

YELLOW TULIPS



HAL AMES

James drove up to the main gate of the cemetery. He had tears in his eyes as he remembered how he had taken care of his mother before she died of advanced cancer. It was just a year ago that she had been buried here. He had decided to visit her grave at least once a year. Today he had taken a personal day to make the special trip.

Since she had died, his life had not been easy. His life was pretty simple. The only things he did was go to his classes at the university, to his part-time job, and then to his home every day. It was hard for him to accept that his mother was gone.

He parked his car outside of the main building and sat quietly watching the raindrops fall gently onto the glass of his windshield.

Getting out of his car slowly, he opened the umbrella he had brought with him. He looked around. He remembered the day she was buried here. The weather was the same, dark and gloomy.

He walked toward the entrance to the cemetery, a sign over the door said, ‘Greenbrier Cemetery’ and under it, a smaller sign said, ‘Florist’.

As the door opened to the flower shop, a bell sounded notifying the clerk inside that someone was coming. While James closed his umbrella, shaking the water outside of the door, a voice from behind the counter greeted him.

“Welcome to Greenbrier Flower Shop. Is there something I can get for you?” she asked.

James looked up and saw a pretty young lady standing behind a glass display case

with many flowers inside. He smiled back at her.

“I need twelve yellow tulips. Do you have any?” James inquired.

“That’s curious. You’re the second person to ask for yellow tulips today. I don’t usually get a lot of requests for tulips this time of year. Let me check,” the pretty sales clerk answered.

She went to the glass case at the end of the counter. She went over to the large refrigerated case along the wall and opened the door. A breeze of cool air rushed past her, then she commented, “There was a man in here a little while ago and he bought twelve,”

James looked around the floral shop admiring the flower arrangements and then looked of at her. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She was wearing a blue apron over a white sweater with the name of the shop written on it.

“I have ten left. Can I add another kind of flower for you?” she asked.

“Do you have any red ones? If you do, you can add them to make it an even dozen. My mom always liked an even dozen,” James requested.

“I can do that for you,” she responded.

The sales clerk took out the tulips and placed them on her table.

“Would you like anything else added? I have a special on these small white flowers. It’s just a dollar more,” the young woman offered.

“Sure, that would be nice,” James responded.

Looking at her nametag, he saw that her name was Cindy.

“So, Cindy, how long have you been working here?” James made conversation with her.

“Let me see. I think I have been here about seven months. Before that I was in college,” she answered as she placed the small white flowers gently among the tulips. “I had to quit school after two years. I needed to make some money so I took this job.”

“Do you like your work?” James continued.

“Yeah, but working in a cemetery isn’t as happy of a place as a regular florist. I hope someday to own my own shop. Then I can provide flowers for weddings, parties,

and other more exciting events,” Cindy finished after putting green paper around the flowers.

Looking up at him, she asked, “Are visiting someone special?”

“Yeah. My mom. She died last spring. I plan to visit her every year,” James replied, as he took the flowers from her and looked them over.

“These are really fresh, thank you. How much do I owe you?” he asked while taking his wallet out of his hip pocket.

“Twenty-four dollars,” she replied.

“Twenty-four dollars!?” James responded surprised at the price.

“I’m just kidding. That will be twelve dollars and fifty cents,” she smiled at James.

He chuckled.

“That’s a lot better. You had me going there for a moment,” James said relieved while counting out the money for her.

He looked into her face and suddenly remembered her, “Aren’t you Cindy Franklin?”

“Yes, how do you know me?” she asked.

“We were in Mr. Jackson’s art class together. You were a model once. I recall I had to paint you,” James responded.

“I remember that. It was really embarrassing,” Cindy answered.

After she put the money in the register she smiled and asked, “So, how did your painting turn out?”

“I think I got a pretty bad grade for that one,” he paused. “But it wasn’t because of the model though. I’ve never been very good at art. I only took the class because I needed another credit to graduate and it seemed like an easy class, but boy, was I wrong!” James laughed.

