

Nia's Palace Garden

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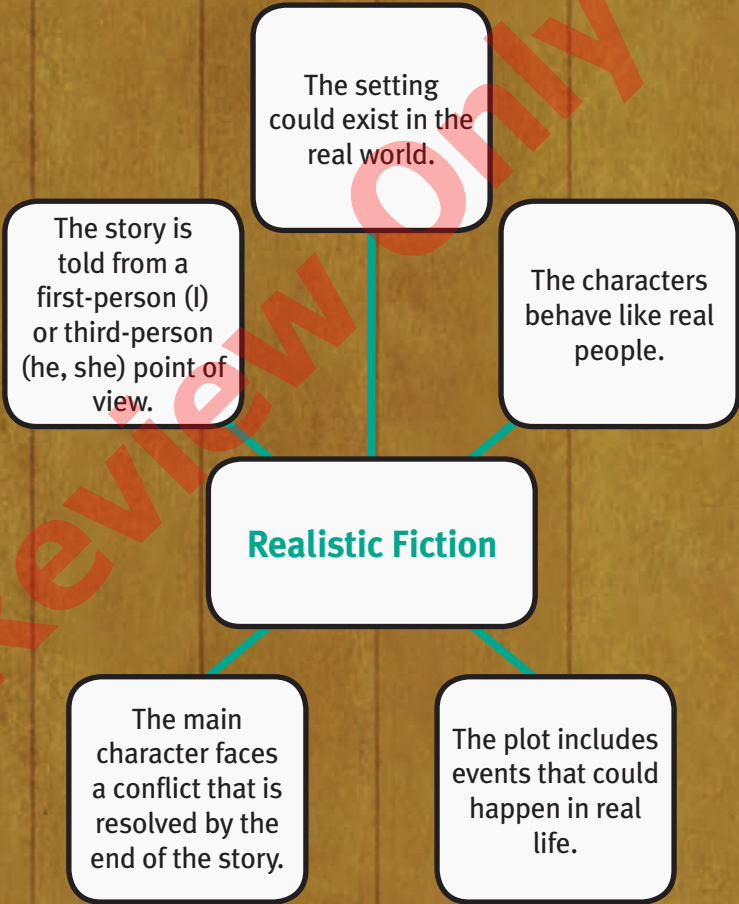


REALISTIC FICTION
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Realistic Fiction

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The Next Move

Nia woke to the muffled sounds of her parents' voices on the other side of the thin bedroom wall.

"How soon do we have to be out of this apartment?" she heard her mother ask.

Nia tried to hold her breath so she could hear better. She couldn't hear exactly what her father said next, but she heard the word *rent*.

Nia's stomach lurched. *The rent on the apartment must be going up again*, she thought. *We might have to move again*. They had moved to three different apartments in the past two years, each one smaller than the last.

I don't want to think about moving, she said to herself. Not that Nia loved this place, with its worn-out carpets and hard-to-open windows. The walls were so thin that you could hear a door close from two rooms over. But it did have its good points, like the balcony where her vegetable buckets were lined up, soaking up the early summer sun.

Nia slid out of bed. Her older sister, Mel, was still asleep on the top bunk. Nia closed their door quietly and padded across the living room, collecting her sketch pad from the coffee table piled with books on her way to the balcony.

Nia could still hear the hum of her parents' discussion as she jiggled open the sliding door, but outside, the noises from the street drowned it out.

Thank goodness, she thought.

Nia sat down in the plastic chair, jammed in between her vegetable buckets, and started to draw. She had planted seeds for beans, tomatoes, and peppers in June. She had been imagining a large, quick harvest that would help fill her family's refrigerator. But disappointingly, her little plants still showed no signs of producing any actual vegetables.

Well, at least some seeds have sprouted, and plants are growing, Nia thought.



She brushed the dirt off the leaves of the nearest tiny tomato plant, then flipped through her sketch pad. It was filled with drawings of fairy-tale castles. She liked drawing faraway lands with big houses—anything more glamorous than her current surroundings.



