

# *Sketch*

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## Around the Mulberry Bush

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## Around the Mulberry Bush

Rachel T. Schmidt

When I was eleven, my family moved from our apartment to a house in the next neighborhood over. My brother, Jake, and I were getting older and we needed more space, our parents had said. I didn't argue. I was sick of sharing a room with a fifteen-year old boy who got smellier every day. It meant that I had to go to a new school in the fall, but I was convinced it would be worth it. No one at my old school was particularly nice, and besides, it was summer. I could worry about that later.

We brought the last load of our things on June 29<sup>th</sup>, just when it was starting to get unbearably hot out. It was a little later than I would have liked, but there was still plenty of summer left. I'd explored this neighborhood before, since there was a bike path from our apartment that went through it. It wasn't a very interesting neighborhood. There were four basic shapes of houses but with different colors of bricks to make them look different. Each yard had sprinklers that went off once in the morning and once in the afternoon. That didn't do much good, though, because it was so hot by the end of June that everybody's grass was brown anyway.

Our backyard still needed to be scoped out, though. I did that our first night in the house. Everyone was busy unpacking, but I was tired of that. It wasn't quite dark yet, but the sun was down already, so it wasn't too hot. Our yard looked pretty much like all the other ones I had biked by on the path. The grass was brownish with a few splotches of green and there were some nice big cottonwood trees. Along the house, there were small flower bushes that were wilting a little, and along the back, there were some tall bushes. I went to look at those more closely. They looked like the mulberry bushes that had been behind our old apartment. They were even taller than my dad, and there were, in fact, little red berries on them. I looked for darker ones to pick but couldn't find any. I pulled on a red one just in case, but it didn't want to come off. That was odd. The mulberries from the apartment complex were already splattered all over the parking lot, but there weren't any on the ground here, or even ripe. These ones must be slow.

Before going back inside, I checked each tree for good climbing branches. They'd be okay in a pinch, but nothing amazing, and no tree house material.

The next day, my parents went back to work and ordered Jake to

watch me. Fortunately, he saw as much need for this as I did and went out with his friends like he had every day at the apartment.

Since it was so hot out and I'd seen the neighborhood, I decided to concentrate on rearranging my new room. It was bigger than Jake's and he was jealous. He snored, though, so my parents put him in the hallway with the bathroom. I shared the other hallway with them.

I started by organizing my chapter books. Since my room was bigger, I had gotten one of the bookshelves that had been in our old living room. I had the movers put it next to the window with my chair so I could have a sunny reading spot. I was excited to read about Nancy Drew in my own little corner, without Jake sneaking up on me during the good parts.

I'd been sorting books all morning—I don't think I'd even left my room to brush my teeth when I got up—and was just starting to get hungry when something moving in the backyard caught my eye. I immediately ducked and crept closer to the window. I peered out over the splotchy tan and green grass. I saw nothing but the trees and bushes. I could have sworn it was something big, and there weren't many animals in town. I stayed crouched and listened closely, just in case. The branches swayed slightly and all I could hear were cars on the highway a mile away and a few birds chirping. I *knew* I had seen something, though. It could have been a stray cat or dog, but I wanted to know for sure.

I stood up to go look out my parents' bedroom window, where I'd be able to see in the direction the something had gone, and an old man ambled into our backyard. I crouched again quickly to watch. He was bald and had a hunched back and walked very slowly, kind of shuffled, and he carried a brown bucket. He was wearing a sweater vest and those cushy bright white old-person shoes with bottoms so thick I was afraid he would trip over them. My first thought was that he had escaped from the nursing home. It was only a few blocks down the main road. Before I could get the phone book to call it, though, the man began to pick berries from our bushes! That's why there hadn't been any last night! I sat in my chair and watched as he came back for three more buckets. If I leaned over far enough, I saw his collection was right behind the house next door.