Cindy laughed as well.

For James, it was nice to have someone to laugh with. The last year had not been easy for him.

“What have you been doing since you left high school?” Cindy asked.

“Well, I went to State University and studied engineering, but when my mom got sick I had to help care for her. I’m now back in school and I’ll graduate at the end of the year,” James told her about his life.

“It was nice to see you. I hope you come by again,” Cindy said smiling at James.

“I’ll do that,” James responded, while opening his umbrella preparing himself for the rain. “I need to get these flowers to my mom’s grave before they close the gates. See yeah,”

The rain had stopped, but it was still dark from the clouds. At least it had cleared up a bit.

James walked to the gravesite. The road circled around the hundreds of tombstones that dotted the hillsides. He walked slowly reading the names on some of the stones and the dates when they lived. Some of them were from a very long time ago. He had no idea the place was so old.

His mom’s grave was on a hill very close to a large old oak tree that shaded the grass under its branches most of the day. As he approached her plot, he noticed someone kneeling at his mother’s grave.

The man was wearing a brown suit. He was an older man with thinning hair, and his black rimmed glasses were falling down his nose. James had never seen this person before.

The man was soaked from the rain. He was bent over the grave, and in front of him were a dozen yellow tulips, which were set gently on the base of the gravestone.

James paused for a moment trying to figure out who this person might be. Then he walked toward the man and stood behind him.

“May I ask who you are and what you are doing at my mother’s grave?” James said strongly to the stranger.

The man was so surprised that he fell forward. Then he turned to look at the person who had startled him.

“I’m sorry, who did you say you were?” the man questioned.

“I asked you who *you* were, and what you are doing at my mother’s grave. And while you’re at it, why did you bring her yellow tulips?” James was serious.

The man got onto his knees and then stood up, brushing the mud off his pants. He wasn’t very tall and rather thin.

“You gave me quite a fright young man. Did you say this is your mother?” the man asked.

“Yes, and what are you doing here?” James demanded.

“My name is Will Randall. I knew your mother many years ago. I only found out recently that she had died. I came to give my respects,” Will explained.

“You knew my mother?” James was surprised. “She never mentioned you.”

“I’m not surprised. Things didn’t go so well the last time I saw her; we never spoke again,” Will told James.

“Let’s go over there,” he said, as he pointed to a cement bench close to the tree. “Let me tell you a story. You might enjoy it,” the man said as he walked toward the bench.

James set his flowers on his mother’s grave and blew a kiss to her.

He said to her, “I’ll be right back, mom. I’ve got a lot to tell you.”

James followed the man to the bench. He was very curious about what Will had to say to him.

Will began to tell the story, “Well, so, it was like this.....

“It was 1971 and I was on my way to attend State College. I had come from California to attend the school to study to be a teacher. My mother had driven me to the school on the first day of registration. She had many friends in the city because we had lived there when I was young, so she joined me on my first day at the school.

“As we approached the school, a car pulled in front of us. As it did, I noticed a girl sitting in the back seat singing to a song on the radio.

“I noticed her and watched her as the car went past. She never saw me.

“I said to my mother, ‘Mom, go faster. I saw a pretty girl in that car,’ I begged my mother.

“She just ignored my request and drove the same speed, but when we got to the entrance of the school, to my surprise, the car with the girl in it turned into the parking lot of the college ahead of us. When her car stopped, the girl got out.

“She had on a green skirt and a yellow blouse. She had shoulder length brown hair and a smile that seemed to go from ear to ear. I wasn’t able to take my eyes off her.

“I turned to my mother and said, ‘I’m gonna get to know that girl.’

“My mother just laughed.

“We passed the girl’s car, and then we parked in the next lot in front of the building where I was going to live while at the university.

“It took about an hour to get all of my things out of the car and up to my room. I met my new roommates and the student advisor. Once all of that was done, it was time for dinner.

