

FENCE

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I WILL TELL YOU THIS: I never saw anybody work the ladies like Conrad. You wouldn't even think it if you saw him. He's not a looker, for sure. He's like a telephone pole in the summer. One of those misshaped ones that have roasted in the sun for years and now there's a curve to it. I'm talking about posture here. I'm talking about a Hawaiian-shirt-wearing, thick-accent-talking Oriental. Not Bruce Lee. Not even Charlie Chang or Mister Miyagi. I don't actually know where Conrad's from because he doesn't let on to stuff like that. It's part of his mystique. His aura.

I own a hardware store—Hammer Right—and Conrad lives there. It's peculiar, I know, but the truth is he had no place to go and I needed someone to maintain order. The shop's nothing grand. I keep irregular hours because sometimes I'm out building porches and gazebos and fences. There's a lot of fence building that needs to be done here. Seems like I'm putting up a new fence every week. If there's one gift I possess, it's the ability to make things right again. If it has an engine, I will make it purr. If it's broken, I will make it new. Tell me to fix something in my own life, however, then I'm lost as a pup. Seems I've been lost for a while now.

My wife Trisha says I'm doing good taking in Conrad. She says I'm being hospitable. Says I'm showing Conrad what a real American is, not some bully causing trouble in other countries. She's smitten with him. Don't think I didn't notice the first time I brought Conrad home for dinner and Trisha just about fainted. Don't think I didn't notice how Trish leaned in and settled her chin on the flat of her palm and smiled and listened to Conrad's crazy stories about his travels all over the world, laughing and playfully batting at his arm. I know my wife. It comes with the fifteen years we've been married, and I almost forgot that she could flirt like that—those big eyes and those fluttering lashes, they about drove me loopy when we were in

school. And here was her youth again, sitting close to Conrad on the couch, legs crossed but her ankles bare, asking if he needed more tea, needed more anything. I didn't mind—not too much—because I hadn't been witness to that side of Trisha for a while now. Somewhere along the way, we kind of settled into the roles of ourselves and forgot what made us matter to each other in the first place. But here was this Oriental, charming the skirt off my wife, and suddenly I was that boy again, the one who got proprietary over his love, and so I went over and draped my arm around my wife, clear in front of this man I'd known for no more than a week, and said I love you, Sugar Dumpling, a nickname I hadn't used since those younger days, and Trisha leaned into me and kissed the tip of my nose and whispered, my Big Bear, like she used to those fall nights under the stars when the corn had been long harvested and we lay in the fields, a blanket around us, tracing constellation after constellation.

More than anything, this is why I keep Conrad. He reminds me of the man I used to be, the man I'm still capable of being.

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After work today, Conrad and I head to McMillan's and have a drink before going our separate ways. McMillan's is the only bar in the county, and like the rest of this place, it isn't much to look at—wood panel walls, broken neon beer signs, and a couple of deer heads. Still, it serves its purpose and the beer is cold. Everyone in the county gathers at McMillan's, especially the ladies. McMillan's motto: Every night is ladies night.

Now I know my type. They are the women with a little more meat on the bones, not necessarily a plumper, as some of the boys say here. But I like heftier women, like Trisha and her thighs. In fact, it wasn't those eyes I fell for first; it was how she was able to heft up a heavy load of costumes from the school play and store them in the school attic, the way her large arms toted that weight and how those muscular legs pushed her up the stairs. I nearly fainted face first at the sight of it. That's my type. It is my belief that most men have a type. Blonde or brunette. Tall or short. Wide or thin. Married or single. But Conrad, he was a leaf going up stream. He was not a discriminating man. It's what, I believe, got the attention of the boys around here, because now there was this Oriental taking all the meat from the salad bar, and there wasn't much meat to begin with.

Old Gilbert took a disliking to Conrad from the start. He was a decade older than me, but I heard stories about the guy. Used to stir things up. He was a finisher. That's what people said about him. Don't start anything with Old Gilbert because he will damn sure finish it. There were other stories, too, like how he was prone to take the stick to his wife, how you could hear a beating a mile away. People gave Old Gilbert a wide berth. He was a big fellow, tall as a young tree, shoulders wide as a bull. I wasn't a sapling or anything, but next to Old Gilbert I felt like one. And Conrad, he was a splinter in a donkey's behind.

Old Gilbert wasn't the type to say much. He didn't have to. He'd look at you and you knew where you stood. Every time Conrad came in, Old Gilbert never took his eyes off him, never blinked. Just sat and sipped his beer. Wordless. Soundless. Sometimes, he cracked his knuckles, and the bar would turn and look; it sounded like brittle bones breaking. Shortly thereafter, he'd leave, hit the bar with a thunderous tip, but his presence lingered.

