

*[Roberto Andrade is a 9 year old boy growing up in 1970s American Suburbia. As an empath, he is extremely sensitive to the emotions of others around him, and emotionally tires easily, resulting in him preferring to spend his time alone. The conformists of the suburbs believe the boy is strange, but Roberto is not alone in carrying their judgment.]*

Hazelwood Oaks was the epitome of suburbia. It had clean, paved sidewalks that carried baby strollers on walks and children on their way to school. Rows of identical houses with square lawns that were always freshly trimmed and green. Wonder bread in the toaster, napkins inscribed with notes in the lunchboxes, and two or three children playing in the backyard with a dog. Despite all the uniformity, there was the unmistakable individuality of each man, woman, and child in each home. Everyone had a story. This is Roberto's.

It was 9 AM on a Saturday morning. His mother was hard at work fixing the squeaky gate outside, and his father was washing the breakfast dishes. Roberto's family was always a little backwards, which always made him a little backwards too. Some of the children from the neighborhood rode their bikes down the street, laughing not at anything particularly funny, but rather because it was fun. The people of Hazelwood Oaks could always find something to keep themselves busy on empty days like Saturdays. Roberto could not.

For Roberto, everything was exhausting. Playing with the other children left him wanting a nap. Reading a book required much effort, even if the story interested him. Watching TV with his parents made it hard for him to sleep at night. Even as he sat by the window, watching suburbia at its normalcy, he wished he could just go back to bed.

The children of the neighborhood often laughed at Roberto - not from cruelty, but bafflement. It didn't help that he was always a little browner than the other children, even when they tanned in the summer sun. He never said a word, and such silence in a child was quite

literally unheard of. They did not understand why he would like to be lonely, spending all day in the house. They laughed, not because he was fun, but rather that he was funny. Funny-looking, funny-sounding, and even funny-acting.

His grandparents - that is, his father's parents - didn't dislike Roberto, but they didn't exactly like him, either. When describing him to their friends in the retirement community they chose the word "sensitive". He cried too much, and too easily. If he was a girl, they might overlook this behavior, but in a young man - this was unacceptable. His grandmother often remarked that he would grow up to be diffident and marry a woman who would take advantage of his meek manner. In simpler terms, his grandmother believed he would turn out much like his father.

His mother's parents believed him to be spoiled - stuck up, even. They questioned Roberto's mother endlessly. He got everything he wanted, why? Why wouldn't he play with the other grandchildren during Christmas celebrations? Why was he allowed to skip mass? What Roberto wanted shouldn't matter. He was only nine years old, his parents needed to take their place as his authority, and Roberto should obey them.

Roberto's teacher believed him to be simply "shy". This, she explained to the parents in every parent-teacher conference, was the true reason he was being held back a grade. He was a bright boy, yes, but even the brightest children do not know everything. Roberto needed to learn to ask questions and use his voice at school. This would be easier for him if he would come out of his shell and get to know a few of his classmates. His parents should encourage him to be a little more extroverted.

His neighbors thought he was strange. Some wished his parents would bring him to a psychiatrist - a doctor, which meant medication - but Roberto's parents were too backwards for that. They never cared about anyone's thoughts but their own, so his mother continued to fix the car, his father continued to shop for groceries, and Roberto continued to distance himself from everyone.

His parents worried about him. They never expressed it, but he knew. He could *feel* their worry, and somehow, it made him worried too. However, despite everyone's wishes, they would not act on that worry. They simply stood back and watched him grow up, saying, "we can hope he'll grow out of it."

But this particular empty Saturday held much in store for strange, spoiled, sensitive and shy little Roberto. He watched out the window as the children of the neighborhood started to congregate in front of the little blue house on the corner. Their voices raised, surprised and delighted, drawing more children and even a few curious adults. Roberto, curious himself, opened the window to listen.

Children and adults alike were laughing. Whatever the spectacle was, it was funny. Their laughter was fleeting, however, because the old man - he lived in the house one door down from the blue one - seemed rather unhappy.

Roberto strained his ears to listen, even pressing his face up against the screen that kept the bugs out of the house.

"That bird will turn out stupid if you let him keep up like that," the old man told the owner of the blue house, a young woman named Lucy Hanson who was often frowned upon for living alone.

Lucy shook her head full of blonde curls and answered him, but her voice was much too soft for Roberto to pick up what she said.

"No really, think 'bout it Miss Hanson," the old man argued. "Throwing himself at that window all day long, he's putting real damage to his head and beak. Listen to the way he keeps screeching. He'll grow up to be one dumb, sensitive bird that'll never find happiness."

"Forget about that!" it was George Erickson's mother, a stocky woman who was believed to eat too many of her own blue-ribbon brownies. "Think about your window!"

Lucy drew her shoulders back. "What about my window?"

Roberto knew from watching that Lucy was never the kind of woman one could call patient, and that she was probably tired of all the attention. Nearly the whole street was on her

lawn now, voicing their opinions about the problem, which Roberto had finally realized was a stubborn little robin that would not stop flying into Lucy's basement window.

"He's obviously trying to get into your house," Mrs.Erickson said. "You need to shoo him away from that window or he'll break it!"

"It seems to me that he would be more likely to break his beak before he broke the window, Mrs.Erickson."

Roberto looked and it was his mother. He hadn't even seen her leave the squeaky gate, which if he hadn't been watching the crowd he would have noticed immediately. His mother was not one to leave a project unfinished, but the little robin must have piqued her interest as well. Roberto listened to his mother's voice as she went on, "You should call the DNR, or maybe even a veterinarian. Maybe they could help him and turn him back to being a normal bird. Something must be wrong with him if he keeps on hurting himself like that."

