

5 The rain came pelting down. The old man had come to seek shelter under the eaves of our house. Through the window, I saw him hunched over as if bowed by the weight of the cane in his hand.

10 Mother extinguished the lamp in the room, drew back the curtain and peered through the window. "Don't let him know we're watching him. Next thing you know he'll be knocking at the door," she whispered to Father and me. She released the curtain to let it cover the window and hide the man.

"We ought to have built a fence," she complained. "They come into our yard just as they please. Goats come in and destroy the plants. Children come in, chasing after balls, and run about as if they're on a soccer pitch. Their screaming at each other is liable to make you deaf. We ought to have built a fence."

15 Father put down the book he was reading and looked straight at Mother. "Let them enjoy what we have. Just let them be. What's the good of a fence if there's nothing that needs protecting?"

"Do you think this house doesn't need protecting?"

20 "Not the house. Who's going to steal the house? It's what's inside a house that needs protecting. That's the function of a house: to protect its contents. So, if there's nothing of value in the house, there's no point in having a fence. And because there's nothing in this house worth protecting, for the time being at least, there's no need for a fence."

25 "So, you think we aren't worth protecting? You think we're no better than the grounds outside, which anyone can walk all over as they please?"

Father said nothing to this but took his pipe from its pouch and tamped some tobacco into its bowl. The bowl of tobacco slivers caught fire with the touch of his lighter. His cheeks puckered as he inhaled the smoke, then expelled it through his nostrils.

30 "The sort of fence that you have in mind is not the kind of fence that is needed to protect all of you," he said. "Anyway, sometimes you have to go out through the fence, which means it will have lost its purpose." He took another few puffs, and the smoke rose in swirls above his head. "So what kind of fence is it that's needed for

protecting people?” He removed his pipe from his mouth and pointed the stem emphatically at Mother. “It’s faith in God and remembering the principles of faith! That’s what you have to instill in yourself and the children. That’s what’s needed to serve as a fence in this life.” Father returned the pipe firmly to his mouth and picked
5 up his book again. It was obvious that, as far as he was concerned, the matter was closed.

But Mother still had to have her say. “You always change the subject. Do you know what that man is up to out there? Is it really just shelter he wants? If you don’t watch him, he’ll be spreading a mat out there and making himself right at home. It’s going
10 to be a reception center for vagrants out there under the eaves.”

I couldn’t resist getting up then to take a peek myself. I was just tall enough to look out the window. Sure enough, under the eaves was not just the old man who had come earlier to seek shelter but more than five other people as well. They were all rubbing their chests to keep warm against the cold.

15 When I told Mother what I’d seen, she started in on a long grumble. “There, that’s the use of a fence for you. Before you know it, there will be ten of them out there. And pretty soon, they’ll be knocking at the door to ask for pillows.”

“If they knock, let them come in,” Father said, still absorbed in his book.

And knock they did, hard and repeatedly.

20 “Open the door,” Father said calmly.

“Don’t!” Mother insisted.

“Tell them to come in.”

“Don’t!”

“They’re knocking again,” I said.

25 “Tell them to come in!”

“But Mother said not to.”

“Open the door!”

I went to the parlor and drew the curtain aside again. Several men were knocking at the door.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“Us,” they answered.

“What is it?”

“The old man is freezing to death. He’s gone all stiff.”

5 I finally opened the door. “What can we do to help?” I asked, still unwilling to actually let them inside.

“Give him some hot coffee and some balsam ointment or some other kind of medicine.”

I turned around and relayed this message to my parents.

10 “Give him some hot coffee,” Father consented.

“But there’s only enough coffee and sugar for one cup,” Mother said.

“Give it to him anyway.” He got up, went to the parlor door and ordered the old man to be brought inside. I took a rug and spread it out on the parlor floor. The men placed the old man on it. Mother came in, carrying a glass of coffee on a saucer. The old man
15 took the glass and poured the coffee into the saucer. He began to slurp it, gulp after gulp, from the saucer’s rim. His eyes were wide open as he stared around him.