After he went back into his house, I tiptoed down the stairs, skipping the one that creaked (I had been sure to identify that last night, too) and through the kitchen. I checked our back yard—and his—once more before opening the back door. I stepped out cautiously, aware that the old man could be watching my every move. As quickly as I could, I dashed to the nearest cottonwood tree. It had a nice thick trunk and I clung to it, standing

on the roots, grasping them with my toes. I had to crouch a little because the trunk split and the top of my head might be visible. It was the perfect lookout, though. I slowly straightened up and peered over into his yard. The grass looked like it would be up to my knees, but it was much greener than our grass. He had a lot of trees, some cottonwood, like ours, and a lot of others I didn't recognize. I scoured it for mulberry bushes. There wasn't a single one.

That night, after my mom had put the fried chicken, mashed potatoes and peas on the table, after I had set the table and my brother had poured the milk, we all sat down. My mom asked how everyone's day had been and I let my dad and Jake respond before I asked, "Is there an old man who lives next door?"

My mom and dad exchanged glances and shook their heads. "I don't know, Janie. Why?" my mom asked.

"He was stealing our mulberries."

"Nonsense, Janie," said my dad. "We don't even have mulberries."

"Yes, we do! Our neighbor doesn't, though. I'm guessing that's why he wants ours."

My parents gave me a disapproving look and Jake snickered. I glared at him.

"Janie, you may not spy on the neighbors. I thought we had made this very clear," my dad said sternly, looking over his glasses at me.

"I wasn't spying, though! This is different!" I was almost shouting now. It was true, a couple of years ago I had made up a game where I spied on our neighbors and kept track of what they did. When my parents found the notebook, they had thrown it away and told me never to do that again. I hadn't. "I didn't even mean to look! I just saw him out the window and he was taking our berries!"

"Honey, I think you're exaggerating a little bit," my mom said. "Let's keep our eyes to ourselves now."

I snorted and crossed my arms. "I was not spying," I mumbled, but my dad was already talking about his job again.

I saw the old man in our backyard every day for the rest of the week. There were fresh berries every day and he came out around eleven each morning. This was completely unacceptable. I'd have to make my parents believe me so we could stop him.

When I woke up Saturday morning, I felt better. Surely the old man

wouldn't pick any berries when my parents were home. I lay in bed listening to my mom's opera music, hoping it was blasting into his house, too, warning him that we were looking out the windows. My nose suddenly caught the scent of bacon and scrambled eggs. I immediately forgot the old man and the berries, leaped out of bed, and ran down the stairs.

"Good morning, Mom!" I called as I hurried into the kitchen. I slid across the tile floor in my socks and shuffled quickly over to the stove where she was cooking.

"Good morning, Janie." She kissed me on the forehead, but I ducked out, closer to the sizzling pan. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes! When will it be ready?" I asked.

"Get yourself a plate!" Mom said.

As I was shuffling to the other side of the kitchen for a plate, the doorbell rang.

"Be careful, the pan's still hot," Mom said as she wiped her hands off and walked toward the front door. Clutching my plate to my chest, I stood at the edge of the kitchen and leaned around to see who was at our door.

All I could see was Mom standing in the doorway; she must not have let the visitor in. I could hear him, though. "...I thought I'd bring you this as a housewarming gift. I picked the berries out of my own backyard." The voice was deep and shaky, like an old man. My heart began pounding. I tiptoed through the living room and stood behind my mom, peering under her arm at the visitor. It was definitely the man from next door.

"Hello, there!" he said, leaning around to wave at me. I shrank back.

"Janie's kind of shy," my mom said, clearly hoping he wouldn't try to talk to me. I didn't want him to anyway. They talked for a few more minutes about me and my brother, Mr. Stewart's wife, and the weather. She never mentioned that those were our berries in the pie. I could feel my face reddening. Something inside me was boiling. There was my proof! They had to believe me now.

She thanked him again and he turned to leave. "Those are our mulberries!" I said, as soon as the door clicked shut. I followed Mom into the kitchen.

"Janie, shh, he might hear you!"

"He should! He can't just...take our mulberries and--"

"And give them back to us?" Mom stopped and looked at me. "Your breakfast is going to get cold. Don't worry about Mr. Stewart. He's a very nice old man. He just moved here, too, from the country. And he just lost his wife."

