

Consuela



an intense short story

Harvey Stanbrough

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To give the reader more of a sample, I've moved the front matter to the end.

Consuela

Consuela, the worthy wife of Juan Rodolpho Rodriguez Saenz, was up at 4 a.m. as had been her habit for over fifty years.

She turned up the lamp in the kitchen, then lit a fire in the stove and set coffee to perking. She went to the bathroom to perform her necessary tasks, then pulled on her chore dress and stopped just outside the bedroom door. She imagined him lying on his right side, as he always had, if he hadn't gotten up yet.

Quietly, but loudly enough that he should be able to hear her from the bed, she said, "Come on, Saenz. It's that time." Then she turned and left to go about her chores. He would be up and about by the time the coffee finished perking.

Back in the kitchen, she selected a shallow basket from the cabinet and took the empty milk pail from a peg near the door. The spring of the screen door stretched and complained as she opened the door and stepped onto the porch. She balanced on her left foot for a moment, hooking the door with the toes of her right foot to keep it from slamming, then stepped off the porch without looking.

Even on a black night she knew the way, and on this early morning, the almost-full moon had bathed the back of the house and the porch in a silvery glow. In the fields beyond, long-since overgrown with pigweed and other intruders, the tall spires shone in the moonlight like an amassed army.

She crossed the dirt patch where she would like to have planted Bermuda grass. If only Saenz had built that fence. It would be of white pickets, he'd said, backed horizontally with sturdy two-by-twos and with a four-by-four post every six feet.

Soon she passed into the part of the dirt patch that would be the barnyard if Saenz had ever built *that* fence. That one was to be a rail fence, he'd said, not only sturdy but economical. He'd told her about both fences twice every year, in the spring and in the fall, until a little over a year ago. He'd stopped suddenly then, if the cessation of anything that happens only twice a year may be said to be sudden. As if he'd realized perhaps fences would require gates. Gates were barriers, and the one thing Consuela didn't need as she moved about her morning chores were more barriers.

But she had wanted those fences. They weren't necessary, but that would have made them even more of a gift. It was a good thing the cow lacked the urge to wander. Silly Saenz, putting things off.

As she passed the barn door, she hung the milk pail on a nail and continued to the henhouse.

She stepped through the two-by-four and chickenwire gate that served as a door to the henhouse.

There was a row of low nests on either side of a narrow walk, with six nests along each side. She began moving from nest to nest, collecting the eggs. When she reached the end of the first row, she thought about Saenz again, wondering whether he was up.

As she turned to start back along the other row of nests, she glanced to her left. The house, made smaller by perspective, was framed through the henhouse door. Dim light still shone through only one window. Saenz always turns up the lamp in the front room as he comes through, doesn't he? She frowned and shook her head. "Silly old man. Gonna sleep the day away."

She turned back to her task. A chicken was on the nest. It looked her in the eye, as if anticipating the

command to move. She nudged the hen. "Go on then. Hop down."

In a flurry of feather detritus and dust, the chicken leapt from the nest. Consuela collected two eggs there and moved to the next nest, where another hen awaited her.

She addressed that one directly. "He's getting lazier with age, you know." The hen jerked her head in a motion that looked like a nod. Consuela nudged her. "Go on. Hop down." She gathered one egg there, then moved to the next nest. That hen was missing, having taken her direction from the previous two. Consuela gathered an egg and moved to the next. The hen there glanced sidelong at her, and just as Consuela was about to nudge her, she leapt from the nest, squawking her way to the dirt floor.

Consuela exited the henhouse, a cloud of dust hovering around her, eleven eggs in her basket. She set the basket on what remained of an old bench next to the henhouse and opened the top of a twenty gallon drum. She cupped both hands into the drum, returned to the henhouse and scattered the pellets through the chickenwire. Then she put the lid back on the drum, picked up her egg basket and trudged toward the barn.

The earliest beginning of dawn was lighting the horizon.

She tugged the barn door open, took the milk pail from the nail and set the basket of eggs just inside the door. The seat of the three-legged stool, which Saenz himself had crafted a very long time ago, was worn smooth and polished from use. She moved her hand over it gently for a moment, then picked it up and approached the milk cow.

