

PROMPT #1: The garden is being infested by a particularly troublesome family of gnomes.

Ruth 22nd

by **Ali Fowler**

Everything changed when my family and I moved to 217 Ruth 22nd Street. It was the typical neighborhood, equipped with houses that all looked the same and families that looked the same too. Of course, everything looked the same now- rules are rules, Mother always tells me, but sometimes I still catch her humming something long-forgotten softly in the shower. When I used to ask her to do it outside of the shower, she would get angry, so I stopped asking. But I still like to press my ear against the door and listen. The cameras can't hear over the water. I can, though.

Ruth 22nd Street was just like our last street, except there was a singular orange tree instead of avocado tree in the front yard. The garden was the same, with three tomato vines curling along their wires, and three pots with basil sprouting from the dirt. As I stepped out of the car, I looked up at the house- gray still, yes, but with a window at the pointed arch near the top.

"That's your room," Mother said, who watched as my gaze widened.

"But that's so far up," I whined, "there will be so many stairs."

Mother laughed. "You've got the best view in the house." She winked. I groaned again, rolling my eyes. Begrudgingly, I grabbed my bag and followed Mother indoors, the window looming at me from far above as I made my way inside.

The inside of the house was almost exactly the same as our old one- gray and black, but the layout was a bit more spacious. A banner of President Ruth donned the entryway. The place we dwell, says the President, is the place where solitude and togetherness coexist. One can be alone in the house but will always have somebody to share it with- it's what makes a house a home. Nobody was allowed to live alone anymore. Cohabitation ensures that everyone does their duty and helps the population to be more productive.

As Mother and I strolled through the house, the cameras whirled and red lights blinked, always observing. The stairs greeted me soon enough. Mother and I began the ascent.

“Even steeper than I thought,” I sighed, lugging my bag up step by aching step. This time, it was Mother’s turn to roll her eyes.

We reached the second floor and Mother stood next to me.

“Father and I have our rooms here,” she said, motioning to the two doors left ajar. Mother walked off to her room to unpack, and I shifted, eyeing up the seemingly endless stairs to the top floor.

Eighteen steps from the second floor to the top, I realized, counting each one. Upon reaching the top, I was met with a door. No hallway, and hardly any space between the top step and the flat level where the door stood. I opened it, slowly, peeking my head around. The usual gray and black furniture greeted me. I sat down in the cold wooden desk chair, shifting. My old chair had formed into my body and was much more worn and comfortable. This one was firm and unyielding.

I opened my bag and began placing my clothes into the dresser, but the glow from the single window beckoned me towards it; I walked over and peered out. There was the orange tree far below, the garden, and the car in the driveway. And across the street was another house, exactly like mine, with a window like mine, and a face looking at me.

I blinked- once, twice, three times. The face remained. I could barely make it out, but it was surely there. My suspicions were confirmed when a hand reached up to wave.

I had never had another child as a neighbor before! It was rare there were ever two children in a neighborhood together since children were so sparse now, let alone on the same street. I had to tell Mother. Hurriedly, I leapt off the chair and pushed it back to the desk, scrambling to my door and down the steps to the second floor.

“Mother, there’s a child!” I shrieked as I burst through her door. She had finished unpacking and was sitting at her desk, practicing equations for her career-work.

“A child?”

“Yes! I saw, from the window.” I glanced out Mother’s window to see if I could make out the towering window from here but instead saw the child walking across the street toward our house. “Look!”

Mother stood up and saw the child, almost to our lawn; she grabbed my hand to lead me downstairs. We opened the front door as soon as the child arrived.

“Greetings,” Mother said, smiling. “President Ruth watches and provides safe-keeping.” “President Ruth watches and provides safe-keeping,” the child said, looking at Mother, and then at me.

“It is rare that two children share a street- how blessed we all are,” Mother told her. “You two can play as children once did. Go outside; Father will be home and then I must leave for my career-work during the night.”

I squeezed Mother’s hand. Each citizen of the population has their career-work either at night or during the day. Mother’s is at night, and Father’s is during the day, switching when the sun sets and rises.

Mother nudged me and I stepped outside. Looking at the other child, I saw we wore the same black clothes, but her eyes were brighter- happier.

“I’m Martha. Who are you?” She asked.

I told her who I was, and pointed south. “Before we moved here, I lived on Ruth 13th Street, far from here. It was the same, but smelled like the ocean.”

“What does the ocean smell like?”

Martha and I sat down together on the walkway to my house, and I told her. Yet I was fascinated with the girl before me; I had seen a few other children before, in passing, but never this close.

