

Better Fences

Siren Hand

My therapist asks me to describe what guilt looks like, where it sits in my body. I fidget with the brass buttons stitched around the border of the couch pillow as I piece the words together. I tell her guilt is Bitty, Miss Valentine's pit bull.

She asks me when the first time I encountered Bitty as guilt. I tell her, well, it wasn't the first time but this one time she was in the house party's doorway in high school, after I kissed Marta's best friend. Then I saw her again at the *STOP SHOP* when I misdirected a customer into the service well during an oil change. I saw her little grey muzzle poking down at me through the gap left by the tilted car.

My wrist twists, and my fidgeting pops a button free. I clap a hand over it, stop it from rolling. I tell her that most recently, Bitty sat at the foot of my bed when I forced a cough and gritted my teeth to let my mother know: I was too sick to go visit her for her birthday. I just didn't want the hassle of the trip, but instead I traded it for another, to her funeral later that year.

Tomás, she interrupts my spiraling, tell me about the *first* time.

I tell her I try to live every day not seeing that dog.

I tell her when I see Bitty, I'm almost always sitting with my head in my hands. The pit bull beside me sets her gray, meaty head on my thigh and nudges my elbows away from supporting. My head lulls, but I catch myself before it drops completely. Bitty wags her tail at me. Her body sways gently, hopeful for a good ear scratch. I oblige, even when I know what's coming.

I tickle her ribs and massage her neck, fingers finding bald lines in the patches of her fur. I scratch the fuzz under her jaw, smooch her jowls and cheeks together, and run a slow seam up her nose with my nails. Then, they catch on an edge of her skin. I pull my hand back, tear away from her, and my palms are bright and bloody.

We were nine then. Summer days started early with kids running our long, straight street as soon as the sun gave them permission. Our houses were packed close together, a crowded row of teeth, the gumline cut short by the fill and highway that separated both parts of East Perry Street. Some houses, like Zion's, had a large yard with the house built at the back of the lot. Miss Valentine's brown house, across from mine, squatted right in the middle of hers. My family's house sat at the front of our property with a gravel driveway running the depth of the back yard, so my dad could park his HVAC van and still have room for my cousins, aunts, and uncles. We always had a visitor and somehow managed space

for them. After my mother drove to work, her vacant space left a perfect half-court for Zion and me to play basketball in, until she got home in time to start dinner. Our basketball games were only ever interrupted by drivers revving their car engines, wanting to peel down the road's straightaway. Or, by dogs barking.

The door to the brown house opened and the dogs spilled out into the plank-fenced yard. The burly husky ambled to the fence with his nose in the air, while the little pit bull raced around the outside of the house in a circuit. Zion pushed the basketball to me.

"They good?"

"I think so, but I've only ever seen them in that yard," I responded. He'd been nervous about the neighborhood dogs for weeks, after a German Shepherd on Hanna broke through the fence to chase him on his bike.

The ball bounced off the back of the hoop. Zion caught my rebound, squared up his feet, and shot a beautiful failure.

"They ever try to jump the fence? No? Well, I'm fine as long as they stay there, and I stay here, and you get the ball if it goes over that way."

"Yeah, I got you." I dribbled, I shot, and missed the backboard completely. He ran after it. I called, "Zee, you got plans for the Fourth? We're doing fireworks in the street again."

"You know my mom doesn't let me go out after dark."

"But my parents are going to be there, so they might. Just ask them, already."

Zion scratched at his scalp. "Yeah, I guess. I might, I just need to wait until they're in a better mood."

"What happened this time?"

"They caught me making an extra sandwich."

Zion was the oldest and only boy of five kids. They all moved to East Perry Street from Greenwood just after New Year, so his dad could live closer to the shipping warehouse in Plainfield. Most families in Bean Creek kept to themselves until they got to know the neighbors, know which ones were safe or who was best avoided. It wasn't even a week after they moved in, before my mother told me I would never be playing or visiting at Zion's house. His family had taken to fighting so loud we could see them rolling in the street or hear them shouting behind closed doors and shaded windows.

