

Both Sides of the Fence

by Teresa Bateman

Alberto and Juan lived in two houses that stood side by side outside a small pueblo. Although both houses were much alike, Alberto had a splendid apple tree, puffed with pink blossoms each spring and bent low each autumn with fruit both red and ripe.

His neighbor, Juan, had little and nothing, except his family and his good nature.

Each day Alberto would brag about his apple tree. "It bears the finest blossoms and the finest apples," he declared. "That makes me the finest man in the pueblo."

"It is a beautiful tree," Juan agreed. "I'm glad you let us enjoy its beauty as well."

Somehow the thought that others benefited from his tree lessened Alberto's enjoyment. The tree was his, after all. Alberto decided to build a high fence so that he alone could enjoy the tree's blossoms and bounty.

Townsfolk shook their heads at his foolishness and left him to his pride.

One spring, however, Alberto was unhappy to see that a branch of his tree extended over the fence into his neighbor's yard.

"I can't cut it off," Alberto decided. "To damage so fine a tree would be wrong. Still, why should Juan receive any benefit from a tree that is clearly mine?"

He fretted and fumed through the pink-blossomed spring. He pondered and puzzled through the green-leafed summer. Then fall came, and with it a moment of truth.

While Alberto could pick the apples on his own land, and gather the windfalls so not even squirrels could enjoy them, he could not set foot on the other side of the fence.

He pretended it didn't matter. But it did.

Then one day, Alberto discovered an apple cake on his doorstep.

"Gracias," read the note. It was signed "Juan."

Alberto was furious. His apples were being used without his permission, and he considered Juan's note a slap in the face.

"I must have justice!" Alberto declared. He hurried to the home of the mayor, bringing the cake along as evidence.

"See here," Alberto declared, plunking the cake down. "This was made with apples from my tree. Juan is guilty of stealing and left proof of it on my doorstep! He's probably sitting in his house, eating my apples and laughing at me even as we speak."

The mayor helped himself to a piece of cake while reading the note.

"A branch of your tree goes over the fence," the mayor pointed out. "Surely these apples are from that branch?"

"It doesn't matter," Alberto fumed. "My father planted that tree on property that's been in my family for years. The land and the tree are mine. The apples are mine as well."

The mayor considered the problem from all angles. "Four days from now a judge will visit our pueblo," he said at last. "Present your case, and surely justice will be done."

Alberto frowned. "How will I prepare my arguments for the judge?" he asked. The mayor seemed to understand his problem.

"You've told me your side of the story. A fence, however, has two sides, as does every argument. The judge will expect you to understand both. A clever man knows his opponent's thoughts. Come back tomorrow and present me with Juan's point of view."

Alberto headed home, absently nibbling on the cake as he considered the arguments he would present to the judge. He tried to imagine what Juan might say. The branch did extend over the fence, and Juan had so little that any food would be welcome. Still, "It's my tree," Alberto said firmly to a passing dog.

The next morning Alberto returned to the mayor and presented what he imagined to be Juan's side of the case.

"He will say the apples fell onto his property and that makes them his," Alberto stated. "But if a dog wandered into his yard, the dog would not become his." (He was very proud of this argument.)

The mayor frowned. "Why, then, did Juan give you the apple cake?"

"Why? To rub my nose in his theft!" Alberto declared.

"Perhaps," the mayor said. "Yet Juan can ill afford to give food away. You are missing something. A fence has two sides, as does every argument. Perhaps you need another day to consider. You don't want to appear uninformed before the judge."

Alberto returned home and stared out at the tree and the fence. He thought of his own argument—the tree was his; therefore its fruit was his. He thought of Juan's probable argument—that the apples had fallen into his yard and, therefore, belonged to him. But why did Juan give him the cake? That night Alberto tossed and turned.

Early the next day he marched to the mayor's house. "How can I know why Juan gave me the cake?" he said angrily. "Who can know what is in another man's heart?"

"Juan knows," the mayor quietly replied. "Remember—things can look quite different from the other side of the fence."

"Very well," Alberto said grudgingly. "I will talk to Juan myself. It can only make my case against him stronger." He hurried from the mayor's door and soon arrived at Juan's house.

Alberto pounded on Juan's door, anxious to gather the evidence he needed.

Juan smiled when he opened the door. "Did you like the cake?" he asked.

Alberto opened his mouth, but before he could get out a word, Juan continued. "I had to thank you," he said. "My family so enjoyed the branch of your tree that comes over the fence—blossoms in the spring, shade in the summer. I knew the man who owns the finest apple tree in the pueblo must surely be the most generous man as well, but the apples, of course, were yours. We got so much joy out of your tree, it would be poor repayment to simply give you the apples, so my wife baked all of them into a cake. I hope you enjoyed it."

Alberto felt no taller than an ant. His arguments dissolved like sugar in water.

"Will you join us?" Juan asked. He motioned to the table set with a simple meal of beans, rice, and tortillas.

Alberto knew at once he would not be presenting any case before the judge the following day.

"With pleasure," he said, "if you will allow me to add something to the meal."

He hurried home, gathered a basket of his finest apples, and carried them to the other side of the fence.

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