

The Secret of Blooming by Phyllis Cole-Dai

The sun's setting fast. You hurry, wanting to get home before dark. But as you stroll past a humble house fringed by lush flowerbeds, you glimpse a line of people in the backyard, facing a privacy fence. With their backs to you, they're ranked like a row of tin soldiers, socially distanced; seven or eight of them, standing at attention.

What are they up to? you wonder, slowing your steps.

A masked man crossing the yard notices you on the sidewalk. "Come, join us!" he calls with a wave.

You hesitate. It's late, and you're not keen on mixing with strangers, especially during a pandemic. But you don't know how to decline the invitation without seeming rude.

He beckons again. "You're just in time!"

In time for what? you ask yourself. Now you're hooked.

You keep your distance as you follow him, adjusting your mask over your nose. The toy soldiers are focused on some weedy plants growing along the wood fence.

"Look!" exclaims a girl, no more than a kindergartener. She's pointing at a flower bud. "This one's getting all trembly!"

"Maybe it will be the first!" says a woman, probably the girl's mother, or she wouldn't be standing so close.

An old lady stretches the tip of her cane toward another bud. "I'm betting on this one," she says. "How about you?"

Yes, she means you. Surprised by her question, you lean in to study the bud, perched on a swaying stem as tall as your thigh. Its green sheath is quivering.

"Watch now," the old lady says.

In slow motion, the sheath starts to peel back, revealing a bit of the yellow flower hidden inside. Fascinated, you survey the long bed of spindly plants. The dimness of dusk makes it difficult to judge, but you guess there must be dozens of such buds, if not hundreds.

"Evening primroses," the old lady says. "I like to call them 'sun cups.' Keep your eyes peeled now—"

Right on cue, the primrose in front of you pops free of its sheath. Its petals are still tightly wrapped, but the brilliant yellow head of the flower curls up as if to say hello, spilling a chill down your spine.

“Oh my,” you whisper. “It’s so . . . so . . .”

“Alive?” the old lady says, finishing your sentence.

One thin petal unfurls magically before your eyes. Another. After a third, then a fourth, the primrose springs wide open. Amazed, you bend to sniff the big yellow cup. You catch a faint whiff of lemon.

From further down the line floats a chorus of oohs and aahs.

“That one bloomed so fast!” a man says, laughing.

“There goes another one . . .” a teenager says.

“Three are ready to pop over here!”

The old lady waves her cane in the air like a conductor’s baton. “Look at them!” she says, a proud lilt in her voice.

You don’t know if she’s talking about the flowers or the people, but you straighten to witness fireworks, primroses bursting into glory. So many are exploding at once from their buds, nobody can keep count.

The spectacle of blooming ends fifteen or twenty minutes later, as abruptly as it began. The shadowy patch of what you first considered weeds is now ablaze with gorgeous bumblebee-yellow blooms glowing in the moonlight. Everyone applauds.

“I never knew flowers could do that,” you say.

“This time tomorrow,” the old lady says, “they’ll all be dead.”

You stare at her, stunned. “Really? They spend all that effort to bloom for one night?”

“The world’s worth it,” she says, “don’t you think?”

You suspect she’s smiling behind her mask.

“Well,” you say, “I’m glad I didn’t miss it.”

“Oh, every night there’s a fresh crop. You’ll have to come again. The plants will bloom and bloom all summer, if we do the secret thing.”

“Water them?” you say.

She shakes her head.

“Pick off the dead blooms?”

“Nothing so hard,” she says.

“What then?” you say.

“Show up,” she says, “and pay attention. That’s why they bloom for us—to remind us how to love.”

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