I first met him walking on his own to the bus stop for school. He was holding and rubbing his arm, trailing behind the girls when I caught up.

"You hurt?" I asked.

"Yeah. I got a *whuppin* this morning."

"What's a *whuppin*?"

He sucked his teeth. "Come on, you don't know what it is? You ever

make a mistake or mess anything up, and they hit you?”

“Oh! Yeah, sure. Sorry.” I didn’t actually know who they were. They could have been his sisters ahead of us or the lanky, greasy high school boys that hung out at the bus stop on their dirt bikes. The boys loved riding behind our bus to school, making crude faces and flipping off the kids on-board. We’d slouch in our seats, hoping to duck low enough to avoid the harassment.

The *they* he was most likely talking about were his parents, I figured. Only because it was early in the morning and I didn’t know who else he might’ve seen in such a short time. I couldn’t speak much from experience. While threats of getting set right were numerous in my house, the only times they became promises were when I misbehaved at school and cut my mom’s work short to come pick me up. Even then it only happened twice. A sore ass later, I figured I’d behave for a while.

I knew that if I listened to this kid, he’d probably tell me what happened, and who *they* was. He did. We got so carried away talking, he told me everything except for his name the first three days. He even told me the *they* was his parents.

Barks braided in between strands of yapping and whining as the mailman opened the box across the street. If Zion jumped a mile, the basketball flew two—and it was a brick.

“Hush, you’re not scary,” the mailman teased over the fence, “You’re a teddy bear. Just a big bear! You don’t scare me, you giant fluffball.”

“Al! Al, I’m so sorry! I let them out—I thought you’d already come by.” She hurried, yelling from the brown house, this darkhaired, short, thin woman. She was dressed in gray sweats with a head of black ringlets that twisted chaos around her like a stormy crown. She clapped her hands to pull the attention of the dogs. It didn’t work.

“Here. Miss Valentine, here! You’re already out here, anyways,” Al offered the mail over the fence as the dogs scuffled at their feet and pressed against the gate. She took it and showed it to the husky, who sniffed and inspected the junk mail. Sensing no threat, he grew bored and ran off with the pit bull to wrestle.

The woman’s gaze swept the street. She spotted us and waved. Zion waved back.

“Y’all doing ok out here? It’s hot, boys. You drinking water?” she asked. Her accent leaned heavy into the summer air.

Zion and I looked at each other, and Zion let her know we hadn’t been; we just went inside for water when we got thirsty. She retreated to her house and came back with a whole gallon, and it was chilled. “I’m sorry, it’s all I have, but it’s too hot to not be drinking water.”

“You got cups?”

“Sorry, I don’t, I’m washing the dishes right now.”

“It’s okay—we can waterfall. Tomás, waterfall!”

I squatted down a bit with my mouth opened skyward like a baby bird’s. He uncapped the jug and carefully tipped a steady stream of water into my mouth. The cold soothed my throat and spilled out the sides, chilly rivers that tore me away from the haze of summer.

“Hey, your dogs. Do they bite?” Zion asked her.

She leaned against the fence on her elbows and laughed. “Not really, just each other. They’ll roughhouse. The big guy, Sampson, will wrap his mouth around your arm, but he just wants you to think he’s in charge. He’s not in charge of anything, though. Bitty is the little one, and she’s scared of everything so she won’t stop barking. Together, they’re not a bad alarm system.”

Bitty had circled the house and returned to the front gate. I offered Miss Valentine back her gallon, but she held up a hand and shook her head. “Keep it,” she said, “just keep drinking water. We don’t need you passing out on the street, with these idiots driving so fast through here. Need anything else?”

With no hesitation, Zion spat out, “You got any food?”

The creases between her brows deepened. Even thinking about it now, I only really saw Miss Valentine frown a handful of times: one when she told me not to worry about what happened to Bitty, that she would be okay, and another was this very time when Zion asked for food. Any of the times I saw Miss Valentine frown, it didn’t seem to be from disapproval or disappointment. It was from sadness.

