

Over the Fence

I'm working on my Covid 19 guilt novel. This is not a novel about Covid 19, but the novel I have vowed to finally finish during the epidemic since the stay at home order has stripped away all my former excuses. I mean, what else is there to do?

Quite a few things it turns out. I have always maintained that children's needs expand to fill all available space, like a gas...sometimes a noxious gas...the kind they used in the trenches of WWI. I love my children, but since they have closed the schools, I once again feel the full weight of those expanding needs...all day long. For the moment though, my daughters have staked out separate territories within the house and immersed themselves in highly productive activities: avoiding studying for a Finance final by preparing to DM tonight's online Dungeons and Dragons session; watching Youtube videos of other people playing *Zelda: Breath of the Wild*; and binge watching all 14 seasons of *Heartland* on Netflix respectively. The dogs have been fed and walked. Everything else can be safely ignored for a few more hours until my husband finally pokes his head out of his office. So, I set a handful of chocolate chips from the giant bag in the freezer (it would have been a bar of 85% cacao Ecuadorean chocolate, but I didn't have time to wait in the half mile long line at Trader Joe's) and a tall, teal mug filled with hibiscus tea on the desk next to my laptop and prepare to immerse myself in Caelynn's dark world of mystery and assassination.

As I reread the last page I have written, the plot unfolds anew in my mind like the intricate petals of a flower coaxed open by the morning sun. The dingy streets and seedy tavern materialize from the mists of my imagination and slowly solidify. I can hear rough voices and the creak of the rickety stool under me and smell the ale, sweat and brine in the air. Suddenly, through the open door bursts...music? a low throbbing base, a whiny guitar riff, and lyrics I can't quite make out.

In just a few bars, it vanishes: the tavern, the stool, the plot line. All gone. I am left with Def Leopard and a family room I should probably vacuum.

This is not a new problem, none of them really are. It is an old, simmering problem brought to a boil by the heat of forced proximity. If I had to distill the family that lives on the other side of our back fence into one word, it would be "invasive." When they moved in five years and two months ago, the first thing they did was re-landscape their backyard. The tree that had for years dangled the best oranges I have ever tasted over our back fence was replaced with an aggressive potato vine that snaked its evil tendrils through the gaps between the boards, ripping them apart. Over the years, I have spent untold hours cutting back that vine, to prevent it from strangling the apricot and cherry trees I had espaliered to my side of the fence. They uprooted the five-year-old apple tree that had just begun offering its fruit to compliment the

oranges and replaced it with cement, a pool, and a speaker system sized for a ten-acre compound where the closest neighbor is miles away.

So now over the fence came not delicious fruit, but malicious greenery and whatever music appealed to their teenage son. They threw the first few expected ribbon cutting parties, then settled into a summer routine of loud music every afternoon while they swam, and an even louder party every weekend where, in addition to classic rock, we were treated to drunken karaoke, electric guitar, and drums, yes drums.

A few months later, as I stepped out into my backyard on a glorious Sunday afternoon to pick oranges from my own tree, I was assaulted by a misogynistic rap song. Already on a ladder, I peeked my head over the fence and saw...nobody there. Their backyard was empty. Snap went the camel's back, and I headed around the block to their front door. "Hello, this is the neighbor from behind you. Is anyone actually listening to that music besides me? Because, if not, please feel free to turn it off." I thought maybe some light humor would defuse the situation.

"Oh, the kids must've left it playing. Is it too loud?" A proud smile flashed across his face. Perhaps I had walked all this way just to compliment him on his thumpin' music system.

"It's just as loud on our side of the fence as it is on yours." That's my politely non-direct way of saying, "Duh. You put the speaker on the fence line. Why do you think I came over here?"

"So is it too loud?" He repeats the question, unaware I have already answered it. Clearly a more direct approach is needed.

"Yes. Yes, it is."

