

## FENCING

by Eric P. Isaacson

Phil pulled on the wire fencing, trying to stretch it as tight as he could do. He'd been out in the hot June sun for four hours now and was nearly finished with half of this weekend project. One of many for the summer. He wrapped the wire around the post, jerking on it a couple times, using the rigidity of the pole as an anchor. With his right hand he held onto the wire and the other slipped the hammer from his belt. He switched the hammer to his otherwise occupied hand, gripping it with two free fingers. He took the u-nail from his mouth, and, using his body as a brace (even pushing hard against the pole, he felt the wire slipping), he began tapping the nail over the wire near the top of the pole. Tap, tap, tap.

He enjoyed the rhythm, the sound of metal against metal. He enjoyed, too, the sounds of Annie doing the dishes, the clanking of the pots in the sink. She had a rhythm of her own that after twelve years he could say he alone knew--a self-gratifying secret. Only now, her rhythm was off.

Phil took a hard swing at the nail, hoping to sink it in one shot (a little game he'd been playing all morning), but the nail careened off into the surrounding shrubs.

"Shit," he said louder than he intended. He looked across the street where Mrs. Marsten was sitting in her porch swing holding a glass of lemonade in one hand and a fan waving in the other. She cocked an eyebrow at him, leaning

forward ever so slightly. He nodded, attempting apology. Mrs. Marsten leaned back, fanning.

“Old goat,” Phil mumbled. He’d learned years ago that he couldn’t do anything outside of their house without somebody (usually Mrs. Marsten) watching with disapproving looks. He’d been approached at the neighborhood Fourth of July barbecues and given free advice about who to call to paint the house or re-roof, to install the new sprinkler system or, he was sure he’d hear this July or sooner, to put up a fence in the lower quarter of his yard. But they didn’t understand that this is what he did in the summer. He didn’t teach during the summer, he explained (every year, every project), and this was a way to keep himself busy. “After all,” he would say occasionally, “an idle mind is the devil’s playground.” That would usually shut them up. Not that he was a regular church-goer like his father was, but he understood these people, what drove them.

Annie always told him to be more polite, to make nice-nice with the natives, but he could only go so far with them before their quaint phrases and distilled witticisms got on his nerves. Annie called him an educated snob, but he didn’t care. “We are all snobs,” he said, “in one way or another. At least I’m honest about it. With you.”

Always with you. He wanted Annie to know that she was the only person he confided in, trusted in all the world, let inside to see the rusted interior and didn’t care. She was his sanctuary from the rigors of the world and academia in particular. There were many days where he would be home late from grading

student papers (deciding long ago that he would not do them at home, however long it took to get them back) or working on his next paper on the postmodernity in graphic novels and Annie would be there, sometimes with a mug of hot chocolate in winter, lemonade or iced tea in the spring months. In the summers, they would sit outside on their porch swing watching the Pleiades meteor shower, or simply talking about where they planned on going for their only two week vacation of the year. But they weren't talking much now.

He scanned the ground for the nail, annoyed to have to stop his own rhythm of work once again. Annie called him single-minded, and he agreed. He didn't like going on to one thing if another wasn't complete. And this was no different. That nail was the proverbial thorn right now--it tasked him, as he always said about such matters. It annoyed him more that he would probably have to crawl around in the shrubs to find one stupid nail that wasn't cooperating. He let go of the fencing and shoved the hammer back into the belt loop.

"Dammit," he said as he stepped back, slapping hands against thighs to clear away the dust and sweat. He heard Annie's gasp before he registered elbowing her. Then came the sound of breaking glass. He turned, locking onto Annie's open-mouthed expression. Her hands gathered in a ball in front of her chest, an instinctive mode of protection. Phil's eyes floated down her sundress, stopping at the wet stain over her now sagging, cold abdomen. He dreamed about her like this sometimes now: beautiful, like sunlight through morning dew, short blond hair blowing in the breeze, a dark hole in her stomach.

“Sorry,” Annie said, tears already sliding down her cheeks, one hand now at her mouth. She opened her mouth again as if to say something to him, but looked where he did. Then she turned and ran for the stairs. Phil stood there, listening to the sound of her feet on the pavement, the door slamming, and the distant cry of a baby.

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