“I’m sorry, I don’t really have anything to make—my payday’s tomorrow. Wait, what are y’all doing tomorrow? I know it doesn’t help much now, but I could make sandwiches. Y’all like grilled cheese, right?”

She had a voice like sun tea that was too sweet to resist. Zion asked his parents, who said it was fine if she fed all his sisters, too, and they wouldn’t worry about dinner whichever night. Mine might have said it differently, but they meant the same thing the Roths did. The meal was a relief. It was nothing fancy, but still appreciated. It was one that my parents didn’t have to cook, and a novelty I could happily eat.

The next day Miss Valentine made good with napkins and paper plates for all six of us kids, crunchy grilled cheese—some with dried tomato, potato chips, and a couple gallons of ice-cold apple juice. She handed them over the fence, over the hopeful dogs’ heads, and shuttled back and forth to her small brown house to make more. Her garbage bin sat right outside the gate for us to throw our trash into.

At first, she did it every payday, then all the Fridays in between. We

looked forward to the grilled cheese Fridays at Miss Valentine's fence. We even snuck Sampson and Bitty more than their fair share through the gaps in the planks. The dogs would snap up the scraps and crunch at the toasted cheesy crusts, sneaking them out of earshot from Miss Valentine.

I picked at the wooden crate that we used for our front step and listened to the crying from down the street. Zion sobbed as his mom yanked him by his elbow to the small brown house. Everything about her was large: her square shoulders, broad chest, and full stomach. Her feet. Her hands, which pulled Zion through Miss Valentine's open gate and straight to her front door. Mrs. Roth pounded it with the side of her fist, police-knocking until it opened.

"Zion said you aren't going to be in town next week?"

"Oh, hello, Miss Roth. No, I won't be. I wanted to make sure y'all could make arrangements." Miss Valentine was small but still offered a cheeriness, even as Mrs. Roth loomed over her.

"Why not?"

"I'm sorry?"

Zion's mom leaned in, at least a good head taller than Miss Valentine. "I asked why you won't be here. We've got five kids, and every Friday this summer you gave them grilled cheese, chips and juice. Why not next one?"

"Missus Roth, I don't mind helping out, but I'm not going to physically be here. I can give you money for the food, if you'd like?"

"I don't have time to make all that, either!"

"Ma'am, I don't know what you want me to do. Zion, I'm sad I won't be here, too, but I'll make sure to give you the money for the food and teach you how to make the plates, if that would help?"

"He doesn't cook."

Miss Valentine tried to wave it away, saying, "That's no problem, I can teach him."

"I don't think you understand: He's not allowed to cook. His sisters do."

Tension hung between them. I sat frozen and unnoticed on my stoop. I only knew Mrs. Roth had taken the Fridays the children were occupied in the neighborhood and used that time to get as much done with errands as she could. She didn't have to cook or clean, so she'd take the city bus to get groceries. Sometimes, she made it back by the time her husband's swing shift ended. Either way, paying a babysitter and getting food for at least six children was out of the question.

It was quiet but crystal clear. "I'm sorry."

Mrs. Roth stormed home.

Zion sank down next to me, cradling his arm. I asked if he was allowed

to go to A&A's for a snack before it got too dark. He just sat there.

I grabbed the basketball and started dribbling into the street. *Turn, shoot.* Made it; dribbled back. *Turn, juke, layup, shoot*—it bounced off the rim and spun across the street. The ball bounced into Miss Valentine's gate and settled into smaller skips. "I got it," Zion called, jumping up and swooping to get it. As he snatched the ball up, I swear I saw him pause for a beat with his hand at the gate latch. Before I could ask, he turned and pushed the ball from his chest. "Shoot again," he challenged.

I don't know why I didn't take a closer look at the gate latch, or why I thought it wasn't my business, but business between the Roths and Miss Valentine. The boundary of the wooden fence buzzed electric with that tension. All I know was that we stopped basketball for the truck that peeled down our road right when Bitty bolted across the yard, through the unlatched gate, straight into its wheels.

