

# *Sunflowers*

by Cecilia Davidsson

Her face was pale but without any sign of drowsiness, and we had a sense that she had been up, tidying the kitchen while we lay sleeping. We could hardly imagine that it was Dad who had pushed the chairs back under the table and neatly piled up the newspaper supplements on the kitchen bench.

“It’s going to be a hot day,” I said and put the breakfast tray on the bedside table. I sat down by her feet, my brother went up to the window and pulled up the blinds.

“But not boiling,” he pointed out.

“You have to take the chance to go out,” I said.

“At least you must go and have a look at the sunflowers,” said my brother.

“Yes, you must,” I said, patting the duvet encouragingly.

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” she said, with a dubious look at the tray with coffee, two sandwiches, and a boiled egg in the pink mummy eggcup. “Are you really suggesting I should eat this?”

We asked ourselves how it was possible. After all, it had been raining for most of June. We didn’t understand how he’d managed it. It had to be something in the soil, we thought, combined with another series of propitious circumstances. Because he was certainly not a proper gardener, not in the real sense of the word. He’d chanced upon an abandoned bag of sunflower seeds for the birds and, once the risk of night frost had passed, he’d tossed them out haphazardly and turned over the soil in the old potato patch, which needed resting from potatoes.

Now they stood in their hundreds, facing onto the lake to the south, many of them more than two metres tall with stalks as thick as saplings and flowers as wide as faces.

“People are talking about them,” I said as we sat in the kitchen.

“I can imagine,” she said.

“Because they’re so high,” I said.

We made a suggestion that we could carry her; my brother stood up and showed his biceps. She shook her head and said that we’d always been crazy, my brother in his way, me in mine.

“Just ten minutes will do it. Just for some fresh air, for the sunflowers. It’s like Spain, like Andalusia, except more incredible because it’s in Sweden.”

She gripped the edge of the table and heaved herself up, reaching for the thermometer in the window.

“It’s unbearably hot,” she said, giving us a look, waiting to be opposed.

We did not reason with her. We held back and went her way, enticing and tantalising.

“We’ll wait until half four five, then, when it’s cooler,” said my brother. “It’s better at that time, when the light isn’t so sharp. The colours are sort of more saturated.”

“But it has to be before the flowers start drooping when the evening and the night sets in,” I said.

She sank back into her chair, slowly adjusted her position on the unruly cushion, and then said:

“Late afternoons are actually the worst.”

I took a pair of scissors and went down to the lake. Dad was watering the sunflowers with the hose; a little carrot bobbing up and down between his lips. There was a bit of soil in the corner of his mouth. In the right quantity it's a superb herb, he said, sweet and salty in just the right combination. He showed me which sunflowers to cut, the small ones growing in the shade cast by a large alder tree. I cut three of them and brought them back. So that she'd get a sense of how it must look down by the lake. Like in a fairy tale or a painting by Van Gogh. More beautiful than Van Gogh.

She protested and said:

"Sunflowers don't want to be put in a vase."

"You can eat the petals," I said, and put one of them in my mouth.

"Watch out!" she said and pushed her body against the back of the chair.

He liked undemanding, fast-growing vegetables. He fertilised and watered but never bothered with thinning out. He never found the side shoots of the tomato plants that grew as high as a man but had no tomatoes on them. He forgot about the radishes, and they grew as large as plums and could not be eaten. It pleased him, the radishes growing so large.

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My brother fetched up the walker from the cellar, exiled there on the same day it entered the house, then opened it and pushed it back and forth over the threshold.

"If you want, we could get rid of the threshold," he said.

"I don't like it," she said. "It skids."

"Okay," we said, laughing. "The easiest way is if you hold on to us when we go out. We won't skid. We won't have a puncture or get stuck in the gravel."

"My legs fold. You don't know what it's like."

No, how could we know?

The morning newspaper lay untouched on her duvet. She had completely stopped reading books. She saw the letters as disoriented ants. That sense of disorientation made her feel giddy and nauseous. We suspected that she had never liked all those novels she used to churn through and put aside with a sigh. We suspected that the only thing she had ever liked was putting on a pair of gloves and going out to work in the garden.

She used to stay for hours on her knees by the beds, weeding and hoeing. In the evenings she looked

through the seed catalogues that we loved as children and begged to be allowed to cut up. In the cellar there were rows of baskets with flower bulbs.

We removed the newspaper and pulled the duvet aside.

"We'll hold you," we said and grasped her arms, pulling her up and forward. There was only bone under her soft, baggy skin. "You got up so nicely yesterday, didn't you, and the day before that. We can carry you on the veranda. You can lie in the hammock."

"There's no point, I'm done, don't you understand," she said, her face grey and stiff.

"You have another fifteen years in you. At least."

There were immediate signs of life in her stony face: "I certainly hope not!"

"I've made a rough estimate," said my brother and made a long pause before going on: "There's close to a thousand of them."

"A thousand? You're joking!" I said.

"No, really."

"That's more than I thought."

We looked at her with expectation.

"You always have to exaggerate," she said and turned to my brother. "Like that time you told your friend

you'd had a hundred Christmas presents."

"I was just a child then," said my brother.

"You weren't so young, actually."

"Children always say things like that, Mum. Children..."

I gave my brother a shove under the table. After that he went silent.

We decided to photograph the field of sunflowers, as evidence, and we bailed the rowing boat dry and took the photographs from the lake. It was early afternoon, and the flowers were fully open. They looked directly at the camera.

"Do you know what they're called in Latin?" I said.