And those hands. Old Gilbert was not that old, but his hands were. You could tell a lot about a man's hands. Conrad keeps his in gloves when he works and lotions them hourly, something I give him heck about. I tell him a real man's hands are knotty and knobby. I tell him my daddy crushed coals and made diamonds. He laughs that laugh and says his hands are the source of his powers. But Old Gilbert's hands were petrified wood. That's how he got the name. His hands were exposed roots of an oak, his skin gray and fissured like bark, his fingers thick.

So, how is Conrad to know the blonde girl sitting at the bar today is Old Gilbert's grown daughter, Alyssa, back from college? How is he to know he is entering dangerous water the moment he sets eyes on her, the millisecond he gets it in his head to pursue this girl, whose jean skirt barely covers her behind, whose legs end in long leather boots, whose blouse opens too much in the front? How is he to know Old Gilbert is sitting at the other end of the bar, Old Gilbert the protective father, sipping his beer, eyes like two bullets in Conrad's chest?

"Not this one, buddy," I say. "Find another hen."

Conrad has on a yellow Hawaiian shirt with big white flowers on it. Guy sticks out in place with camouflage caps and pit-stained T-shirts.

"Often one finds destiny just where one hides to avoid it," he says, eyes on Alyssa.

"I'm telling you," I say, touching his shoulder, "she lays a different type of egg."

"All eggs have shells," he says. "You have to know the right technique to crack them."

"Some eggs just don't crack. Should not be cracked."

He shakes his head. "The purpose of an egg is to crack, my friend."

And he's off. He's striding towards her with that slumped posture and bright shirt and Oriental grin. I don't want to look, don't want to bear witness to this collision course with trouble, but it's impossible not to. The bar senses it too. All eyes follow Conrad, but only one pair matter, one pair boring holes right through him. Conrad finds the chair next to Alyssa. He smiles at her—teeth crooked. She swirls around the ice in her drink. Smiles back. He orders two beers. Lays one of the beers in front of her. She nods. Smiles again. Cheeks reddening. He tilts his bottle towards her, a toast, and drinks. She does the same. And then nothing. Nothing for long minutes. No talking. No looks or secret glances. Just swigs of their brew. But then, Conrad finishes his beer and looks Alyssa in the eyes and nods toward the exit. She nods. And the two move in synch, not touching, out the door.

Does Old Gilbert rise up after them? Does he bellow out for them to stop?

Nope. He does not. He continues drinking his beer. Orders another one and another one and then rises to leave as he usually does. Like nothing ever happened. Like his oldest daughter didn't just walk out with a shaving of an Oriental with crooked teeth and a bright shirt. Like he's not even entertaining the thought of what they might be doing at my shop, what positions he's got her in, what sounds she's producing. I'm no father, but if I was one, that would be tearing me up on the inside. And maybe that's the scariest thing about Old Gilbert. He doesn't let on any. He doesn't show his hand until he has to.

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In the bed, I tell Trisha what happened at McMillan's, and she snaps her book shut and says, "You got to watch your back. Conrad's, too."

"He can watch his own back."

She's turned toward me in the bed, so I can see half her breast in the V of her sleeping shirt. "I don't get you boys," she says.

"What's not to get?" I move my hand toward her. "We're simple to please."

She pulls away. "You talk about having each other's back, but now you'll let poor Conrad fend for himself. Some man you are."

She's right, of course. She always is. It's her gift. I like Conrad. I let him use the shop. But I'm not sure I call him a friend. I'm not sure he's one of my boys, not that I have any boys. He's different and all. He's got his own music going on. That difference is what attracts me, but divides us. I'm talking beyond his looks and speech. I'm talking about the core of a person.

I lie flat and look at the ceiling. "You crushing on him too?"

"Jealous?"

"Nah," I say, but not convincingly.

Trisha laughs and looks at the ceiling too. "He's special. He gets it."

"Gets what?"

"If you have to ask, that's the problem," she says.

We lay there, a space between us. We've been married a while now, and I still don't fully know what ticks inside her head. I don't know a lot of things. I don't know what the point of waking up is, or why I'm given this gift with my hands, but not with my head. That's probably what I envy most about Conrad. He *does* get it, whatever *it* is.

