

May's Flowers
By Lesley L. Smith

At sunrise, my fields of sunflowers looked totally normal as I rode by them on my bike. I almost smiled when I saw their cheerful yellow heads nodding in the soft golden light. They were about a week from harvest, and I couldn't wait.

My flowers were anything but normal. When those jokers at the biodiesel plant realized their oil content, they were sure gonna be surprised. Dang it, but they were gonna fall right on the floor, they'd be so surprised. I loved that Joint Genome Institute and the way they shared genetic codes!

Oof! My knees complained as I hit a pothole. Stupid supplements weren't working anymore, and my arthritis was killing me. Watch where you're going, old woman!

After what felt like too long, but was only a few blocks, I pedaled up to the diner in town and hobbled inside.

"Good morning, May," that overly perky waitress, Staci, said as I went to my table. As usual, I was the first one in the diner. Folks just didn't have a work ethic anymore--of course, most folks around here were out of work, so that might have something to do with it.

I scowled at Staci. She was always flapping her gums, and judging by what she said, she didn't have the good sense God gave a dog, or a sunflower for that matter.

"Aw," she said in a sing-song tone. "Is your arthritis bothering you again?"

My late momma taught me a lady does not brag on her health problems. "None of your business." I sat down slowly. "I'd just like to order, Staci, if it's all right with you."

She pursed her lips and looked at me for a few seconds. Finally she held up her pad and pencil. "Fine. What do you want?"

"The usual," I said.

"What a shock! You could just knock me down with a feather," Staci said. "Oatmeal, fresh fruit and a cup of chicory." She wrote it on her pad.

"Didn't your momma teach you not to disrespect your elders, Staci?" I said with a scowl. "You need to get yourself some manners."

She opened her mouth and then closed it. Then she turned around and walked back to the kitchen.

I sat at my table and looked out the window. Town looked real peaceful this time of day. No folks out and about; no bikes or horses or dust in street.

Staci plopped down my cup of chicory and turned and walked away.

I took a sip and sighed. This was my favorite time of day, Staci notwithstanding. Real peaceful.

Speaking of dogs, who was coming up the road but my neighbor, that old rascal Ramone and his golden lab, Missy, too. I turned from the window and leaned away from it. Hopefully he wouldn't come in here.

The bell on the door tinkled. Dang it, no such luck. Ramone saw me and smiled widely.

I did not smile back. Ramone and I had gone steady forever ago, in high school, until he had the nerve to dump me for that Isabella. I heard Isabella finally passed on. Good riddance.

I sighed. No doubt momma would have said that last thought was over the line. I never really knew Isabella, but it wasn't her fault Ramone was a dog. Okay, momma, not good riddance: I hoped Isabella was in a better place now.

Ramone and Missy sauntered over to my table. "Morning, May," Ramone said, grinning that annoying grin of his. He needed a shave, too.

Missy snuffled her head under my hand. I gave her a little pet. She felt warm and soft. Missy'd never break anyone's heart.

I hadn't forgiven Ramone, the dog, for dumping me, and I never would, so I didn't say anything back to him.

Staci appeared at my elbow with my order. "Oh, is Ramone joining you May?"

"No!" I said. It was totally unfair how Ramone looked almost the same as he had in high school--same trim build, same quick grin, same laughing eyes--and I looked like an old woman. The only difference in him was his white hair and the laugh crinkles around his eyes.

Staci put my food on the table and turned to Ramone. "I was so sorry to hear about Isabella. She was a real sweetheart." Staci turned to me and frowned. "Such a nice tipper."

I didn't react.

She turned back to Ramone. "How's the family holding up?"

"Good, considering," Ramone said. "My daughter and son-in-law are on a shopping trip to Denver--trying to lift their spirits."

"So, you have the girls staying with you then?" Staci asked. "Maybe I'll stop by and say hi."

Ramone had two granddaughters, Maria and Lucia that I couldn't tell apart. I thought they were about twelve and fourteen now, but I couldn't tell, what with their makeup and such.

"Some people are trying to eat their breakfast here," I said, shooin' them away. "You all go and let me eat in peace."

Ramone shook his head and led Missy away.

I watched them go over to a table on the other side of the restaurant. Good riddance. I didn't want to eat with them. I would never want to eat or do anything else with them. They were dang annoying.

I ate and looked out the window. I didn't look at Ramone and Missy.

After a while, breakfast finished, Ramone and Missy left. They didn't stop at my table on their way out.

The diner was filling up, and Staci was flitting about like a swallowtail butterfly. It was time for me to get out of there.

I'd finished checking my irrigation ditches and the heat of the day had arrived. It was time for a siesta. As I approached the house though something wasn't right: I smelled burning. With our drought, that was not good. I pivoted, sniffing, trying to figure out where it was coming from. When I faced east, in the direction of Ramone's farm, I could just make out the beginnings of some puffs of smoke. Oh, no!

As I took in the dead scrub brush in the drought-ridden countryside surrounding our farms, I got a bad feeling in my bones that had nothing to do with arthritis. We hadn't had rain in I-didn't-know-how-long. This could get bad. Real bad. Ramone's family might lose everything and they might not be the only ones. His farm was entirely too close to town for comfort.

The smoke puffs grew substantially just in the few moments I'd been standing there gaping. I fumbled for my cell. Shoot. Where did it get to? I was forever losing it; it was just too small.

Then I heard the blaring siren of the fire truck; it approached and passed me by on the way to Ramone's. Good.