Lately, she had been working on designing a palace. Her palace had tower bedrooms, an indoor pool, and parklike grounds filled with walkways and fruit trees.

“I think the palace needs a fountain,” she decided aloud. She was busy drawing one in when her father appeared at the balcony door.

He was already dressed in his Discount Auto Parts shirt, with his name tag pinned on. Nia’s dad had started the job after the auto plant, where he had been a line supervisor, had closed three years earlier. He worked mostly overnight and slept during the day. Nia’s mother, Alicia, now worked longer hours, too, but it seemed like the family never had much left over after paying the rent.

“Hey, kiddo. Come to the kitchen,” Dad said. “I’ve got some big news this morning.”

Nia felt far from cheerful. *I already know what the news is, she thought. We are going to have to move again because the rent is going up.*

In the kitchen, Mel and Mom were already at the table. Mel was dressed but still looked exhausted. She had covered a busy late-night shift at the Fish Fry where she worked. But Mom—dressed in her nurse’s aide scrubs—looked just as tired as Mel.

“What’s this about?” Mel asked. Her tone was apprehensive.

Nia had been waiting for her father to make the announcement, but when he did, it was not at all what she had expected. He laid out some photos on the table and smiled.

“This is our new house!” Dad announced.

Nia leaned in to take a closer look.

The pictures showed no house, just a rectangle of spaced concrete blocks on a plot of otherwise empty land.

“Our new house? What do you mean?” she asked in confusion.

“A few months ago, we put in an application with an organization called DIYH,” Mom said, beaming. “Our family was selected to build a house!”

“DIYH—Do-It-Yourself Homes—is working with us to build a house we can afford,” Dad explained.

“We’re going to build our own house?” Mel asked.

She sounded as confused as Nia felt.

“Yes, this is just the start of it,” said Dad, pointing to the pictures. “People who work for DIYH, as well as volunteers, have already started on it,” he explained. “But we’ll be helping, too. And when the house is finished, it will be ours.”

“Really ours? Like forever?” Nia asked. She felt her chest fill with hope.

“Yep,” Mom confirmed. “It should be finished by December. And after that—no more moving around! Plus, you girls can each have your own room.”

My own room? All this sounded too good to Nia, but she still had a concern.

“Will I have to change schools again?” she asked.

“I’ll talk to your principal,” Mom reassured her. “We’ll make sure you can stay where you are for your last year before middle school.”

“We can take you over to the building site right now if you would like,” Dad offered.



Carpenters, Complaints, and a Cat

“What a quiet neighborhood. I’ve never seen so many trees!” Mom said dreamily as they rode in their car toward the construction site.

Nia had to agree. This place did seem a world away from the brick buildings and busy streets of their neighborhood.

“There it is,” Dad said as he parked the car in front of the work site. “Let’s go see what’s what.”

The house was actually a little bit further along than it looked in the pictures: the rectangle outlined by cinder blocks was covered now in evenly spaced parallel boards.

“Hi, Mr. Oshiro. It’s me again, Michael Larsen,” said Dad. Then he said to Nia, “Mr. Oshiro is the supervisor of the construction site.”

Mr. Oshiro welcomed them and surprised Nia by shaking her hand in an official sort of way; it made her feel like an adult. “I’m going to keep you busy for the rest of this summer!” he promised, smiling. “We don’t allow young people to use power tools or do heavy lifting, but we can definitely use all the help we can get.”

Nia immediately liked Mr. Oshiro. She also liked the fact that she would be able to help. *How many kids can say they helped build their own house?* she thought.

Nia pointed to the boards lying across the foundation. “Those boards weren’t there in our pictures,” she noted.

Mr. Oshiro nodded. “Those are joists. They support the structure of the building,” he told her. “We’ve just finished laying them.”

Just then, a gray, striped cat leapt up onto one of the joists and started walking across it.

Nia laughed. “Look at that cat,” she said. “He thinks he’s on a balance beam.”