After sitting for a while, watching the wind blow on the orange tree, I looked over at Martha. Her eyes were to the sky. She noticed me looking and tilted her head.

“Would you like to see my garden?” she asked.

“Isn’t it the same as mine?” I responded. We stood up, brushing the gravel and grass off of us. She just giggled, turning toward her house. I followed.

“There’s a creature here unlike any you have seen or learned about,” Martha told me upon reaching her garden.

Puzzled, I looked closer. It was the same as mine and all the others- three tomato vines and three pots with basil. But Martha knelt and picked something up. Three tiny figurines who wore colorful hats, two tall and one short, each no bigger than half the size of the nail on my pinky. The colors on their hats were not allowed- they mimicked nature too closely.

“They are called gnomes, and they protect the garden. But they’re a secret,” Martha said.

“Secrets are lies and lies are against the rules,” I snapped, heat rising to my cheeks. For the entire eight years of my life, I have heard the rules each morning, as everyone does. How could someone be so foolish?

“They are so small they can never be watched.” Her eyes darted toward the camera and back to mine. “And our child voices can be so soft that we cannot be heard,” Martha smirked.

The gnomes did look interesting. I grabbed one, carefully, and set it down atop a leaf of a basil plant.

“No,” I told her, crossing my arms. This was against the rules.

“But they protect your garden and help it grow,” Martha told me. “Isn’t it a child’s duty to have a bountiful garden?” This was true; while children didn’t have career-work, they had to learn and to work on their gardens. President Ruth often reminded us children that we are citizens in the population too and must contribute. Maybe Martha was right. Gardening, after all, had always been difficult for me- I preferred equations..

“Fine,” I relented, uncrossing my arms. “Only if it’ll help my garden.”

Martha and I became great companions, playing find-a-gnome early in the morning before learning and afterwards until dusk. I’d often discover the gnome family in the garden, hiding beneath the dirt, or on top of an orange in the tree. But I wasn’t so skilled at hiding.

“You need to find better spots,” Martha told me one day. “Finding the gnomes is too easy when you hide them.”

“There aren’t many places to hide,” I retorted. She wasn’t wrong- the orange tree and the garden were growing old; I wanted there to be more to explore.

“Think in a new way,” Martha suggested.

I gathered the gnomes into my hands and walked inside, for the sun was beginning to rise and it was time to begin learning. I trudged up the stairs, blowing air hard out of my nose, trying to imagine a new spot.

Maybe... maybe Martha would look out the window to find new hiding spots! Once I reached the second floor, I quickly turned to head up the second flight of stairs when I heard Father’s chair in his room scoot back. Frightened, I missed the step and tripped, gnomes tumbling out of my hands and across the floor. I looked up to the camera that was now facing towards me, buzzing as it focused. I scrambled to gather my gnomes just as Father stepped out of his door.

“What’s this?” he demanded, looking at my gnomes. Clambering toward the stairs, I didn’t answer, and started to crawl up backwards. Father’s gaze sharpened as he reached out a hand to grab me. That hand, that disciplinary hand was all too familiar, so I bolted up, faster than him. I heard my heart thundering in my chest as time seemed to slow down. Nine steps to go. I had to find a better hiding spot. Now. These gnomes could never be found, but now the cameras had seen them, and Father, and-

I reached the top and grabbed the black wooden chair. Running to my doorway as soon as Father reached the top, I shoved him with all my might. He fell backwards, fast, and fell all the way down to the second floor. From way up, I couldn’t see him well, but he wasn’t moving.

“Father?” I called down. No answer.

Slowly, I tiptoed to him. There was blood. Everywhere. I rushed downstairs, blood-stained shoe prints following each step I took, and ran into Mother’s middle. It was time for the career-work change.

“Mother-” I started. She grabbed my clenched fist and spread each finger apart as I gasped for breath, tears rolling down my cheeks. Picking up each gnome, Mother’s gaze softened, and tears welled up in her eyes. I looked behind at Father, and Mother followed my eyes to the top of the stairs. She froze and slowly turned back toward me.

“We must go. Now!” she screamed.

Mother yanked me towards the door. Sirens had already begun to sound. I had only heard them once before, years ago, when someone broke the rules. What happens to people who break the rules?

Mother and I darted to the car, climbing in. She reversed through the yard, running over the garden and the oranges that had fallen, and began to drive faster than the rules allowed. Reaching her hand back, I grabbed onto it, depositing a member of the gnome family. Through her tears, she began to hum, and then she began something beautiful that I had never heard before.

“What’s that sound, Mother?”

“Singing,” she said, and began again. As the sirens sounded around us, all I could hear was her as we drove towards the sunrise.