

The Good Fence

Roberto Diaz glared through his kitchen window at the wooden fence that defined his world. The fence was not tall. A short woman could lean her elbow over the top rail of it, chat with her neighbor, share insights about flowering bulbs or proper turning of the soil. Roberto tried to remember why he'd built the thing so damn low, but the fever that wracked his brain was making him stupid.

Gloria had wanted the fence to be low enough to let the world in. She called it a border, not a barrier. So he built the fence short, back when they were both young and alive and the neighbors were good. Now he was alone, and the new neighbor was not good, and he wished he'd made that damn fence ten feet tall and hung concertina wire along the top.

Roberto's morning took another downhill jolt when he saw his neighbor's stupid Swedish car pull into the driveway beyond the fence. Skinny Claudette, with her weird name and the strange hours she kept, coming home at breakfast time or in the middle of the night. She was some sort of nurse, always prancing off to work in an outfit that looked like pajamas.

She popped out of her car like a jack-in-the-box, crazy red hair tied up on top of her head. She turned his way, gave him a smile and a wave. Roberto ducked away from the window. The woman gave him the creeps. She had no right to be in that house, living there all alone.

That was the Barry house. Twenty-five years they lived there, a decent married couple, him Irish, her Mexican. They raised two kids in that house. Maria Barry was a good neighbor, a good mother, and a good Catholic, just like his Gloria.

It was a heart attack that took John Barry. Maria went to live with her daughter. Gloria took sick not long after that and Roberto's world fell in around him. Nothing would ever be the same and now he was stuck with a weirdo neighbor and a too short fence.

This Claudette woman was at least forty, maybe forty-five, but she was not married. What was wrong with her? A good woman should be married. Roberto never saw any men coming around the place, only women. Strange men would be improper, but somehow the women seemed improper as well. And she had a cat, an ugly beast that prowled into his yard and did its filthy business in Gloria's flower beds.

Roberto blinked at the tidy kitchen. His eyes struggled to recognize the room that held thirty years of happy breakfasts, decades of evenings spent watching Gloria bustle around the stove. He shook his head and sank into one of the wooden chairs. This was wrong, all of it. The room swam around him as he lay his head on the table.

All he wanted was to feel Gloria's soothing hand on his forehead, her cooling touch, that sweet quiet voice telling him everything would be fine. But Gloria was gone, a year gone now, and he was alone in the kitchen and burning alive. The doctors had not saved his Gloria, and neither had the nurses, nurses just like that witch who lived next door. No, they did not save her, she who so deserved to be saved. At the end they said they had done everything that could be done, but their everything had not kept his beautiful wife alive.

He raised his head at the ringing of the telephone, but he did not rise to answer it. It was too far across the room, too much trouble. That would be one of the kids checking up on him. They were always worrying and fussing. This was just a flu, nothing important, not even worth

talking about.

The ringing of the phone stabbed into Roberto's already aching brain. He let his head sink back onto the table and waited until the ringing died away. Dios Mio, he just needed to rest, some peace and quiet, that was all.

Later, the phone rang again, but this time Roberto could not raise his head. Then somehow the ringing changed to the babble of too many voices talking at once. It sounded like the old bus station when he came home on leave. Announcements blared over a bad loudspeaker and people were shouting and everything echoed so that no one could hear anyone, but Gloria would be there. Young and beautiful, she would fall into his arms.

There were people all around him now and then his body was floating in the air. There was the sky above him and the tree branches reached down as if to brush his face. Doors slammed and the sunlight fell into his eyes. He felt the lurch as the bus started rolling, but if this was the bus why was he laid out flat? Everything was different these days, so maybe people laid down on buses now. Gloria would be there to meet him after the long ride, so he tried to get some sleep.

Roberto drifted with the pleasant dream, a bus ride with Gloria waiting at the end. Then the dream turned into a nightmare. He heard the metal clang of doors opening and then he was tilted through the air. Robots were looking down on him, strange beings with plexiglass faces. He was swept down a corridor where a singular smell washed over him like a drowning wave.

Hospital, this was a hospital, and the stark realization chased away the tendrils of his dream. He was wide awake now. Eyes peered down at him through plastic shields and muffled voices asked him questions. He found his voice, pleaded with them. No, no, not here, this is where people die, this is where my Gloria died, this is where it all ends. No, please, take me back, take me back home. He gasped for breath, tried to make them hear his words, but first the faces and then the corridor swirled into darkness and were gone.

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The words reached deep under the water, into the black depths where Roberto struggled to breathe. He was in darkness at the bottom of the sea, amongst the strange creatures that lurked there, and they were watching him die. The words coiled about his ankles and wrists, lifting him, bearing him to the surface. Bright lights broke over him as he gasped for oxygen.

Roberto recognized the voice that was speaking, and that recognition snapped him back into consciousness. He was in a hospital bed surrounded by machines and tubes. Some of the tubes were hooked to his body. His eyes followed the lines of the tubes until he saw the faces. The plexiglass shields cast weird reflections and masks covered their mouths, but he knew that voice. He knew those eyes. It was his neighbor, Claudette Jenkins.

— Mister Diaz, are you awake now? It's good to have you back with us. Can you hear me?

Roberto nodded his acknowledgment, unable to find the breath needed for speech.

— Good. You're in the intensive care ward, Mister Diaz. You're having trouble breathing. Your body is not getting enough oxygen. We're going to intubate you to help your lungs cope with this. Do you understand what I'm saying?

He tried to control his thoughts against a wave of fear. Get a grip on yourself, Hombre. You are stronger than this. You've been through worse. You are a combat veteran, Viet Nam,

you got to show this woman what you're made of. He steeled himself, looked her in the eye, gave her another curt nod of the head.

— This is going to be a little uncomfortable, but it will be easier if you can cooperate with us. We're going to slip a scope and a breathing tube down your throat. Don't fight the tube if you can help it. Okay, we're going to begin now. Just relax and let the team get this done.

The masked woman signaled to the others hovering over him and then Roberto felt their hands on him. He wanted to protest, fight back, fight them all. Fear surged through his brain, telling him to claw his way out of this bed and escape from the hospital. It was only stubborn pride that saved him. There was no way he would show weakness, not in front of this horrible woman.

He gagged as something entered his throat. They were killing him, choking him in his bed. He fought back the panic, forced his mind to focus. The thing in his throat pushed further, a foreign presence probing him, searching. After an eternity the pressure eased, and the hovering figures moved back.

— We're finished now, Mister Diaz. The oxygen is going to be flowing now. You should start feeling stronger soon. Try to relax and sleep if you can. The nurses are here if you need anything. Just push the red call button. It's right here next to your hand.

He felt her hand on his, moist latex against his bare skin. He flinched at her touch and she removed her hand. She gave him a long look. He saw her mouth move under her mask. It was so hard to focus his eyes. Was she laughing at him? I'll show you. You watch me. I will show you what tough looks like. And then she was gone.

Time lurched past his hospital bed in fits and starts, now slowed to a crawl, now whirring into a blur of frantic images speeding past. Masked figures appeared and disappeared. Around his head, a cluster of machines pulsed and chimed and wheezed. The fires of hell coursed through his body and filled his brain. He tried to cry out against the raging flames, but no sound came from his lips.

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