

On Hold

Irene Postlethwaite tugged the garden hose out from under her dilapidated mobile home then struggled mightily with the rusted spigot. Like her own joints both resisted her efforts. She was in no mood to fight with anything, let alone a four-dollar hose from Big Lots and a stubborn hose bib. She was sixty-eight years old, her back ached something awful, the heat was dreadfully oppressive, she desperately needed a drink, yet she had one chore that had to be taken care of. Before the sun rose directly overhead she needed to sprinkle a little water on her garden, an oddity in Dos Pesos, Texas. Not many in this part of the world—really no one other than Irene, or so it seemed—bothered with flowers, but she was from Iowa, for better or for worse, a Midwesterner at heart; she liked the notion of blossoms and greenery around her, even when surrounded by nothing but the wasteland she found herself stranded in.

How I ever decided to retire in this god-forsaken place beats me, she muttered as the water trickled onto the withering petunias and azaleas. Only the ice plants seem to prosper in this caliche. Who ever heard of caliche? No one in Cedar Falls, that's for sure. The roses are a lost cause, damn it. Not to mention the carnations. Even the marigolds look to be doomed. What kind of joyless place won't grow roses? It's time to dig them up...but not in this heat. They'll have to

wait for their interment...right along with me. I fear that I've hastened my demise with this poorly-thought-out move. Each and every day I'm totally wasted by ten in the morning and the evenings find me plumb tuckered out from doing next to nothing.

Much to her dismay, Irene, a dyed-in-the-wool Methodist from a long line of teetotalers, had taken to imbibing. Innocently enough. Since her relocation to West Texas seven months earlier, she took a nip in the evening, then the harmless nip became a shot or two to cool off in the afternoon, lately a can of Miller Lite before noon followed by a shot of Wild Turkey right after her lunch of Braunschweiger or bologna on rye along with a handful of Sterzing's Potato Chips, her favorites. The groceries were all special ordered by Hector Gutierrez, the good-natured proprietor at the Good Luck Grocery on State Highway 1129, the only person Irene could call a friend in her new town. Though even he was suspect in her mind. Good god, she thought, the man's a grocer, and he's never heard of liverwurst.

She wasn't proud of her new vocation, but so be it. She couldn't do otherwise. Back in Cedar Falls I only drank wine, sparingly, on special occasions, Thanksgiving dinners, sometimes along with the family when we gathered around the table for Christmas dinners. Even then no more than a sip. Those days are long gone. Now, this new found habit might appear to some to be a problem, but what the heck, what else is there to do in a town like Dos Pesos?

"Lady," called a voice from the unpaved street that ran from her trailer to the high school a half mile to the south. Before the heat set in for the summer Irene had made the walk daily. Now it was unthinkable. "Those flowers won't make it through the next couple of months."

A boy, skinny as a rail, grinned at her from his bicycle, one of those banana-seat contraptions like her own son used to race around on. His crooked, uneven teeth sparkled in the morning sunlight.

“And I suppose you’re a horticulturalist of some sort,” said Irene.

The boy shook his head. Like nearly everyone in town he had a mop of raven black hair and dark eyes that peered out from under thick eyelashes the females back in Iowa would’ve killed to have the good fortune of cultivating.

“No ma’am,” said the boy. “I don’t even know what that is.” He laughed. “I just know that you’re wasting your time with those flowers. It’s still June. The hottest days are yet to come.”

“And just what would you suggest I do?” Irene swiped at her forehead with the back of her hand. Good God, she thought. It’s still morning and it must be in the nineties. I need a beer. And this boy is being a bit of a busy body.

“You might try growing some sage. That blooms several times a year. That’s if we get rain. Little purple flowers. And a bird of paradise blooms throughout the summer. They don’t take much care. Hardly any water. You should’ve left the creosote bushes that grew on this lot. They have little yellow flowers in the summer. Too many people think of them as an eyesore but they’re a pretty good cactus to have around. They smell really great after a gully washer.”

“And just who might you be to know so much about desert landscaping?” Irene smiled at the boy. “Is your father in the business?”

“No ma’am,” said the boy. He was now off his bicycle. He stood, like a sentry, on the edge of her property. His jeans, several sizes too small and tragically ragged, his AC/DC t-shirt faded and torn around the collar, his eyes as big as chunks of coal, his lips chapped, the boy reminded Irene of David Copperfield, but her days of trying to teach Dickens to disinterested twelfth graders were behind her, thank goodness. “I’m Raul Flores. And my father’s Arturo Flores. He works for Mr. Carruthers at the feed lot.”

“And why aren’t you in school Raul Flores?”