The next summer on one of the few days we bothered to venture into our own backyard, my nine-year-old daughter and her friend were in our pool when profanities set to a beat began to stream through the fence. The girls' eyes went wide. This time I was not giving up without a fight. I told the girls to run back into the house and get my phone and our portable speaker. I figured he had superior fire power, but perhaps I could annoy him into going inside. I was queuing up the bagpipe music on Spotify, but the girls opted for Taylor Swift. Reluctantly I agreed. I'd save the bagpipe music for later...in case I needed to escalate.

What happened next would have been brilliant had it not been accidental. As I went to connect Spotify on my phone to our JBL speaker, I noticed there were two JBL options available. Odd, I thought. I selected the first one and clicked connect. Suddenly, the driving beat of teenage testosterone coming from the other side of the fence was replaced by a pop-country love song. It took a while for anyone--on either side of the fence--to realize what had just happened. It took another long moment for me to disconnect my phone and connect it to my own speaker. It's hard to see through the tears when you're laughing that hard. By the time I got it sorted out, the boys had already gone inside in defeat.

In the spirit of neighborliness, I unilaterally called a truce two summers ago by bringing an offering of brownies. The son in question headed off to college, and they ripped out the devil vine when we replaced the broken fence with a new, taller version...with a privacy lattice. We have been enjoying a friendly border ever since. Then Covid 19 hit, bringing my kids home from school and their son back from college and restricting us all to our suburban properties.

Now I am here, immersed in Metalica that slips through our double-paned glass windows like they are open, imagining several ways I would like to deal with the situation, all of which violate social distancing rules...profoundly. It doesn't help that the novel I am writing is about an assassin. I have done my research. I have searched for things on Google that I was certain would bring a SWAT team to my door at 3:00 AM. Many of these things shove their way to the front of my thoughts at this moment. Fortunately, I do not own an enchanted, abalone inlaid dagger like Caelynn's.

My 14-year-old daughter enters the room rolling her eyes dramatically. Apparently she has given up on the Zelda videos and this is the third time she has changed rooms searching in vain for a place in the house quiet enough for her to memorize the names of every country in Africa. "OK." I respond to her unspoken plea. I decide a text would be the safest way to communicate. Also, I'm a chicken. I check my phone but can't find the neighbor's cell number. I look out the window. The scene contrasts dramatically with the angry mood of the music, and the glowering one in my mind. The spring sun warms the newly opened roses on the fence. A breeze I can barely feel has pulled spun-cotton clouds across a vivid blue sky. I slip on the worn running shoes that sit at the foot of the stairs awaiting my daily walk around the park with my husband and dogs.

On my way, I pass my side neighbor's house. They are on their front porch, so I keep an eight-foot distance while I greet them. They have been driven from their home by the same unrelenting noise. We share a few moments of miserable solidarity before I continue around the block and reluctantly approach the front door.

I knock twice then step back to the edge of the porch before she comes to the door because I forgot my mask and, Covid. Her face is drawn and, in lieu of a greeting, she asks simply, "Is it too loud?"

I cringe a smile and nod apologetically. "Just a little, yeah."

"I'm sorry." She sighs and trudges to the back of the house as the front door swings shut behind her. The music is off before I hit the end of the driveway. Now I feel a little bad. He didn't have to turn it off, just down a little. Still I'm not sorry as I feel my body relax into the quiet.

The next morning the contractors show up to work on my backyard. They unload their pick-up truck, filling the yard with landscaping cloth, shovels, knee pads, wheelbarrows and various other tools of the trade. As the work begins in earnest, I step back inside. As I sit at my desk, again music blares

through the closed windows. This time it is a danceable Latin beat, and it's coming from my side of the fence.

I don't have the heart to ask them to turn it off, so instead I shut my laptop, chuckle at the irony of the situation and head to the kitchen to make another batch of brownies to take to the neighbors.



Kathlene Jackson received a BA in English from Brigham Young University. She lives in the Bay Area with her husband, three of her five brilliantly sarcastic children, two dogs, a seriously ill betta fish, and several chickens. She loves to write, sail, hike, climb and eat dark chocolate (not necessarily in that order).