, Minor Threat, Florence and the Machine. The last one was her idea. Her dark, wavy, curls reached down to the belt that held her black, pleated pants.



“Isiah?” Itzel did not respond this time.

Paloma sighed. “Well can you blame me? It doesn’t make sense. Your name should be a boy’s name. I remember Alma showing a photo of you both some years ago. Confused the hell out of me.”

“Emilio.”

“God, don’t start.”

“You know he named himself after your dad, right?”

Across the street, two owners lose control of their dogs. The vibrations of the passing cars are cut by the sounds of barking and howling.

“I’m not here to talk politics. I’m here to speak about my daugh-” Paloma cleared her throat, then looked across the street to where the hounds had been snapping at each other. Her head tilted as she clenched her teeth. “My *child’s* last arrangements. Normally, a spouse works with the family but we seem to be having trouble seeing eye to eye.”

“There’s no way in hell I’m letting you put Emi in a dress.”

Paloma slammed her hand on the table. “Why can’t you just let us grieve in peace?” She removed her sunglasses to let Itzel see evidence of a week’s worth of mourning. She had bags and her eyeliner was fucked up. “Now she and I may not have spoken in some time, and you may have been married for a couple of years, but I still had nineteen good birthdays before losing her and that’s much longer than you had. Can’t a mother be allowed to honor her child’s last rites?”

The waiter emerged from the shop before Itzel had a chance to answer and placed Paloma's order on the table. He and Itzel locked eyes before he broke contact first. "Good morning, uhm, sir. Did you have a chance to look at the menu?" Itzel watched as the waiter looked at her shoes, then the street beside them. He finally motioned his gaze towards her face, but his eyes did not meet hers. Itzel looked at Paloma who had been staring at her the whole time. The dogs continued their noise. Itzel turned to the waiter and spoke.

"I'm good, thanks." The waiter nodded. He looked to Paloma who had pulled out a cigarette and let her know that wasn't allowed before heading back inside.

"God everything's gone to shit, hasn't it?" Paloma flicked the barely lit tobacco across the sidewalk in front of her, making sure it landed outside the café's property. "Maybe if you hadn't enabled her, she wouldn't have died from stress."

"They said it was sudden cardiac arrest. Nothing caused it."

"The doctors don't know what they're talking about."

Itzel's heart pumped enough blood to make her lightheaded. She looked down, inhaled, and let the wind escape her lungs and into the world. She inhaled again, her voice no longer shook.

"I'm going to have Emi cremated. That's what he always wanted so that's what I'm going to do. We can split the remains if you wish." Itzel pulled her hands from her jacket's pockets and clasped them at her chest. "I'm holding an arrangement at St. Johns next week, but you already know that. The week after I'll be dispersing his remains at a favorite spot of his overlooking the ocean. You won't know where. That's all I came here to tell you."

“That’s absurd, and what do I do about the funeral I already scheduled?”

“You can have a closed casket.”

Paloma’s eyebrows dug deep into the bridge of her nose.

“You’re a mongrel.”

“I know.”