I'd better get over there and help. I lashed my shovel on my bike, got on, and determinedly made my way east. Every push of the pedal was like driving spikes in my knees. As I got closer, it got smokier, and ash floated in the air. I gulped and doggedly continued riding. I passed a few folks on foot also heading to the fire. That was one good thing about this town, we all pulled together in an emergency.

As I approached Ramone's place, the smoke and ash and heat made the going even tougher. I pulled my shirt up over my nose as I approached the

large knot of people standing at the end of the driveway. Ramone was among them, his mouth in a grim line. His granddaughters stood next to him, clean trails of tears running down their ash-smearred cheeks. Poor things. I bet they were scared.

The fire truck was there but it wasn't doing anything. No one was doing anything but looking sad.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Why aren't you fighting the fire?"

Ramone shook his head. "It's too late. The place is a tinderbox. It's going up too fast." He pointed at the truck. "Fire Marshall says we can't spare the water. The whole crop's gonna go. I don't know what the family's gonna do now. Or town. We were the biggest supplier for the biodiesel plant." He looked like he was going to cry.

"I'm so sorry, Ramone," I said softly, touching his arm. Smoke in my eyes made me get teary.

He nodded and grabbed my hand on his arm.

After a moment, I said, "I don't want to sound alarmist, but we need to act quick before we lose the town and the farm that borders yours. We need to get to work on the fire breaks ASAP."

Ramone's granddaughters exchanged some heated, but soft, words with each other. Then one of them said loudly, "You just want us to help you save your farm," and glared at me.

I nodded. Yeah. What was her point? "Yes. And the town."

Quite a crowd gathered around us, armed with shovels and other firefighting tools.

The Fire Marshall nodded. "Yeah, folks, we need to get to work on the firebreak between the Ramirez place and town."

People started moving away.

"And my place," I said loudly.

Staci (where had she come from?) said, "Yeah, right. Like we'd help you. You never help anyone." Maybe I should have given her a tip this morning.

"It's a fire," I said. "You don't understand, I could lose my whole crop. It's special. It could revolutionize all our crops." I was planning on sharing seed stock if the crop worked out.

Everyone just scowled or frowned at me. It was as if they didn't believe me.

"Besides, I help people," I said, "plenty of people."

"Who?" the other of Ramone's granddaughters demanded.

The rest of the crowd grumbled. What were they so worked up about?

"We're wasting time, people," the Fire Marshall said. "We need to get to work." He pointed toward town. "Let's start digging over there."

The crowd started to move out again.

"Wait! What about my crop?" I said. I pointed behind me. "My crop can help people. It has six times the oil content of typical sunflower seeds."

Most of the crowd had already decided against helping me and were going where the Fire Marshall told them to go. I couldn't believe it. Was it possible they really weren't going to help me? I thought we pulled together in this town. I came here to help.

A handful of folks, including Ramone's family, remained.

Staci said, "Six times?"

One of the granddaughters said, "Yeah, right." Why were kids so disrespectful nowadays?

"Maria," Ramone said, "don't be rude." He looked me in the eyes. "Really, May? Six times?"

"Yes." I had a light-bulb-over-the-head moment: I knew how to get them to help. "And I'll share! Anyone who helps me fight the fire will get a share of the crop."

The youngsters all snorted.

Ramone said, "Girls, May was always a career lady--didn't even have time for a family." Was that a note of regret in his voice? "She was a geneticist before she retired. If she says she's got unusual sunflowers, she does." He turned back to me. "What'd you use? Coconut genes?"

"Oil Palm," I said.

He nodded. "Come on, everyone, let's get to work." He swept his arm toward my farm.

"Really, grandpa?" one of the girls asked.

"Yes, honey," he said softly. "Fire's already taken more than enough today."

They picked up their tools.

Dang it if that smoke didn't irritate my eyes some more.

By sunset, the fire was out, and everyone in town was an ashy, cranky, mess, but we hadn't lost anything else to the flames. Everyone was finally heading home except Ramone and his granddaughters. We all leaned heavily on our shovels. Even ash-smearred Missy was exhausted.

I was too tired to hold on to an ancient grudge. It was time to let it go. Past time. "I can't thank you all enough," I said. "You saved my flowers. I appreciate it. They mean a lot to me." Years of experimenting went into those flowers.

I faced east and couldn't help noticing the flat black expanse of nothingness that used to be Ramone's home and farm. I knew they had meant a lot to Ramone and his family. "I'm sorry for your loss." It just wasn't right to kick a family when it was already down. "Your losses," I added.

The girls looked teary again and Ramone didn't look much better. And who could blame 'em?

"Thanks," Ramone whispered, looking down at the ground. I figured he was thinking about a lifetime of keepsakes of his life with Isabella, gone. At least he still had his memories, no fire could take them.

I put down my shovel and straightened up. "Now, who's hungry for dinner?" I said. "And who wants the first shower?"

Ramone looked up at me. "Are you sure, May?"

"What?" Maria asked. "What are you guys talking about?"

"You all are gonna stay with me," I said. "I won't take no for an answer."

Ramone nodded and smiled. The girls' chins stopped quivering quite so much, and Lucia's shoulders relaxed.

"And I want to hear all about your grandma, Isabella," I said. "I never got the chance to know her. I hear she was a real nice lady."

The four of us turned to go into the house. On the threshold of the front door I turned and looked back at my fields of sunflowers--flowers that reunited me with a dear old friend and helped me make some special new ones.

I knew those flowers were special, but dang it, if they didn't end up surprising even me.