As she sat down, the cow shifted closer, anxious for the coming relief. Consuela rubbed her hands together briskly for a few seconds, then tugged the morning milk from the cow. When she was finished, she picked up the pail and the stool and went back to the front of the barn. She set the stool near the door, picked up the basket of eggs, and headed for the house.

Still, only the one window was dimly illuminated. Well, breakfast would get him up.

In the kitchen, she set the pail and basket on the table, then used a ladle to skim the cream from the bucket into a two-quart jar. She would shake the cream into butter later, after Saenz had his breakfast and left to work in the fields. She poured the remaining milk into a pitcher and set it in the icebox.

The coffee was perking hard against the glass button on top of the percolator. She took a potholder from the wall above the stove and moved the percolator off the hot burner.

She set an iron skillet in its place, then spooned a bit of grease from the larder near the stove into the skillet. When the grease had melted, she broke two eggs into the skillet, then put the remaining eggs in a small box and set it in the icebox.

The eggs in the skillet had just begun to pop and sizzle as she walked into the front room of the house and then approached the door of the bedroom again. "Saenz? Are you up yet?"

She could almost see him, curled into himself and lying on his right side. He'd be upset with her if she let him sleep much longer. He always drove himself too hard.

A tear crept down her left cheek. She wiped it away. "Come on, Saenz, sleepy head. It's time to get up. The sun will be up soon, and breakfast is cooking."

She returned to the kitchen, slipped a spatula under the eggs to turn them, then cut two thick slices of

bacon and laid them alongside the eggs. She set aside some flour on a saucer and added salt and pepper, then retrieved a small bowl of leftover mashed potatoes from the icebox. She scooped a tablespoon full of mashed potatoes onto the saucer and turned it a few times with the spatula. When it was coated enough and the flour mixture had siphoned enough liquid from the potatoes, she put the potato cake in the skillet on the other side of the eggs.

The bacon strips were sizzling well. She turned each of them, then lifted the eggs from the skillet and set them on a plate. She turned the potato cake, then looked toward the front room. "Saenz! Breakfast is almost ready. You should come now."

She went to the icebox and poured a half-glass of milk. She set it on the table, then returned to the stove and took a cup from the wall. She picked up the percolator, poured a cup of coffee, and set it on the table as well. "Saenz! It's time. I'm putting breakfast on the table."

She moved back to the stove, picked up the spatula and turned the potato cake one more time. It was a warm golden brown on both sides. She scooped it onto the plate next to the eggs, then added the bacon strips. She used the potholder to slide the skillet off the hot burner.

She picked up the plate and glanced in the direction of the front room again. "Saenz? Stop fooling about! You always do this. Are you coming?"

She waited for a long moment, then selected a fork and a case-knife from the box on the cabinet and carried them and the plate to the table. She set the plate between the coffee and the milk, but slightly closer to the edge of the table.

"Well, I won't let it go to waste," she said, then pulled the lone chair away from the table and sat down to eat.

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About the Author

Harvey Stanbrough is an award-winning writer and poet. He's fond of saying he was born in New Mexico, seasoned in Texas, and baked in Arizona. After 21 years in the US Marine Corps, he managed to sneak up on a BA degree at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales in 1996. Because he is unable to do otherwise, he splits his writing personality with his persona, Gervasio Arrancado, who writes magic realism. Some of Harvey's personas include Nicolas Z "Nick" Porter, who writes spare, descriptive, mainstream fiction, and Eric Stringer, who writes the fiction of an unapologetic neurotic. Harvey writes whatever they leave to him. To see other works by Harvey Stanbrough or his personas please visit HarveyStanbrough.com.

THIS STORY WAS PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED UNDER THE PSEUDONYM NICOLAS Z. PORTER

Nicolas Z. Porter is an expatriot, having moved in better times to a small place in the hills above the fishing village of Agua Rocosa. Nick is an adventurer who enjoys deep-sea fishing, trout fishing in the back country, engaging intimately in the revolutionary struggles of other lands, and any other endeavors that might serve to refill the well of experience from which he draws his stories. He unapologetically takes full

responsibility for his own life and flatly refuses to accept responsibility for poor choices made by others. He loves to write. It is his reason for breathing.

YOU'VE REACHED THE END!

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