Bitty wags her tail at me. Her body sways gently, hopeful for a good ear scratch. I oblige, even when I know what's coming.

I tickle her ribs and massage her neck, fingers finding bald lines in the patches of her fur. I scratch the fuzz under her jaw, smooch her jowls and cheeks together, and run a slow seam up her nose with my nails. They catch on an edge of her skin and pull back, bright and bloody.

Each time I recoil in this dream, I wish the dog would just unravel like a sweater. Even once, I wish for her to be filled with insulation fluff. I wish for wasps or birds to escape from the nest of her body; or maybe music instead, pouring out from her like a jewelry box. I've even wished for her to be empty.

Instead, I tug and her skin peels from one side of her body, zigzagging in a long fleshy strip where the wheels of the truck dragged her along East Perry Street. I see her lungs quiver against the fence of her ribs. She leans further into my lap and I push her away, my hand sinking deep into the soft pulsing of guts and muscle. I taste copper.

Bitty is still panting and wagging her tail. Her ear hangs off the side of her skull, flapping loose and on-level with her empty eye socket. Her tongue falls out the side of a bony jaw, frothing bright red as she licks me awake.

The lights flicked on in the laundry room. "Tomás, what the hell is wrong with you?" my mother hissed so loud, I jumped. She caught me standing naked and barefoot on the cold basement floor, my arms full of my wet sheets and pajamas. My throat coiled tightly around my words.

I knew my mother would think it was silly to fear dreams, and I knew it was a dream. In it, this time, I was sitting at the end of my bed instead of on my wooden front step, and Bitty came right for me, nudging me like I was the only one who could fix her. Bitty's face was halfway scraped off where the truck caught her behind the jaw and dragged her. She nudged me, pushed to lick my mouth, whined her hurt. I tasted her blood in my dreams and I tasted it when I woke up and my pillow was all bloody and my nose hurt. "Mama, please—don't be angry, Mama, please don't."

"I already am, and I don't even know why. Why am I angry right now, Tomás?"

I looked to see the white knuckles pressing through her skin. I pleaded. "Mama, really, please don't. I had a bad dream, and I was really scared. I woke up and I promise I didn't try to pee the bed."

My mother's shoulders relaxed a bit. Her knuckles returned to their sandy color. "And what about the rest of you? You look like you lost a fight."

I lifted up my arms to wipe my nose on the back of my wrist and got a huge whiff of old pee. I kept my face from scrunching up. I was already embarrassed enough without being called *stupid* too. The sheets dripped on my feet as I tried to explain.

"My nosebleed."

"Was it another dream about your father?"

I shook my head.

"Is it the dog across the way? The little one?"

I nodded.

"The one that got hit?"

I shook my head *no*, but *no* turned into *yes* and I nodded again and harder and faster. I started crying and I couldn't stop it. My mother came to hug me, but I tried to push her away.

I didn't care about being naked. I didn't even care about the stupid pee. I cared that I saw Zion undo the gate and I didn't say anything, didn't tell him no or ask him if that's what I saw—that Samson and Bitty got out. I know that Zion didn't do it *to* get Bitty hit with the truck. I knew that all I just wanted the grilled cheese sandwiches Miss Valentine promised us every Friday *like clockwork*, tapping on her wrist. I wanted her to know it's not okay to break promises, even those promises, even for me. And I didn't *need* the grilled cheese, unlike the Roths.

Mama took my sheets and they fell to the cement with a wet *thwap*. She steered me to the bathroom, where I sat on the toilet lid while she turned on the shower. I heard her tell me to wash up and then go to bed, and that she'd check with Miss Valentine tomorrow to see if there's anything we could do for her. It was a long time before I could fall back asleep.

In my dream, Bitty is still panting and wagging her tail. Her ear is hanging off the side of her skull, flapping on level with an empty eye socket. Her tongue falls out the side of a bony jaw, frothing bright red as she comes closer. I can smell the jungle of her breath and see earth and gravel and stick bits stuck to her. I remind myself, *this is not her. She's dead.*

Surely by now, she's dead.

She can't do anything to you now. Just let her lick you.