

A FINE SPELL

Eduardo woke without an alarm. A potential new client was waiting across town - a woman named Vivian, in need of renovations. He needed the work more than he liked to. It was summer in Phoenix, wealthy people on vacation in Colorado or Vermont, soaking up the green. His crew was getting edgy. They all had obligations back home and a limited amount of time and youth to spend making their fortunes (by Mexican standards) in the land of opportunity. They all intended to head back home once they'd saved up enough money. Eduardo was unusual. Not only had he survived crossing the border, become a citizen, and saved his money, he'd also started a business. The men looked up to him, depended on him.

Eduardo checked his palms for callouses and smoothed them with a pumice stone. He carefully polished his belt buckle, a hammered silver rectangle his mother gave him when he left Mexico eight years before. He surveyed himself in the mirror. Not bad for a bachelor. His mother and sisters insisted he would be a catch at home, especially now that he'd grown into his looks. Though he was nearly thirty-five, he had the thick, luminous hair of a boy and eyes at once joyful and disarmingly wise.

For three years now, Eduardo had owned and operated Big Time Construction out of Phoenix. He laughed when his Uncle Manny said things like, "You're the big time now, Eduardo. Time to buy a bigger hat." But Manny meant: Time to go home. Family waiting, tradition, a wife soon, in a nice enough suburb of Mexico City. Sure, Eduardo sent money every

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month. He wanted his mother to have nice things. In turn, his mother sent prayer cards and photos of eligible women and letters from his nieces and nephews and finally, her brother Manuel. Manny showed up in June and had stayed, admiring Eduardo's home, the mango-colored walls and kitchen table with legs Eduardo had turned by hand. Manny was good company. He could cook a little – tampanadas and chorizo with beans.

But today, Eduardo needed to get past his uncle, out of the house, and across town to Scottsdale before the heat became intolerable. He walked quietly through the front room where Manuel sat peacefully, eyes closed, asleep? If God was feeling generous, Eduardo thought, but God wasn't.

Manny spoke without stirring. "I'm calling Maria Gomez today, Big Time. Your time is up."

"You don't frighten me, old man," Eduardo said, but he waited at the door out of respect for his uncle and at least a little fear. Maria was the wife of one of his mother's distant cousins. She had a daughter in dental hygienist school in Tempe. Everyone south of The Border agreed that the daughter and Eduardo would make a nice match, and if photographs could be trusted, she wasn't ugly. Once, when they were both young, he'd kissed her and almost instantly had to hide his erection, but then, he was fourteen and was always getting erections, so he didn't remember her as the source. Just a girl.

Manny laughed. "I know I don't scare you, but your mother does. She's called me every day this week. She knows you're not so busy, Eduardo. She thinks you didn't even try with that Clarissa."

Eduardo winced. Clarissa lived nearby, also in Phoenix, and he hadn't really tried, because she had bulging eyes and talked constantly about the family she wanted to start, as if

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they were discussing bread and how many slices he wanted. When he first made it to Phoenix to set up his new life, he spent a year or two with a waitress from the Denny's down the road. She didn't want to make bread. She had a kid and was just happy to have him stop by every now and then when he was lonely. Not how he'd been raised, but his mother didn't need to know things that would break her heart. He wanted his mother, and his sisters, and Uncle Manny to be happy. He wanted everyone to be happy. Even the waitress, who'd moved back home to Michigan. He missed her, but he understood how home could change everything for her.

Manny said, "I'm supposed to make *sure* you see Maria's daughter this week."

Eduardo laughed nervously. "I could run. I'm faster than you."

"Yes, Big Time, you are faster. But the real question is: Why are you running?"

Eduardo had no answer. "I'm not," he said. "But I do have to get my ass out the door. Lady in Scottsdale waiting on me, Tio."

Manny waved him away. "Go on. Build something. You and your houses. I'll be here."