"No," said my brother.

"Helianthus annuus," I said, with a titter.

"Crap joke," said my brother.

Dad called out from the shore. He also wanted to be in a photo, sitting in a garden chair at the edge of the field of sunflowers.

"You have to get it all in!"

He took off his cap and put it in his lap. Squinted at the camera. "Is it okay like this?"

Afterwards he said: "I mean, you never know if things will come around again."

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He stayed out of doors from six in the morning until nine in the evening, with breaks for meals and a nap on the sofa.

He came and went just as in the olden days; sat down to a laid table and left after mopping up the last of the gravy from his plate with a piece of bread. The first few days he took his plate and glass to the draining board. Then he stopped doing that.

In the evenings he took a spin in the car. Sometimes he brought back a bouquet of sunflowers, their stalks wrapped in wet kitchen roll.

With one hand on her walking stick and the other against the wall, the door-frame, the chair, sideboard or whatever was available, she moved along with an expression of indignation from the bedroom through the hall to the kitchen. She stopped on the threshold, taking a breather.

"It's good that you're up and moving about," we said.

"It's just a lot of hard work," she said.

"But it is *good*."

We suggested getting hold of a wheelchair so we could push her down to the lake. She looked amazed:

"Over the stocks and stones? Well that would be a sight for the gods."

She was the one who was ill, we reasoned to ourselves, whereas we were healthy. It was no more than right and proper that we should make ourselves available during our holiday weeks. We believed she would recover sufficiently by the autumn to stop talking so carelessly about death. She'd get used to not being able to run about like she used to. She'd start to feel comfortable with it, and find new topics to take pleasure from.

"It's really sad when they get old," said my brother. "But it's inevitable."

People came to look, and they drove their cars down the track to the lake. My brother and I agreed that it was cheeky of them, but rather than parking their cars in the garage drive where Mum's car had been abandoned under a tarpaulin.

From the window of my old room I saw two women getting into a white Saab, each with a bunch of sunflowers. They were of Mum's age. Unapologetically sanguine and cheerful. I went in to see Mum and ask her if she wanted anything. She thought about it for a

moment. Then she said: "It's early for coffee."

One night while I was reading I heard her laughing. Right out, a hearty belly laugh clearly audible but so brief that afterwards I doubted my own ears.

"It's Dad," said my brother with a smile when I told him in the morning. "He can still get her to laugh."

"But I didn't hear any voices, no whispering. Only the actual laugh. And afterwards it was completely quiet," I said.

"Then it must have been a dream," said my brother.

"You have to get up, we'll help you. Just for a bit, then you can go back to bed again."

Patiently and without raising our voices we coaxed her and, in the end, maybe just to get rid of us, she shifted herself into a sitting position.

"You don't know what it's like," she said.

"Of course we don't know what it's like," we said, determinedly grasping an arm each and pulling her up.

"Was it you who put a clean tablecloth on the kitchen bench?" I asked my brother. We were standing on the jetty with the field of sunflowers at our backs. It was the last evening.

"Ah," said my brother with a laugh. "If it was up to me we'd throw out every tablecloth."

"Anyway, she's sick."

I turned around, and reacted. "Look at them!" I could never get used to them. I could not satisfy my need to gaze at them. My brother turned around and looked. The sunflowers looked back: an army of mute individuals.

"Soon they'll die," he said.

"Well, that could take another five or ten years," I said.

"I'm talking about the sunflowers," said my brother.

In the morning she wandered through the rooms with her stick and checked that we hadn't forgotten anything.

"Do you have your keys?" she asked.

I put my hand into my handbag and felt the key-ring in the small compartment, and my brother rattled his in his trouser pocket.

"Your telephones?"

"Your swimwear on the clothes-line?"

"Everything from the laundry?"

We made another round of the house to calm her, and found a couple of socks and a hairbrush. Then we

went to the car where Dad was waiting. He'd put a plastic bucket of sunflowers, with a bit of water in it, on the floor in the back seat.

"You'll have to share those between you when you get there," he said. "However you choose."

We didn't know. Both my brother and I were travelling the next day with our respective families. Then we noticed that she'd come out onto the front steps. It was the first time in two weeks that she'd been outside. She stood in the sun, shading her eyes against the sun, and if it hadn't been for the walking stick she would have looked her usual self. It was the same old scene of departure, framed by the same old trees and conifers and contradictory feelings of loss and relief.

In the end she did get to see the sunflowers.

Evert, the neighbour, had been out fishing, and from the boat he saw Dad lying on the path between the sunflower field and the vegetable patch.

He rowed ashore and confirmed that Dad was dead, although it didn't much look as if he was. He was lying on his back with his hands on his stomach, and, according to Evert, it seemed as if he was just taking a nap, which he may have done, the only difference being that this time he never woke up.

Mum went with Evert after he'd come up to the house to raise the alarm. Later, when we asked him about the details, he said she'd been tremulous but determined. When they came down to the lake he put out Dad's old garden chair by his body so she could sit down. Then he went up to the house to wait for the ambulance.

In the immediate time that followed, I pushed away the image of the white-haired woman sitting on a garden chair in the evening chill beside the corpse of a man to whom she'd been married for forty-five years. It was an image of horror. Then I learned also to see the rest of it: the small forest of drooping sunflowers, the damp evening grass dotted with the first fallen leaves of autumn, the stillness of the lake with its unmoved mute life under the surface, the walking stick that she had put aside so she could smooth the locks of hair from her husband's brow. He is dead but not yet entirely separated; they still have a moment together.

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