“All of the parents were invited to join the new students for dinner. It turned out the dining hall was just a short walk from my dormitory.

“My mom and I got into line and chose the food we wanted. The first meal was free which made my mom very happy, and the food was good.

“When we sat down, to my surprise, the girl in the yellow blouse was sitting across from me. I could not take my eyes off her. She was a little shy, but she seemed to like the attention.

“I tried to talk to her, but the wrong words kept coming out. I felt foolish and my roommates kept teasing me.

“My mom just laughed.

“The girl’s parents looked concerned.”

James laughed at the story.

Will continued his story, “After dinner, I went to the mailboxes to get my papers for the orientation the next day. While I was looking through the materials which

included my schedule.

“While I was doing this, the girl went to her box and did the same thing. It took some doing, but I got up the courage to talk to her.

“I turned and walked over to her. I started by introducing myself, ‘Hi, my name is Will. I’m new here, what about you?’

“As she put out her hand to shake mine, she said, ‘Hi, I’m Brenda. I noticed you during dinner. Do you always act like that?’

“I responded, ‘Actually, I saw you in your car when you passed by us on the road leading to the campus. Then I noticed you in the parking lot. To tell you the truth, I was really surprised to see you sitting across from me at dinner. I think it’s karma or something,’ I laughed.

“She then said to me, ‘In your dreams, pal,’ while laughing at me. ‘We’ll see. We’ll see what karma *really* is.’ and then, she walked off.”

James spoke up. “Doesn’t sound like you were getting anywhere fast with her. Did you give up?”

Will laughed and answered, “Nope, I kept trying and trying.

“After she walked away, I leaned up against the wall and folded my arms.

“I thought to myself, ‘How am I going to impress Brenda?’

“I kept thinking of ways in my mind.

“Two days later we had a meeting of all the first-year students in the main auditorium. I saw Brenda and sat behind her. All during the presentation I asked her questions like: ‘Where are you from? Do you like to go to the movies? Have you ever been to the circus? How many brothers do you have?’

“She tried to ignore me, but I wasn’t going to give up.

“The next day, we passed each other on the way to class. I said, ‘Hi Brenda,’ but she just ignored me again. I could see the smile on her face, so I knew I was beginning to get to her.

“For the entire first semester, I followed her almost everywhere she went. I was her

shadow. Twice she asked her friends to talk to me and ask me to stop bothering her, but it didn't work.

“She even told people that I was stalking her.

“During Christmas break I went home to California to see my family. I was gone for four weeks, and when I returned to the school I couldn't find Brenda. No one knew where she was. One of her friends told me she had transferred to another university. I didn't know what to think.

“So, I decided to start dating other girls. They were nice, but just not the same as Brenda.

“It was not easy. Most of the time the girls would ask me why I wasn't with Brenda because they knew that I had been chasing her.

“I told them she was gone and now I had to start over.

“Two weeks later, Brenda returned to school.

“I ran up to her and asked, ‘Where have you been? People said you transferred to another school.’

“She tried to ignore me, but when she realized that it was not going to work this time, she turned to me and answered, ‘I went to Florida for my grandparent's fiftieth anniversary. Who told you I wasn't coming back?’

“I answered, ‘That would be Maggie.’

“She looked upset.

“Then she said, ‘She knew I was coming back. I think she only told you that because I don't want you following me anymore!’

“I said to her, ‘If it means anything to you, I'm glad your back.’

“She turned and walked away.

James stopped him for a moment and asked, “Didn't you get the message that she wasn't interested in you?”

“Nope, I had a goal in mind and when I set my mind to do something, I don't give up very easily.

“Now I knew I had a lot of work to do, so I decided to continue to date other girls to see if I could make her jealous. It seemed to be working, and then my whole plan fell apart.

“One of the girls I was dating realized what I was doing and told Brenda. Then the whole thing backfired. Now she really hated me.”

James interrupted, “So how did you get her, or did you?”

