Good Fences

by Laurita Miller

I stood shivering in my robe, watching the crowd gathered below. Fire trucks were parked haphazardly on the next street, lights flashing but sirens mercifully quiet. All the activity was centered in the yard backing mine.

The shed burst into flames in the early morning hours. My neighbour was inside.

Every evening he wandered out to his shed and spent hours in there. Perhaps he had a hobby like woodworking or model building, the neighbours said. He smoked cigars and drank Bud Light until the wee hours. He threw the butts and cans over my fence.

I built the fence myself, strong and high and aesthetically pleasing. It was high enough to provide privacy on both sides, but from my bedroom balcony I could see everything. More than I wanted to see.

The fire had been intense with flames licking toward the pre-dawn sky. Now there was nothing left but charred wood and smoke ghosts rising from the ash.

The firefighters sifted through the remains, speculating. The makeshift chimney was faulty, the woodstove too hot, a cigar got too close to the flammables — paint thinner, gasoline — it was anyone's guess.

Morning's thin light was visible on the hills when the crowd began to fade. There was nothing left to see. Accidents happen, and this one was overdue, they thought.

I turned to go inside, pushed my hands into the pockets of my robe. I smiled as I fingered the book of matches.

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My fence was still intact.