I tried for a split second to feel sorry for him, but I was still angry. I could see that my mom wasn't going to listen to me, though. I ate my bacon and eggs quietly and went up to my room. I would have to find a way to stop Mr. Stewart without my parents' help.

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By Monday I had a plan. Mom and Dad were back at work and Jake ditched babysitting me again, so when Mr. Stewart went out to pick our berries, I took action. I was sure would recognize me if he saw me. I didn't plan on being caught, but I had to disguise myself just in case. I went to Jake's closet and found a pair of sneakers he never wore anymore. I picked out one of his most boyish-looking shirts with Batman on it and put on a pair of his old jeans. It was all slightly too big, but maybe that would make me look older. Just for good measure, I grabbed an orange baseball cap that he never wore from a back shelf. I was pretty sure it had been a gift from our Aunt Macy in New Jersey. I took Jake's scissors from his desk, peered out his bedroom door and sneaked into the bathroom. No one was home, but now that I was disguised, I didn't feel like I could walk like I normally did. I had to tiptoe. Then it occurred to me—I had to disguise the way I walked, too! I would work on that after the haircut.

I turned on the bathroom light and looked in the mirror. Everything was perfect except for the hair. I'd never cut hair before, but was going to learn now. I never really paid attention when the woman at the salon cut mine, but it couldn't be that hard. I took a chunk from right next to my face and chopped. Not bad. I wasn't sure how the back would turn out, but I just chopped and chopped until it was all off of my neck. I squinted at myself. Could I pass for a boy? I thought so.

Suddenly, I heard voices out the window and went over to look. It was Jake and his friends. I turned off the bathroom light and crouched, peering down at them. They walked slowly and heavily, kind of slouching, but still looking like they thought they were the coolest people on earth. I stood up and tried it. It worked with the pants and the shoes. In fact, it was easier than trying to walk normally. I made my way down the stairs and into the kitchen, practicing the walk. Yes, it was comfortable. I liked it. I checked the yard out the window. Jake and his friends were nowhere to be seen. They must have just been passing by. I took a canvas bag from the pantry and went to the front door. I opened it and stepped out. It was still hot, but the breeze felt cool on my bare neck. I hiked up Jake's pants and the movement felt right. I knew my disguise was convincing.

I walked along the front of our house and leaned my head around to

check that Mr. Stewart was still picking our berries. Just as I peeked, he was coming back with a bucketful, walking straight toward me. I snapped back and flattened myself against the siding. My heart was beating madly in my chest. I held my breath. His shuffling stopped. There was a thunk of the bucket being dropped heavily, and an empty bucket left the grass with a small *fwosh*. The shuffling retreated back to our yard and I checked again—very slowly and cautiously this time. He was walking away from me. I let out a long breath and composed myself, then dashed across the gap between our houses.

I looked around in case anyone was watching. I was, after all, in broad daylight, but all the grown-ups were at work. I didn't see any other kids around. I sighed in relief, but I still felt the need to be stealthy. I ducked down and crawled along the bushes in front of Mr. Stewart's house until I got to the front porch. This was my moment of truth. If the door was locked, I was done for. I reached for the handle and pushed. It clicked open. I opened it just wide enough to slip through, and shut it softly behind me.

The inside of Mr. Stewart's house was different than I had expected. It definitely smelled funny, but instead of a nursing home smell, it was like too much food. I couldn't pick out any scents, but it was almost like a restaurant—a little bit of everything. The living room was so packed with couches and chairs and footstools, I didn't even know where he'd have room to walk. Fortunately, there was an easy way to get to the kitchen without going through all of that. I tiptoed around and paused at the doorway to the kitchen. It was as full of food as I'd pictured it. One counter was covered in pies, cakes, salads and casseroles and the other had bowls and bowls of fresh fruits and vegetables, including our berries. I wouldn't have been surprised if he had robbed all the gardens in the neighborhood.