Eduardo left his uncle and crossed through the solid heat to his truck. Sure as the sun, Manny would be there when he got home. They'd drink beer and watch baseball. Could be worse. Manny knew him well. Eduardo's father died young and Manny stepped in; taught him how to throw a ball, how to use his hands. He'd been building things since he was four, stacking tin cans and making walls from bits of broken glass and plastic.

Eduardo drove across the desert floor to Scottsdale, where houses grew like trees and new was good; if not a new house, then a new kitchen or bath or countertop. Whatever they wanted, Eduardo complied. New was good to him. New was money to send home and money to spend on music and food and the truck he'd just bought and the hand-stenciled lettering on the door: *Big Time Construction. Eduardo Garcia.* And his phone number. All of it stacked like that,

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the names and his number, felt solid, timeless. Didn't matter how he got here, crawling through a run-off tunnel with the other water rats. Most of them were stuck picking apples in Washington or working the street in L.A. Eduardo knew he was lucky, but he also carried with him a deep well of pride which gave him joy and possibly more. Did he need it too much?

He tried not to expect much as he parked in front of the client's house. The job would be small, she'd said. He'd done some work for her neighbor, not a friendly woman, but she'd paid well and left beer for his crew. He checked his notes: Mrs. Shaw. Checked his breath. Studied the house, stucco, bland, ceramic roof in decent shape, fake shutters like on every other house on the block, and the usual heavy wooden door, almost too big for its purpose.

She opened the door before he'd made it up the walk and he worried he was late, but she was smiling. Very blond, thin, pale, and smiling like they were old friends.

He nodded hello. "You must be Mrs. Shaw."

"Oh, no, please. Call me Vivian." She offered her hand and he saw that she was trembling slightly.

He didn't like to call clients by their first names, but she insisted. Her hand was cold, her eyes a dulled sort of gray. Had he done something to make her nervous? He worked hard to make his clients feel comfortable, his English pretty good for an immigrant. Learned the basics from children's books. First family to help him, just over the border in Texas, had two little boys with books like *Red Fish*, *Blue Fish*. Eileen, the mother, was white but completely different from this Vivian. Eileen was sturdy and held her family together. Eduardo had been a big help to them. The father was disabled due to a fall from the cab of his long-haul truck and sat in front of the television wheezing as his belly, a good three feet across the crown, rose and fell and

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shuddered. Eileen had cried the day Eduardo left. She tucked fifty bucks in his shirt pocket and hugged him quick, like she was just trying it out, this idea of touch.

Now the client, Vivian, placed her other hand on top of Eduardo's as she pulled him inside. He stumbled a little and she glanced down at the threshold. "Maybe you can fix that."

"Absolutely, Mrs. Shaw."

"Vivian." She let go of his hand and turned away. "Follow me."

He walked behind her through her house, which was very, very white and sparsely furnished. The usual stucco, arched doorways, neutral sandy tile around the fireplace. What work would she want done? She smelled like vanilla and he thought of his friend the waitress and of Maria's daughter and Manny, waiting for him at home, which in turn allowed him to put the thought of Vivian's smell right out of his mind and to turn his attention back to the house.

A little paint would bring the place to life, but she wouldn't want color, he thought. She'd want the usual: a few new windows, or a slab of granite. She stopped at a closed door with an old iron doorknob, like something he would find back home. She folded one slender arm across her waist, took a deep breath, and opened the door.

Based on the deep breath and how she looked away from him, he expected to find something upsetting, or embarrassing, but neither was true. The room was small, with rough-hewn timbers solidly holding the ceiling in place. Unlike anything he'd seen in the house, or in most of Scottsdale for that matter, all of the trim was painted a faded turquoise blue; the mouldings carved with flowers and shapes he knew as if he'd done the work himself.

"I'd like for this room to be the nursery," she said.

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Eduardo nodded. “*Si*. Of Course. The nursery.” He glanced at her stomach and saw no sign of pregnancy, but it could be early. He began to measure the walls. This was the one room he least wanted to change, but what could he say? She was the client. She was dinner.