After he had finished his coffee, he cast a glance outside.

“Has it stopped raining?” he asked.

“No,” everyone replied in unison.

20 “Do you have any balsam?” he asked.

“Yes,” Father replied, and glanced at Mother. She went off to fetch it.

She was back in a minute. “Rub some of this into your chest.” She handed the ointment to the old man. The others took turns massaging the old man with the balsam until the empty base of the balsam jar gleamed. A little while later, the old
25 man seemed to have regained his strength.

“The rain’s showing no sign of letting up. I had to seek shelter five times today. Lucky for me, not everybody’s house has a fence, otherwise I wouldn’t have anywhere to go for shelter. This rain’s been slowing down my trip.”

5 “Where are you headed?” asked a boy who was among those taking shelter in our home.

“I don’t know,” the old man said.

“Do you have a place to live?” another older man among them asked.

“I’m on foot.”

“But where are you going?”

10 “Home.”

“Where’s home?”

“Traveling is my home.”

“How far are you going?”

15 “Let’s just say until I reach a fence. But that fence is far away, very far away. And when I’ll reach that fence, I don’t know. So I just have to keep on going, just keep on going until I reach it.”

He rose from where he had been resting and looked about him. “Has it stopped raining?” he asked again.

20 “It’s still drizzling. What’s the rush, especially since you’re not going any place in particular?”

“But there is a place, so I have to keep on walking. And when night comes, I look for shelter.”

25 A little while later, the rain subsided. The group of vagrants left, going their separate ways. We closed the parlor door. Father refilled the bowl of his pipe, heaping it as one would fill a hole with rubbish, and set it ablaze.

Mother prepared hot coffee for Father, herself and me. She set the glasses on the table. “Now we really are out of coffee and sugar,” she remarked.

"I guess then there's no need in keeping that stoppered jar anymore," Father said.

"Why?"

"Because there's no sugar to keep the ants away from. You don't need a fence when there's nothing of value to protect."

5 "But the old man said he was looking for a fence," I said.

"That old man wasn't in the land of the living."

"And Mother? Mother's been hoping for a fence, too!"

"Your mother wants to live."

"I don't understand."

10 "Wait till you're old enough to understand."

"When's that going to be?"

But he didn't intend to answer me. "My tobacco, bring me my tobacco. Where is my tobacco?" Father knocked the bowl of his pipe on the corner of the table to loosen the ash. I brought him a fresh clip of tobacco. He tore open its tinfoil wrapping and
15 crammed a pinch into the bowl of his pipe.

"Fences. You're making too much of a fuss about this fence. There's no need for it."

"They come in as they please," Mother grumbled. "Children play ball out there whenever they like. Goats come in and tear up the garden. And there should be a fence around the clothesline."

20 "There's no need for a stoppered jar when you've run out of sugar," Father said.

"But we're going to buy some more sugar!" Mother groaned.

"You wouldn't have to get rid of the jar just because we ran out of sugar," I added.

Mother was beginning to win her argument. "And you don't have to buy a new jar every time you buy sugar!"

25 "But you do need a jar before you buy sugar," I insisted.

Father looked straight at me. He shifted the pipe in his mouth to one side. “Really now! So you have to have a sugar jar before you have sugar?”

“Of course you do. Jar first, then sugar.”

“Are you sure it’s not the other way around?”

5 “No way.”

“So in the case of a fence, you have to have the fence before you can own something of value?”

“Of course you do. First the fence, then the valuables!”

“All right, so I guess we need a fence.”

10 * * * * *

We built the fence with money Mother had put by, a simple construction of discarded lumber and bamboo. But then children were no longer to be found running around in the yard outside our house. Whenever a ball fell on our property, they had to ask permission to retrieve it. Mother would go out to open the gate and the children
15 would run inside to find their ball. They treated Mother with respect, and she conveyed this to Father.