Someone voiced their agreement with Roberto's mother. A teenage boy ran to his own home and came back with a phone book, handing it to Lucy. Slowly, the crowd dispersed, the problem having been - as far as the neighborhood was concerned - solved. The old man returned to watering his daisies, Roberto's mother was back to work on the gate, and the children were again playing up and down the street. The robin was just another interesting event on an empty Saturday in the uniform neighborhood of Hazelwood Oaks.

Roberto watched Lucy as she stared at the big phone book in her hands. She looked at the little robin, still relentlessly throwing himself into the window. A cool spring breeze pressed through the screen and against Roberto's face. He blinked, startled, and pulled himself away from the window. When he looked again at the little blue house, Lucy was pulling her front door shut behind her.

With Lucy's square green lawn now empty, Roberto summoned the courage to do what he had been wanting to ever since the crowd had started to form. Pulling himself away from the

window, he went to the front door and stepped into a pair of shoes sitting conveniently in the entryway. Remembering the cool breeze, Roberto opened the coat closet and took out a thin jacket.

As he made his way down the driveway his mother saw him.

“Roberto, where are you going?” Her eyes were wide and bright. He walked over to her and felt the hope radiating from her, warming his skin and bolstering his confidence.

He pointed at the blue house.

“You want to see the crazy little robin?” She asked with a smile. “Go on, I’m sure Miss Hanson won’t mind.”

He made his way down the sidewalk, being sure to step on each crack in the pavement. Roberto always felt bad for the cracks - the other children’s shoes never touched them - and often he wondered if they ever felt unnoticed.

Roberto, however, did not go unnoticed by the other children. They laughed when they saw him out of the house - proving that he would never be normal to them, for they laughed when he was in the house as well. He walked past, and said nothing when they teased his shoes - which were not Roberto’s, but his father’s and thus much too large for his feet - and his jacket, which belonged to Roberto’s older sister who was away at college, thus much too feminine for a growing boy.

He crossed the street at the crosswalk painted on the end of the block. It always bothered Roberto when people crossed the street at any other place, because someone had taken time to paint the crosswalk so they would be safe. So whenever he did leave the house he was sure to put it to good use. He hesitated as he approached Lucy’s lawn. She wasn’t outside and he felt rather unwelcome.

Then he heard it. *Plink!* A long pause, and then again, *plink!* His eyes were drawn to the basement window on the side of the house. Sure enough, a little robin was perched on the edge

of the window well. Roberto watched in horror as the bird lifted his little body up with furiously flapping wings, and flung himself into the window. *Plink!*

The bird retreated, sitting again on the edge of the well and shook his head with a small cry. Roberto's eyes widened and he took a step onto Lucy's lawn.

"Are you sure?" Roberto heard Lucy ask whomever it was she had called. "My neighbors think I should cover the window." A pause. "Alright, thank you... yes, have a good day as well."

Lucy's door opened and the young woman crossed her lawn over to the bird's window without even noticing Roberto. Lucy's presence filled Roberto with worry, but he didn't know why he should be worried.

"Please, my little friend," Lucy murmured to the bird as he hit the window again. "Just look away from the window for a moment. Look behind you, there is a beautiful lady robin trying to be your friend."

Roberto looked up, and there was in fact a robin sitting on the gutter of the old man's roof, looking down at the pitiful, confused little bird. Lucy knelt in the grass near the window and watched the bird. She didn't look up until Roberto's light footsteps startled her.

She squinted at the little boy before her face melted into confusion. "You must be the Andrade's kid," she said. Roberto nodded. She sighed.

"The man from the DNR said the bird isn't stupid," she said, more to herself than to Roberto, "that this happens to male birds in the spring every so often. This little robin sees his reflection in the window and thinks it is another male, trespassing on his territory, and he keeps trying to attack and assert his dominance."

The robin hit the window again, hard. Sadness and pity poured out of Lucy, and Roberto seemed unable to do anything but soak it up.

"He told me that I don't need to cover the window, that if I do the bird will find another window to throw himself at. He told me this robin will grow out of it once he finds a woman to make a nest

with.” Lucy looked up at the female robin on the roof, her eyes pleading it to fly down and save it’s mate.

Lucy Hanson had always struck Roberto as a very serious young woman. Now, only feet from her, he saw the light in her eyes and realized she was very much a romantic with a big heart, and this backwards little bird was breaking it. Roberto took a deep breath and sat in the grass next to Lucy.

“You can hope he’ll grow out of it,” Roberto said quietly.

If Lucy was surprised that he had spoken, she didn’t show it. They sat in the grass quietly, watching the robin fling itself at his phantom enemy. He kept it up for hours - Lucy lost patience as her worry was taken on by little Roberto, and she went inside to continue on with her day.

Roberto watched his friend. Yes, for the first time he felt he had a friend, the little robin. He was taking a liking to the bird. In Roberto’s mind, he was much like the robin. The world saw both of them as funny, stupid, spoiled, sick, and shy. They both needed so many things; an intervention, a doctor, a friend.

As the day came to a close, and the sun sank into the west, Roberto left the bird to it’s futile activities and went back to his bedroom. Little Roberto knew better than anyone else would, that everyone’s discernment and advice would not change the robin’s reality. What the bird needed right then was someone to see that he was doing his best, and that he was normal in his own special way.