"I know nothing about him," I say. "Fast talking kid comes to town, says his name is Conrad, which is a strange name for a fellow like him, isn't it? He speaks funny and dresses funnier, asks for a job right then and there, and I give it to him. Asks for a place to stay, and what do I do? I give him the keys to my livelihood. No questions asked. It's funny, don't you think?" I think about that day, our first meeting, and I thought *well hell*. I thought there's something about this guy and his funny look, something good and comforting, and I wonder now whether this feeling is the same feeling the ladies have. This mythical presence. It's like a spell, like how Alyssa tonight, just walked out of the bar with him without ever saying a word.

Trisha inches her hand toward mine. She touches my fingers. "That's trusting something other than your own brain, some deeper part of you."

"Brain's not trustworthy, I guess."

"Especially yours." She touches my face.

"You getting feisty?"

"You got something Conrad don't," she says.

"What's that?"

Trisha rolls on top of me. Her gold hair hangs down over her face and she traces the loose strands behind her ears.

"I see," I say.

She leans close to my lips, and I can smell the mint of her toothpaste, the flowery scent of her lotion. "You watch yourself, OK?" she says.

"I don't have a say in the matter, do I?"

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When I open Hammer Right, Alyssa walks out all smiles, winks at me, and waves good-bye. Conrad's got the coffee going already. He makes it dark and strong, the way I like it. He calls it his special brew. He smiles in a mischievous way, and I tell him, "I don't even want to know." I tell him, "This is a story not for my ears."

He puts his hands up, all innocent. "We just talked, Boss."

"I'm sure you did."

The day unwinds slowly. I put Conrad to work, running errands for me: delivering fixed tractor engines to the Pattersons and Olsons, putting ads up around town, picking up the mail at the post office. While he's gone, in walks Old Gilbert and I think *here we go*. The sun's hot today, and there's a glaze of sweat on his face, but otherwise he looks as he always looks—mean. He ducks a bit and turns sideways to get through the door. I think, man, this guy is large. Lumberjack large. I think, what would you have done, Old Gilbert, if you saw Alyssa walk out of the store all smiles this morning?

Old Gilbert crosses his arms. "I hear you're the guy I talk to about fences."

This is the first time I've heard Old Gilbert talk, and his voice near knocked me out. It is bottom of the earth deep. The bass of it shakes the ground.

"You hear right," I say, and compared to his, my voice is a squeal.

"I'm in need of one."

"What—"

Old Gilbert puts his hand up, and it looks large and heavy like a shovel. There are deep scars on it, canyons that run across the palm and disappear into the sleeve of his flannel. "Let me finish." He looks at me with those eyes, and what's a guy to do but clam up.

"I want a fence," he says. "This is how I want it."

He gives me the details. He brings with him a map of his property and marks in red the boundary of what he wants fenced in.

"That's a big area," I say.

"Let me finish," he says.

Then he gives me more instructions: timeline and procedures. Says he wants the fence done in one day, 24 straight hours. Says we don't leave until it's done. Says he'll provide all the materials. Says he'll have all the tools and I can't use any of mine. Says he doesn't want the use of any machinery either. No auger to dig out holes. No drills or nail guns. He wants this done the old fashion way. He wants it done with sweat and hard work.

"I'm not sure that's possible," I say. "Not in one day."

"Let me finish," he says.

He tells me this is what he's planning to pay. The number is large. Larger than any number I've seen before. A number that surpasses all the fences I've built in the last three years. A number hard to pass up.

"Only you and that friend of yours can work on this. No other boys. Be there at ten sharp tomorrow. You got me?"

"I got you," I say. I want to ask him what if we don't finish the fence, but I know the answer already. I know the unpleasantness that would follow. "I can tell you no. I can say the job is too big."

"You can," Old Gilbert says, his chest rising. "But do you want to?" And that look again. To the bone.

I shake my head. "I hear you loud," I say.

Old Gilbert plops down an envelope. It's filled with twenties.

"Down payment," he says.

"You got horses or something?"

"No."

"Bovines?"

"No."

"Big fence."

"Yep." Old Gilbert turns to leave.

"Mind if I ask what's it for?"

He doesn't answer. He opens the door to the store and walks out.

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There's a science to fence building. It's meticulous work. You can't just throw one up and hope it stands because it won't. With a fence, you have to make damn sure the whole thing is secure, that there isn't a weak spot. One of those and the fence is as useless as a broken hammer. Stevey K knows what

I mean. He put up a fence not long ago to protect his livestock and allowed too much height at the bottom. The coyotes squeezed under it. He came out one morning to find a couple of his baby calves dead, his guard dog whimpering something fierce.