“Oh, I got her alright, but it took a long time.

“For the rest of the semester things didn’t get any better. She kept putting me off.

“During the summer, I took a job working with kids in a camp. Brenda had signed up to work at the camp, so I signed up too. When she realized I was also going to be there, she wanted to back out, but the owner wouldn’t let her.

“She kept her distance and avoided me for most of the summer. I was used to it. Whenever I got a chance to talk to her, I made the most of it.

“One night, we were sitting at the campfire singing songs, when it began to rain. I had an umbrella with me so I offered it to Brenda. She was surprised, but she took it and ran to her cabin.

“The next day she returned the umbrella to me.

“She said, ‘That was nice of you. Thank you.’

“Then she walked away.

“That evening we went on a long walk in the woods. I was at the back of the line making sure that none of the kids got lost.

“It got very dark. Somehow, the people at the front of our group became separated from the rest of the campers and went the wrong way. Brenda was with the kids in the front of our group. They were talking and laughing when we realized that we were lost. Brenda started to scream for help.

“I ran up to her and told her it was going to be alright.

“We walked for a while trying to find our way back when ahead of us we saw a house. The owners answered the door we asked to use their phone to call the camp to let

them know where we were and that we were safe.

“The camp sent a small bus to get us. I ended up sitting next to Brenda. To my surprise, she took my hand and held it tightly. I knew better than to say anything. I think she had been very afraid.

“When we got back to the camp, Brenda and I were taken into the office where they asked us what had happened.

“I told them it was my fault. I wasn’t paying attention, and the kids in my group went the wrong way.

“They told me I was going to pay them one week’s salary for my mistake.

“After the meeting, Brenda thanked me for taking the responsibility for the mess-up.

“She leaned forward and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

“She said, ‘You’re pretty nice after all.’

“From then on we did a lot of things together. She was more fun than I could have ever dreamed. I was falling deeper in love. I knew it would happen, eventually.

“When we returned to school, the other students were shocked. They all thought we would never be together.

“We continued to date until graduation. While I was making plans for us to get married, Brenda had bigger plans. She wanted to see the world and experience many things before she settled down.

“After graduation, she left for Europe and was gone for almost a year.

“During that time, I met another girl at my workplace. We began to see each other, and then she fell in love with me. This caused me big problems.

“When Brenda returned from Europe, I told her the story. She became very angry with me and told me she never wanted to see me again.

“That was the last time I saw her. She moved away and I never knew where she went or what happened to her. I always regretted it.

“Here’s some advice. If love ever comes your way, don’t mess it up. Give love a

chance. If you've got an opportunity to find it, go after it. Don't do what I did. I gave up on the best thing that ever happened to me. I didn't go after her."

Will paused and looked toward the tombstone in front of us.

"It was nice to meet you James. It was nice remembering that part of my life. No one has been as important to me as her.

"I hope we meet again."

Will stood up and walked away, whistling a song, with his hands in his pockets.

James just stood there on the hill under the tree. First watching Will walk away and then at his mother's stone with the flowers resting under it. He thought about what Will had said. He was wasting his life sitting at home grieving for his mother. He needed to get a life.

He went to his mother's grave, and he said to her, "I just met a man who you knew. He gave me some very good advice. I'm glad you had someone like him in your life.

"Now it is time for me to find my way in my life. I need to make some changes.

"I love you mom. I'll come and talk to you next year."

It began to rain again so James put his umbrella up. He walked slowly out of the graveyard to where his car was parked. As he passed the entrance to the flower shop, he paused. He looked inside and saw Cindy preparing to close for the day.

The bell on the door chimed as James walked in.

Cindy looked up at him with a smile.

"So, how did it go?" she asked.

"It went very well." James replied.

He paused for a moment and then spoke up, "May I ask you a question?"

"Sure, what is it?" Cindy responded.

James paused again, a little hesitant, and then asked the question, "Would you like to get a cup of coffee with me?"