

“Gardening” by Nicole Cohen

Eleanor was working in her garden when it happened. She had a small plot, only four feet by five feet, just enough to grow a few tomato plants and cucumber vines. The community garden had almost 20 individual plots, and hers was hardly the largest or the most impressive.

She had just started weeding when she saw it. Her tomato plants were beautiful. No, they were magnificent. It looked like someone had come in and planted them overnight. Yesterday, the fruits were still mostly green, and the branches weren't even upright. But now, the plants in front of her looked award-winning.

She touched them gently. They were real. It was a disaster

“Yoo-hoo!” someone called to Eleanor. It was Mrs. Reilly from two plots over. “Eleanor, dear, I see your hat peaking over my sunflowers! How are you?”

“Fine, Mrs. Reilly!” Eleanor said with a wave. “And yourself?”

Eleanor didn't listen to the response. She was trying to figure out how she could salvage the situation. Tomato plants *that* beautiful were going to stir up some talk. And she had *just* gotten her name out of the town gossip.

Mrs. Reilly was gabbing on and on. “...A terrible thing about Lindsey, you know. Didn't you hear? And he was all lined up for the big promotion when-”

Eleanor tried to shut it out and think. She could pick them early and compost them. No one would know. But what if her husband saw? How would she carry them away without anybody noticing?

“How are the cucumbers coming along?” Mrs. Reilly asked, her shrill voice piercing Eleanor's thoughts. “Did the fertilizer I gave you work?”

Eleanor heard Mrs. Reilly walking to her plot. She would tell everyone about the tomatoes if Eleanor didn't *do* something. She could imagine what the other ladies in town would say at the grocery store and in their yoga classes:

“Thinks she's better than everyone else, does she?”

“I'm surprised she could keep a husband, let alone a garden.”

“*Just* moved into town, and already she's acting like she owns the place?”

“Tammy said she saw a UHaul the night before. Word is she imported them all the way from California.”

“Pathetic.”

“Desperate.”

“No!” Eleanor hissed. With fast hands, she began ripping tomatoes off the plant. They fell hard onto the ground. Clouds of dirt surrounded her. She kicked and stomped to destroy the ones that fell. No one could see how beautiful they were.

“What on *Earth* are you doing to Mrs. Winnifred’s tomatoes?” Mrs. Reilly said. She stood beside Eleanor in shock.

Eleanor stopped stomping and stared at Mrs. Reilly, unable to make a sound in response. Could she have been in the wrong plot? Wasn’t this hers?

“You ... you ... You just couldn’t have someone else go and be successful, could you?” Mrs. Reilly shouted. “Had to go and ruin it! Well!”

Mrs. Reilly chucked her gardening gloves at Eleanor and hurried away. The gloves bounced off Eleanor and fell to the earth, raising a meek cloud of dust. Eleanor looked at the small red bodies underneath her and wept for their sake, and for her own.