Vivian’s voice rose and cracked as she spoke. “The floors won’t do, of course. Not for a baby. Imagine, the tile, a fall . . .”

He looked up at her. The late-morning sun slid along the length of her hair like a coat of fine varnish. He tried to imagine a fall but didn’t know much about the fragility of an infant. “The tile can easily go,” he said. “You’re wanting carpet?”

“No. Wood, I think. To transition to the molding and trim. I want to keep all of the trim.”

He smiled like a boy.

“You look so relieved,” she said. “I take it you like the blue?”

“I do. Very much. But of course it’s your home. Whatever you like.”

She frowned.

“I’m sorry. I hope I have not caused offense. I wasn’t expecting this. It’s like where I come from. I don’t usually see this sort of handiwork. **Miu Bueno.**”

She nodded. “Best room in the house, right?” But she wasn’t really talking to him. She was studying the carving, as if reading Braille, gently running her fingers across oval leaves and curling stems.

Eduardo cleared his throat. She smiled, but said nothing. Eduardo tried again, looking for a way back to the basics, to the job, the room, his purpose. “So, this room, it is special, yes? Different from the rest of the house?”

Vivian nodded. “Yes, very different. When we bought the house, this room was just like you see it. It was the daughter’s room before, and they- the former owners – didn’t have the heart

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to change it and then neither did we. The original owners had remodeled the rest of the house completely and painted it all white. But they had tremendous pieces of art everywhere, so it wasn't as stark as it is now." She glanced back out into the hallway. "I remember talking about painting, adding some color, and then time just ran on ahead and with our furniture, it wasn't as obvious. But now . . ."

Eduardo didn't hear much of what she said, more the lilt of her voice and the movement of her hands, which both soothed and unnerved him. He thought then that he should have had breakfast. He felt light-headed, wiped his brow and turned away; made a big fuss over the window measurements so he could keep his back to her. "So now you and your husband have decided to add some color to the rest of the house, as well as preserving this room?"

"No. Yes. What I mean is, I will. I need to. All the rooms are too large now, and maybe too small. I can't explain it. I didn't notice so much before Jim passed. But now, I can hardly breathe sometimes."

Eduardo turned. Grief and loss were not to be handled over a shoulder. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Vivian. When did he pass?"

"A little over a year ago," she said, her words clipped and fierce.

"I'm sorry. I should not have . . . asked so much. To intrude." His words weren't right, but what did it matter. The problem was the pain on her face, or was it embarrassment? Shit, he thought. He had to stay professional and close this deal, but his mind was working independently, struggling to reconcile the date with the nursery and the nearly empty house.

"No, no, no," she said. "You didn't intrude. This is just a long time coming, this project. I thought it would be easier to start over. I'm sure you noticed when you came in that I don't have much furniture. I took everything outside one weekend last month and called a charity service. I

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couldn't look at it anymore." She shrugged. "His mother, my mother-in-law, was furious because I gave away all of her old china. That was wrong, I see that now, but I couldn't stop to sort. I had to have it all out of here."

Eduardo nodded.

"You understand, don't you? I have this strange feeling that you would understand."

"I understand starting a new life."

"Yes. A new life."

Eduardo shifted his feet. He had nothing left to measure. "So, may I ask when you will need the room completed? I understand most parents want their nurseries ready early."

She laughed and looked at the ceiling. "I don't know," she said. "I don't know why we're in here right now. This isn't in my notes, or my plans, or my day as I saw it last night. I was going to have you do the kitchen." She swayed as if she might fall, then sat down on the cold tile and flinched a little; hid her face in her hands, as if in prayer. "My mother will think I'm insane, and maybe I am."