I read somewhere about a fence in Australia, I think. Damn fence is over two thousand miles long, built in the 1920s. I can't get my head around that. That's a fence that can just about wrap around this town a few hundred times. It's meant to keep out unwanted things, like wild dogs and foxes and rabbits. They built it the old fashion way, the way Old Gilbert wants me and Conrad to do his. Still standing now, still keeping things out.

When Conrad and I arrive at Old Gilbert's, I see he's got all of it laid out for us: the posts, the thousand or so pounds of wiring, the tools. Old Gilbert lives in a swath of land around no one. He's far out here, surrounded by corn and corn and more corn. On the horizon is a grain silo of another town about seven miles away. Other than that, it's just us out here. You could get lost and nobody would know where to start to find you.

Before we even step foot out of the truck, I tell Conrad to keep his trap shut. I tell him let me do the talking. I tell him this is going to be a tough job and we have to finish it today. No slacking. He takes it all in, smiling.

"Going to be hard," I say.

"Try to save a dead horse as if it's still alive," he says.

"Damn," I say.

Old Gilbert sips something from a tin cup. He spits to the side and nods at me.

"I'm Conrad," Conrad says and sticks out his hand, which he has already put into a glove. "Nice place. Lots of space. I like that." Conrad looks up at Old Gilbert, and it's like a three-year-old looking at a father.

I wince and think, *Dense-headed boy, I swear.*

Old Gilbert doesn't look at Conrad and his red Hawaiian shirt with guitars on it. He walks straight past him and dumps the rest of the contents in his cup onto the dirt. The ground smokes. "You're early," he says. "Can't start till ten."

"Thought we'd have a look," I say. I check the mounds and mounds of wood posts. They look like Old Gilbert downed a forest himself. The posts are uneven, some thicker than others. Some are birch, some oak, some hickory, some other wood I don't know of. There's no uniformity to this, just a hodge-podge of sticks. Untreated. I want to tell him the hickory will dry in

this heat and will be the first to rot out; I give it a month. I want to tell him, for a good fence you need to dig a deep hole, and already, I'm noticing some stones and rock and clay. An auger could do it in a minute or so, but by hand—well—depends on what's under the earth. I want to tell him this wood is good for a fire, not a fence. But I don't. No use telling him what he already knows.

I kick at a log, shaking my head.

"You got four minutes." Old Gilbert smiles. It's unnatural, unnerving. Makes me think he can take care of us right here, and that would be the last thing I would see, that smile. "I suggest you work hard today."

"Don't have to tell me twice," I say.

"Things of today, accomplished today," Conrad says. "Right?"

Old Gilbert spits again and a bit of it sticks to his chin.

"What he means," I say, "is no problem."

Conrad winks. Old Gilbert spits.

When four minutes pass, we start. I move fast, marking the ground with spray-paint X's on where we should dig. Conrad follows with a shovel. He goes at it. He's determined. He hums a song I don't know. When I hear a *thunk*, I know he's hit rock. I tell him he's got to dig that out. I tell him to be careful. I tell him he's got to go at least two feet deep or else the post won't hold. He nods. Keeps digging. "One side at a time," I say. "One hole at a time," he says. And we dig. We push the spade of the shovel into the dirt and lift up. The ground is dark like coffee grinds. Some holes are easier than others. Some are a damn pain. "Done," Conrad says after every hole. "Damn," I say. It's July and no one does fences in July because July is hot, the hot that melts tar on the road, the hot that kills. Old Gilbert knows that. Old Gilbert sits on an old stump, watching us, like a goddamn totem. And we dig. Ten holes. Twenty. Thirty. Forty. We dig. One hour. Two. Three. Four. Sweat drips from my brow, soaks my shirt through. Conrad changes into another Hawaiian shirt, blue with doves. His cheeks are red, but he's still humming. He's still saying, "Done," every time he finishes a hole. He still saying crazy things, like "If one doesn't do, then the two don't rest," or, "Ride an elephant to catch a grasshopper." His talk passes time. Fifty holes. Sixty. Seventy. "Damn," I say. "Done," he says. Five hours. Six. Seven. We take short breaks, and I guzzle water and Conrad chews candy bars and hums. Old Gilbert points to the watch he doesn't have on his wrist. Eighty. Ninety. Eight Nine. The shovel breaks, but there's another one, and that one breaks a few holes later. We

