

Requiem for Michelle

My neighbor, Ruth, was describing her new tenant to me.

“Well...Michelle is 30ish and... she’s sweet. Just a really nice, sweet girl.”

When I met Michelle the next morning, “sweet” wasn’t my first thought. Her camo multi-pocket cargo pants and defined biceps inspired words like “active” and “self-reliant.” I admire both qualities, but subconsciously, my definition of sweet implied demure. And that didn’t jive with Michelle’s hair either. Her blond locks looked more mowed than cut.

“I’ve successfully cut my own hair for years, but I wanted to try something different,” she assured me, running long fingers through her wild thatch. She was tall and pretty in a casual way. I leaned closer to admire the tattoos on her shoulders. They were beautiful, but her only inked heart wore a bleeding crown of thorns.

I was thoughtful returning to my own yard. The new kid on the block was intense, and sending out some strong messages. Since we were neighbors and shared a driveway, I looked forward to getting to know her better. But how had Ruth come up with “sweet”?

Within days, my new neighbor’s first love became obvious: Michelle fiercely embraced other people’s rejected little dogs. She became their protector, sheltering and doting on those who had been abused or abandoned. Both her dogs were rescued adoptees, small animals in a new location, and quite nervous about it. They disguised their fears with fits of ferocious yapping.

That meant my household faced a grim new reality: every time we opened a window, left the house, or stepped into the backyard, we set off a barrage of barking. Our cat’s new case of nerves was evident in the deep scratches on tree

trunks and wooden fence posts throughout the neighborhood. I longed to join her for a round of frustrated shredding, but I was afraid she'd take it as permission to turn her claws on the wee dogs.

"Let's give them some time to acclimatize," I coaxed. Peach sighed, and a few weeks later she was proved right: the dogs didn't adjust.

I spoke to Ruth. The next day she assured me she'd explained the situation to her tenant. Reading between the lines, she'd told Michelle we were cat-loving dog-haters who had to be tolerated and mollified. This conversation raised a whole different set of issues, but did nothing to change the barking.

As soon as Ruth left that day, I knocked on Michelle's back gate. I suggested we skip the translator, and work together to find solutions. She was pleased that I'd come, and though the situation was never resolved to my cat's satisfaction, the barking lessened and tensions eased between Michelle and I.

One morning she invited me in to see her apartment. I followed Michelle's sweats-clad body inside, reminding myself she had little space and few resources available from her part-time jobs.

My jaw dropped. I'd stepped into a sumptuous, Parisian-themed boudoir. She'd built the headboard from salvaged, embossed tin, chosen silky fabric for the comforter and crisp lace for the sheets and curtains. Black and white photos of the Eiffel Tower were richly matted and framed against warm, cafe o' lait walls. I stepped into the tiny kitchen where a place setting of black, white and gold-rimmed bone china sat on a beautifully re-finished oak table.

"Everyone's surprised by my girlie side," Michelle commented, "but this is who I really am."

"Surprise is an understatement," I laughed. I went home adding "genius" and "miracle worker" to Michelle's list of talents. Still, I shook my head at the gulf between her tough, public persona and her internal truth. And I chided myself for my misguided assumptions.