Here I could also see out a window to Mr. Stewart's back yard. I saw all his buckets lined up on the patio. There was one full one and five empty ones. Good, that would keep him busy for a while. I made sure he was still in our yard with his back turned, then began opening cupboard doors. When I opened the first, a large plastic measuring cup tumbled out and hit me on the head. "Ow!" I shouted, then spun around to make sure Mr. Stewart hadn't heard me. He was still busy picking. I retrieved the cup from the floor and stuffed it back where it came from. The cupboard was incredible. It was absolutely packed with all kinds of kitchen gear. There were big metal gadgets with gears, wooden dishes and instruments in all shapes and sizes, and a lot of plastic stuff that looked like my mom's but older.

The next cabinet contained stacks and stacks of old-looking plates

and bowls. In the one after that was the biggest collection of coffee mugs I had ever seen—bigger than Aunt Macy’s. Finally, in the fourth, I found what I was looking for. The baking supplies! Despite the ridiculous amount of pies on the counter, there was still a stack of at least five pans in the cupboard. I stood on my toes and reached for it, barely fitting my fingers around the rim to pull it down. I put all five in the bag I’d brought. Behind them was a rolling pin. I had to jump for that, but it made its way into the bag too. On the shelf under those, there were greenish-yellow canisters labeled, “Flour,” “Sugar,” and “Brown Sugar.” I took those, too, and by then my bag was bulging. That would probably do. I glanced out the window. Mr. Stewart was just turning back, bent over from the weight of his full bucket. Perfect. I scanned the kitchen to make sure nothing was out of place. On the fridge, I noticed, was a grocery list. I removed that, too, and placed it in my bag. That should at least slow him down for a while.

I tiptoed back around the furniture and to the front door. I peered out before stepping onto the porch. The coast was clear. I sneaked along the edge of Mr. Stewart’s house, but I couldn’t be quite so quick this time because the bag was heavy. I wasn’t worried, though. No one was around except Mr. Stewart, and he was occupied with our berries.

I poked my head around the house to be sure his back was turned.

He was standing right around the corner, staring straight at me. I dropped the bag.

“Hello, Janie,” he said, grinning. With his hunched back, his face was almost at my height.

I was annoyed that he recognized me through my disguise, but there were more important things to worry about now. “Hi,” I said.

“You dropped something,” he said, reaching for my bag. I was too quick. I snatched it back up, hugging it to my chest.

“Were you in my house?” he asked, still grinning. I could see a stray hair growing from inside his nose.

I glared at him. How had he caught me so easily? He couldn’t possibly have seen me through the window in his kitchen! And I was so quiet!

“Yes,” I said, a little louder than I meant to. “I want you to stop stealing our mulberries, and my parents won’t listen to me.”

“So what did you do?” he asked. He looked nervous now. Good.

“I stole the things you bake pie with.” He, after all, was a thief, too. Maybe he would understand. At least I had a good reason.

“I’ll bet your mom isn’t going to like that, is she?”

“She isn’t going to like you when she knows what you do!”

“Did she like my pie?”

I glared at him again. “Yes.”

“Did you like it?”

I loved pie, but I had refused to taste it. I refused to answer him.

“Well, I don’t want to be told on,” Mr. Stewart said. He looked even more nervous now. I felt better. “How about this...” He hunched his back over further to lean closer to me. I leaned back a little. “If you don’t say anything to your parents about me picking your berries, I won’t tell them you snuck into my house.”

This seemed kind of unfair to me. Jake tried to explain blackmail to me once, and I think this might have been it. “Are you going to keep picking our berries?” I asked.

“What would you do with all those berries, Janie?”

I hadn’t really thought about that. I glared at him.

“How about this,” he said. “If you let me have my baking supplies back, I’ll leave your berries alone.”

I nodded slowly, waiting for him to threaten me with something else.

“But if you bring me the leftovers when *you’re* done picking,” he said, “I’ll bake you more pie, and even make you jam. Do you like mulberry jam?”

“Yes,” I said. *I was grinning now.* This was more like it.

“Do we have a deal?” He held out his hand for me to shake. It was covered with purple berry stains.

“Deal.” I said. I shook his hand.

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**Rachel T. Schmidt** is a junior in English, secondary education. She enjoys speaking German, cooking, drinking coffee, making scarves, wearing scarves and reading.