have one shovel now and bunch of trowels. Conrad kneels and goes to it. Two hands plunging into the earth, flipping up soil. He doesn't quit, doesn't seem human, his arms sinewy and strong. Discomfort never shows on his face, but he has to feel it, right? I feel it. The temperature is hot; my body is getting hotter. I'm familiar with this feeling. Understand it to be the first sign of heat exhaustion. I dump water on my face. I use the spigot in Old Gilbert's yard, the water tasting like rust and dirt. He doesn't object because he uses it, too, because he's hot, because being out here doing nothing is as crazy as being out here doing something. When the sun goes down, it lights the sky on fire, and for a moment I forget what I'm doing. It's damn pretty, I think, and I imagine Trisha at home looking at the sunset, wringing her hands, waiting for me. I know she won't rest, like us, until the job is done. She will sit on that porch and wait for my headlights to swing into the driveway. One hundred. Two hundred. Three hundred holes. Nine. Ten. Eleven hours. I fear that it isn't the shovel that will break next. "Damn," I say. "Damn," I say. "Damn," I say. Conrad won't break. Not Conrad, who Old Gilbert stares down with knots in his jaws. "Done," he says. "Done," he says. "Done," he says. "Boss," he says. "Done." It's deep into the night, save the headlights from the truck and the lights of Old Gilbert's house. All the holes are dug. Seems this much was impossible, but here we are. I know I didn't do much. I know I was spent three hours ago and I'd been poking at the ground, like a kid lollygagging in the dirt. Old Gilbert is getting no satisfaction out of this because Conrad is supposed to be in my state, but he isn't. He's worn, but he's Conrad. "I don't know if I can do anymore," I say. "Behind every able man, there are more abled men," he says. "No men here. Just me," I say. "I'm with you," he says. "Don't I know it," I say. "Let's finish this," he says. We begin to unroll the wire fence and put the posts in the holes. Each roll is about four hundred pounds, each post about fifty. I lift one post while Conrad goes back and forth putting five in. He pushes the roll of fence up one side, using his legs to thrust off. He packs in the dirt tight around the holes. "Ready to nail?" I say. "When the only tool you have is a hammer," he says, "every problem you have is a nail." "Damn," I say. I steady the wire fence. He misses sometimes and hits his fingers, yet he doesn't react, doesn't say a thing. It's not just the hammering we have to do. We have to tighten the fence. I use a power pull and ratchet the wire until it twangs like a guitar string. The movement burns my forearms. My hands begin to cramp. I grunt with each ratchet. We move thirty feet at time, about five poles. Six nails per post. We

stop talking. I'm working against my body. I'm finding another level I never knew existed. It's that secret place people talk about. It's the way I imagine Conrad operates on a daily basis. It's the state he's always in. Power pull. Hammer. Power pull. Hammer. Old Gilbert drifts off; his snores are thunder in the distance. One side done. Eighteen hours. Nineteen hours. Morning. Two sides done. Twenty. Twenty-one. Trisha. Three sides done. Twenty-two. Twenty-three. "You got secret powers or something?" I say. It's the first words said in hours. "Only with the ladies," he says, hammering. "You know who that man is?" I nod over to Old Gilbert, slumped over on the stump. "I know," Conrad says, hammering. "You know why we're doing this?" I say. "I know," he says, hammering. "You're an odd duck, you know that?" I say. "I know," he says, hammering and stops.

"Done," Conrad says. "All done."

"Damn," I say.

I'm on the ground. Flat on my back. I feel the rise and fall of chest, the air painfully sweet. Clouds hover over me. Birds dart above. There's a loveliness in this moment I can't describe. But I feel it and it feels like a beer at McMillan's on a hot day, that satisfying quench. It feels like Trisha against me, her legs crossed over mine, her breath on my neck.

A hand blocks my view. It's large. I take it and it swallows mine up and hoists me to my feet like a feather.

"An ugly fence," Old Gilbert says.

"I've seen better ones," I say.

Old Gilbert shakes the post and tests the tautness of the wire. It holds. It's strong. He turns to me and hands me another envelope. It's thick and heavy and my arms can barely hold onto it.

"What would you say if I told you to take it down?" he says.

"I would say not in one day, not in twenty years."

"Fair," he says.

The two of us look at the work. Conrad's by the truck, changing into another shirt.

"Your boy works," he says.

"He does," I say.

Old Gilbert digs his hands in his pockets and walks off toward his house. Conrad and I watch him make it up the steps and through the door.

"The giant goes to sleep," Conrad says.

“Let’s not wake him,” I say. I hand the envelope of money to Conrad. The entirety of it. “This is yours.”

He takes it and looks at me. “Boss?”

I notice his hands. Bloody and blistered. The tips of his fingers are purple. A nail or two have come off. It looks as if the skin has peeled off of them. I don’t make a big deal out of it, so I dummy up and say, “Let’s get going.”