**Fenced In**

Every summer Katie stayed at Po Po’s, her grandmother’s house, while her parents worked nearby during the week. She loved to help in Po Po’s garden, pruning and watering pink lilies and the budding *mo qua*, fuzzy squash that grew abundantly in the sunny backyard.

There was an old cedar fence that lined Po Po’s backyard. Each iron-gray, dog-eared wooden panel had shrunk with time, exposing thin gaps into the yard of the taupe stucco house behind. It gave glimpses of life beyond her yard, but never enough to get a clear picture of the neighbors who lived there. One day, Katie was surprised to find the fence was gone.

“The wood was rotting,” Po Po explained. Like always, she spoke in English with a Cantonese accent. “I asked the gardener to take it down. I’m getting a new fence put in by the end of summer.”

“Be careful,” Po Po said as Katie headed outside. “There is no fence. The neighbors--we are not like them,” was all she said. Katie was puzzled over this.

The yard looked sparse without the familiar barrier that had prevented Katie from truly seeing what laid beyond it. Standing in the warm sun, she could clearly see the taupe stucco house with its windows and doors shut, giving away nothing about its inhabitants.

Suddenly, Katie saw movement out of the corner of her eye. She heard the rustle of leaves and the scraping of shoes on pavement. Then a boy her age emerged from behind the house. He wore a cardinal red T-shirt, yellow gardening gloves, and a blue Dodgers baseball cap that shielded his dark skin from the sun. He held a bucket in one hand and pruning shears in the other. Their eyes met, dark eyes gazing at dark eyes.

“Hi,” Katie ventured. “Do you live over there?”

“Yeah,” he replied, smiling. “I’m Joseph. Do you live over there? Is the lady your grandmother?”

“She is. I’m Katie, and I come here every summer. Nice to meet you!” replied Katie.

Joseph nodded. “Nice to meet you, too.” He gestured to her own pruning shears. “Do you also like gardening?”

Katie grinned. “For sure I do. Let me show you her *mo qua* plant.”

“That’s a cool vegetable! I’ve never seen that before,” exclaimed Joseph as they peered at the vine with green fuzzy melons nestled among the yellow blossoms. Katie and Joseph continued to chat happily together when Po Po opened the backyard door.

“Katie,” she called out before seeing her with Joseph, who waved to Po Po with a cheerful “Hello!”

“Hello,” Po Po replied shyly to Joseph, as she stood in the doorway.

As the days passed, Katie and Joseph became fast friends. They spent time together gardening in their backyards, filling their conversations with plants, school, and music. Po Po silently watched them from a distance, only giving a quiet hello to Joseph when he greeted her.

One day, Katie was dropped off at Po Po’s house by her dad, but the house was empty. To her surprise, she found Po Po in the backyard with Joseph. They were deep in conversation, Joseph’s laughter mixed in with Po Po’s soothing voice.

“Katie!” Po Po exclaimed when she saw Katie approaching. “I came out here for *mo qua* to make soup today, and Joseph was in his garden. Did you know his family grows pumpkin?”

“I was telling her about how my mom uses a family recipe to make *soup* *joumou* on New Year's and Haitian Independence Day,” Joseph added. “Your grandmother was telling me about her *mo qua* soup!”

“I’m making it today,” Po Po told us with a wide smile on her face. “If you come over for lunch, Joseph, you can try some.”

“I’d love that,” Joseph answered with a huge grin.

Weeks went by and before long it was the end of summer. Katie suddenly noticed that there was still no fence.

“Po Po, what happened to the new fence for the backyard?” she asked.

“I talked to Joseph’s parents, and I changed my mind,” she replied happily. “Instead of a fence, we’re putting in planter boxes instead. Now, Joseph and I can grow new plants together.”

Katie and Po Po celebrated together over this news with hugs and *mo qua* soup. Katie knew that before Po Po had been wary of others who weren’t like her because they were “too different.” This summer Po Po learned to let go of her previous misconceptions and appreciate people for who they are. A shared love of gardening and treasured family cooking brought Po Po and Joseph’s family together. With the removal of the brittle fence came a mutual appreciation for each other’s cultures and traditions.

Summer was ending, and Katie wouldn’t see Po Po or Joseph as often anymore. Yet she was grateful and excited that they had formed a deep, lasting friendship with one another. Now, no one was fenced in any longer.