Eduardo paced and tapped his pencil on his notepad, the edges marred by the residue of nails, old wood, and the red dust of Arizona soil. He checked to see if she was crying, but she was quiet, tracing the lines of the tile pattern on the floor with her delicate fingers. He had absolutely no idea what she meant by insane, and having grown up in a house of ten, Eduardo found the prolonged silence uncomfortable. He knew he should go, both to let her decide whether she really wanted to do this project and to maintain propriety and any chance he might get the work. His head throbbed, but he waited. He didn't want to leave her in all that quiet.

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He sat down facing her, his knees drawn up in front of him. When she lifted her head he saw that her eyes were not as colorless as her skin; there were flecks of green and gold and she seemed so happy to see him, as if they'd been apart for years.

He said, "Maybe you are not quite ready for this part of the project? There's always time." His hopes for work fading like the awning over his front door, once a marine blue and now nearly gray.

"But there's not always time. Don't you see that? There *was* time, I thought, and then my time was up." She held her hands up and said, "Poof."

She could have been a one of the many women, sisters, friends, mothers, he knew and loved back home inasmuch as he both cared for her and feared her at that moment. "You're not the ordinary homeowner in this part of town, I don't think."

"No. Maybe not." She lay carefully back on the tile and let her arms spread wide like an angel. "Wow. I haven't felt this good in two years. I suppose there will be a surcharge." She laughed.

He traced with his eyes the lines of her breasts, her hips, poorly concealed by pale blue linen.

She sat up again. "There *was* a baby, Eduardo. Does that mean I'm not completely insane? I was pregnant when Jim died. Four months. Out of the woods, as they say, and what a blessing that I would have this piece of him still." She pulled at a small fray at the hem of her dress. "But then no. The baby stopped growing. I wasn't even sad. Can you imagine? Just another small layer of defeat. His mother. I know what she thinks. She thinks I let it go, that I gave up, that I was too weak."

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Her wild-eyed manner faded as she began to cry and rock in place. Little droplets of saltwater darkened the terra-cotta tile to the color of dried blood. He scooted closer and wrapped his arms around her.

She quieted finally, her head on his shoulder. “You can go, if you want. I would understand.”

“No, that’s not necessary. Really.” She was warmer than he’d expected. Officially, it was all wrong, him sitting on the floor, holding the new client. No manual for how to handle this. “I . . . I think it is good that you told me of your grief. That maybe I could help a little.” He shrugged. “You know, not just with duct tape and hammers. It is a terrible loss for you. These things should not happen to good people.”

“I might not be good,” she said.

He allowed a small laugh. “No. That’s true. You might be a witch like my grandmother, and me caught in a terrible spell.”

“Yes. A terrible spell. I’ll trap you here and for the rest of your life you’ll remodel my home, room by room, over and over again. No one will know what happened to you.” She allowed her head to shift and settle into his chest and he sat rigidly, wondering if she could hear his heart, if it gave him away.

“Are you frightened?” she asked.

“Not so much,” he lied. “I come from a long line of women feared for good reason. And I could be trapped in worse places.”

“Ha. Like where?” Vivian gently broke the embrace.

“Like in my apartment with my Uncle Manny.”

“Does your uncle live with you?”

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“Seems like it, but no. He’s here visiting to convince me it’s time to come back to Mexico and marry. My mother has several candidates; one with a mustache, who she says makes a fresh tortilla to make the angels sing.” Eduardo looked down at his coarse hands.

“You won’t go, though, will you?” she asked.

Eduardo had a pre-packaged answer for her, for Manny, for everyone: *Eventually, when the time is right*. He wiped a wayward eyelash from her cheek with his thumb and as he brought his hand down she drew hers up so that they met, palms facing, and their fingers laced themselves together.

“No,” he said. “I won’t go.”

He knew he’d just stumbled big time. He’d catch hell from Manny, his sisters, his mother, from God maybe; they’d call him a liar and they wouldn’t be wrong. He might be foolish, selfish, coming down with a flu, but he just plain didn’t want to let go of her hand, and that’s all there is sometimes, he thought later, wanting to hold on to someone at the same moment that they refuse to let you go.

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