The boy grinned then shook his head. “It’s summer, ma’am. Monday was Memorial Day. School’s out until the middle of August.” Raul stepped forward. “And another thing. I wouldn’t go to reachin’ under that trailer to yank out that hose.” He grinned. “One of these days you’re gonna reach under there and instead of gettin’ ahold of your hose you’re gonna find a rattlesnake in your hands. They love the shade on these hot days.” He blinked. “My grandfather got bit and he ain’t been the same since.”

Irene set the hose down then sighed. “You seem to know quite a bit when it comes to surviving in this town. I don’t seem capable of getting the knack of things.” She paused. “I’m from Iowa. Up where I come from you just throw some seeds in the ground and watch them go to town. Down here everything’s a struggle.” She took a deep breath. Though it wasn’t eleven o’clock the heat was getting to her. “Did your grandfather survive the snake bite?”

The boy nodded. “He survived, but he talks funny. Like my mother, he never could speak English all that good, but after that snake bit him he can watch the American shows on TV and

understand every word of them. Before that he only watched the shows in Spanish. He especially likes The Wheel of Fortune.

Irene laughed. “You speak English quite well yourself. Your teachers must do a good job at your school.”

Raul shrugged. “I suppose. I’ll be in the eighth grade this year.” He strutted toward Irene. “Let me help you with that hose.” The boy expertly coiled the hose—a snake charmer putting his python to rest—then he set the curled plastic onto the cinder blocks that served as uncertain steps to her mobile home. “How’d you come to live here?” he asked. “Most...heck all...of the Anglos live on the other side of town. Everyone wonders why you’re livin’ on the Mexican side of the highway.”

Irene shook her head then harrumphed. “You know what, Raul, I hadn’t noticed that until recently. I bought this trailer sight unseen from a real estate agent in Ft. Stockton. We did everything online and on the phone. She never said a word about an Anglo side of town and a Mexican-American side of town. I might’ve been hoodwinked. What do *you* think?” Irene put her hands on her hips. “I retired from teaching and wanted to move someplace where the winters would be tolerable. That was after Norman passed and my son moved his family out to Santa Clara. That’s in California.” She looked at the boy. “But you know something...I’d rather be on this side of town. I just wish this trailer weren’t about to collapse on top of me.”

The boy studied the structure like an insurance appraiser. “It ain’t so bad. *Mi padre y mi tio* could have this place in shipshape in no time. They can do almost anything when given the chance. My father says you can do any job with the right tools.”

Irene chuckled. "I'm afraid any repairs on this place are going to have to be put on hold...at least for a while. My funds are limited after the expense of my relocation, plus my poor old Camry is in need of some work. It rattles. Even those repairs are on hold. Maybe I'll get around to doing something with this tin can of a home this winter. A retired teacher's resources are limited." Not to mention Norman Jr. out in California asking for this and that, she thought. And then there's Janice, Norman Jr's wife, a woman who never learned how to delay her gratifications, come hell or high water, a woman who spends more on one pair of shoes than I've spent on my wardrobe throughout my entire life. My rift with my son may be painful yet I had to put my foot down at some point. Otherwise, I'd find myself destitute. But this urchin doesn't want to hear my problems.

The boy squinted like a surveyor then kicked at the dirt where the marigolds were supposed to be. "Ma'am, let me talk to my father. He'll come by and take a look at this place. It don't look so bad to me."

"No," said the retired teacher. "When the time comes I'll keep your father and your uncle in mind. For now, I'll just have to make do." She rubbed her arthritic fingers against her thighs. "Raul, I'd offer you a cold drink, but all I have is water." And beer, she wanted to add.

"I don't need nothin'," said the boy. "My mother doesn't like me talkin' to strangers." He paused. "And she told me not to go to botherin' you especially. Everyone in this neighborhood knows who you are. They're all curious about the *quera* who moved into this trailer."

Early on Sunday something or someone scraped against Irene's mobile home. Her habit, as of late, was to sleep until nine, drink a cup of instant coffee and catch up on the week's news on

Meet the Press. Only the bells at St. Michael's Church disturbed this routine. And the ringing was short lived. But today some animal must've climbed onto her roof. Some animal or some marauder. As she lay in her bed, her thoughts in disarray after too much to drink the night before, she listened to a b-r-r-r-p over and over above her and a tapping along with enough clanging to wake the dead. No animal made any such sounds...and certainly no criminal would be so brazen, even in West Texas.

An empty bottle fell from her bed then rolled across the uneven floor.