Father decided to test the fence’s worth himself. He set up a chair and coffee table in the yard and would make sitting there evenings a part of his daily routine. Mother would carry out a glass of coffee for him and place it on the table. Sometimes she
20 would bring out a chair for herself, too, and sit down beside Father to drink coffee or to eat a batch of fried bananas. Then, while Father read his book, Mother would crochet a pillow cover. None of the people passing by ever bothered them. Everything was finally safe and secure behind the fence.

Then, three months after we erected the fence, the rainy season began and one night,
25 inevitably, we forgot to close the gate. Sure enough, people came running in through the opening to seek shelter under the eaves of our house. Among them was that same old man with the cane.

Mother stood beside me at the window and pulled back the curtain. We both peered outside. “Don’t let them see us,” she whispered. “Next thing you know they’ll be
30 knocking at the door.” She released the curtain and it swung back into place. “We shouldn’t forget to keep that gate locked. Now they’ll come in whenever they like,” she grumbled.

Father, sitting at the table, knocked the bowl of his pipe against the wood to dislodge a crust of tobacco. He looked at Mother.

“And?”

5 “And they’re coming into the yard just as they please. We shouldn’t have forgotten to lock the gate!”

“Let them come in,” Father said calmly. “It’s raining.”

“If that’s the way it’s going to be, what’s the good of a fence? They can still come in.”

“That’s your fault. Why didn’t you lock the gate?”

10 Suddenly there was a knock at the door. I looked at Father and then at Mother.
“There’s someone at the door,” I said.

“Then open it if someone’s out there,” Father instructed.

“Don’t!” Mother said.

There was another knock, this time much louder.

“Open the door and tell whoever it is to come in,” Father told me.

15 “But Mother said not to.”

“Open the door,” Father said, knocking the bowl of his pipe against the corner of the table again, like a magistrate rapping his gavel. I opened the door.

“Who is it?” A group of five men were standing under the eaves outside the door. The only one I recognized was the old man with the cane.

20 “It’s us.”

“Is something wrong?”

25 Without bothering to answer, the strangers, carrying the old man with them, brusquely pushed their way past me. Once inside the parlor, the old man suddenly came to life. Mother screamed in surprise, but one of the men quickly covered her mouth. Father rose from his place at the table where he had been cleaning his pipe. The men pulled out knives.

“If anyone screams, he . . . or she,” he added, glaring at Mother, “is going to get it with this knife. Remember that. Don’t try screaming for help. In this rain, no one would hear you anyway. And we’re used to knifing people who scream. A little twist is enough to do the job. So take a seat.” He motioned to his companions. “Tie them up.”

They turned the house upside down. But when they discovered nothing of value, they began to quarrel heatedly among themselves.

“We’ve broken into the wrong house. This here’s a poor man’s house. There’s nothing worth taking. This stuff is an insult to our profession. Bastards!”

One of the men grabbed Father by the collar. “So!” he snapped. “A poor man carrying on like a rich man, huh? What did you build that fence for? There’s nothing in here to protect! It was that fence of yours that decided us to rob your house!”

“This is humiliating,” another of the men said. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

They hurried out of the house, kicking the front door open, then shoving it brutally aside. They then took their disappointment out on the fence gate, each of them giving it a good kick as he passed by.

I scooted the chair I was tied to back against Father so he could untie my knots. Once free, I untied the knots that held Mother and Father to their chairs.

The first thing Father did, of course, was retrieve his pipe, knock the rim of its bowl against the corner of the table and begin to search for his tobacco.

“What did I tell you? There wasn’t any need for a fence; there’s nothing of value to protect. Those men tried to rob us all on account of that fence.”

“Yes, it was more dangerous after we put up the fence,” Mother sighed. “It was the fence that made them want to rob the house.”

“You mean, just because of the fence, they thought we had money?” I asked.

“Right!” Father said.

“Then does that mean we’re going to take it down?”

“No sense in worrying about that now.” He turned to Mother. “How about making us some coffee?”

“But we’ve run out of sugar.”

“Then what’s that stoppered jar still doing on the shelf?” he asked.

“In case we get some sugar later!”

5 “I think I’m getting a headache,” Father groaned. With his eyes closed, he put his hand on his forehead. “Go get my tobacco!”