Irene slipped into her light blue terrycloth robe, a gift from her late husband, then went to her kitchen window. A ladder leaned against her home. She looked up and was startled to find a pair of men's work boots on the top rung of the ladder. Her ceiling creaked. Someone's on my roof, she whispered. She'd met Sheriff Reed, but to call him to let him know she was being invaded seemed premature. Someone, a crew of workmen perhaps, had the wrong address.

Outside on her makeshift steps she called to the man on her roof. "Sir, there must be some mistake. This is my trailer. I didn't call for any repairs to be done."

The man, no older than forty-five, clean shaven, his skin lined and leathery like that of someone who worked outdoors, stopped his drill then motioned to the man on the ladder to cease his hammering. "My son told me that your trailer could use a little fixing up," he said.

Irene blanched. Eight-thirty and it was already hot. "Is your son Raul?"

"Si...Raul."

Irene sighed. “I told Raul that I couldn’t afford any repairs just now. This is all a terrible misunderstanding.”

The man looked at the other man, said something in Spanish then returned his gaze on the teacher. “All we’re going to do is fasten down these loose panels on your roof and on the sides of the trailer. A strong wind could rip them off and you’d have to go all the way to San Antonio to retrieve them.” He laughed. “It won’t take us long, then we won’t bother you no more.”

“But I can’t afford to have any work done. Not now.”

The father of the boy nodded. “That’s what Raul told us.” He straightened up on the roof then teetered like a man on the high wire in the circus. “Raul,” called the man over his shoulder. “Come around here and explain to the lady that we’re only doin’ what needs doin’. We’ll finish the job when she can afford it. Or she can hire someone from Ft. Stockton to really fix this place up. All we’re doing is a stopgap solution to her problems.”

From behind the trailer the boy appeared with a rake in his hand. “Good morning, lady. When I told my father and mother about your trailer he called my uncle and here they are to fix up what needs fixin’. They’re just gonna put some sheet metal screws where they’re needed for now. Their drills are battery powered so they shouldn’t be any bother. Then they’ll put a sealant on the roof and in the seams. It’s all for free. No charge. Just being good neighbors.”

“But I don’t want anybody on my roof,” she said. “Tell them to get down immediately. If I needed help I would’ve asked for it. Go on, tell them.”

“Lady,” said the father. “We understand English.” The man on the aluminum ladder nodded then began his descent. The father, drill in hand, followed. The three stood like three boys who’d been sent to the principal’s office for shooting spit wads. “We meant you no harm,” said the father.

“If you meant no harm,” said Irene, “you wouldn’t have shown up here unannounced on a Sunday morning.” She turned to Raul. “And you, young man, should’ve made that clear to your father.”

“The boy meant no harm,” said the father.

“Perhaps, but he apparently doesn’t listen. Or he doesn’t understand English.” Irene cinched her robe at the waist then glared at the boy.

“Raul understands two languages,” said the father. “Better than anyone I know. He also knows how to treat people with respect.”

“That may be all well and good,” said Irene. “Now I want the three of you to shoosh off of my property. And don’t come back unless I call you back.”

“Our apologies, lady.” The father gathered up the tools then tossed them into the back of the pickup truck.

The boy grinned. He carefully put the rake into the bed of the truck. He turned back to the retired teacher. “My mother sent some tamales over for you. They’re in the cab of the pickup.” He took a deep breath. “She told me to tell you that you can keep the plate.” He opened the door to the truck, removed the pile of tamales, covered in aluminum foil, and offered them to Irene.

Irene held up her hands. “Tell her thanks, but no thanks.” She sniffled. “I don’t like people thinking of me as a charity case.”

“I’ll leave them on your steps,” said the boy. “But don’t leave them out here to spoil or for the ants to get them. My mother and my grandmother went to a lot of trouble preparing them for you. I won’t tell her that you refused to accept them. She wouldn’t understand.”

The air conditioner on high, a soccer game from Mexico on her TV, Irene sat with a Miller Lite in her hand, a plate of the best tamales she’d ever tasted on her lap, her slippers crisscrossed on the ottoman. She’d stained the robe her husband had given her with red sauce from the husks. Tears moistened her cheeks. The stain would never come out. She knew it. But what the heck. This afternoon, she said to herself, I’m going to call Norman Jr.. I’ll tell him all about this invasion into my privacy. But for now, I’ll enjoy the company of two men drinking a beer with me and eating tamales, as well as a well-mannered young boy, sharp as a tack, polite as all get out, taking it all in. Even if I *was* hoodwinked it’s for the best. This afternoon I’ll call the boy’s mother to thank her, but if her English is as poor as Raul says it is, it won’t be easy. But what is? Yet not everything can be put on hold...even out here in the middle of nowhere.

The End