

## The Little Sunflower

There was once a little Sunflower that grew alone out of the soft soil and began to bloom. And the Gardener remarked, "What a beautiful little Sunflower! She is perfect for my garden."

As the little Sunflower grew and grew, she wondered where she belonged in the world. She had been told all her life by the Gardener that she was beautiful, but she felt so alone. So, she decided to visit the other flowers to try and find her place in the world.

First, she visited the carnations. She thought they were so pretty, and everyone loved them. However, the little Sunflower was mistaken - while it is true that carnations are pretty and popular, she thought they were actually roses.

The little Sunflower went up to the carnations to make friends, but they laughed at her. She was yellow, and they were red; she had a thick, fuzzy stem, while theirs were slender and smooth; and she had a big, brown face, which they thought was funny looking. They did not want to be friends with someone so different from them.

The little Sunflower felt the sting of rejection - she couldn't help that she looked the way she looked! And she was confused because the Gardener told her she was beautiful! The Gardener would never lie to her.

Nevertheless, the little Sunflower wanted to fit in. So, she found some red paint and painted her petals bright red. Now they'll accept me, she thought. But the carnations laughed at her even more because she was just a red-painted Sunflower. The little Sunflower realized she would never fit in with the carnations.

Night fell, and the little Sunflower wept. She asked the Gardener, "Why did the roses not like me?"

The Gardener replied, "My sweet little Sunflower, those were not roses. They wanted to be roses, just like you wanted to be them. But they are carnations, and you are a beautiful Sunflower who is perfect in my garden. You do not need to be anything but what you are." The sun rose, and the little Sunflower once again stood tall.

But the little Sunflower was still lonely and wanted to make friends. So, she found the daisies, who looked more like her. They thought the little Sunflower was so beautiful, much more beautiful than they were! So, they welcomed the little Sunflower happily. The little Sunflower loved the attention - she loved feeling welcome and admired by the daisies. But as time passed, the little Sunflower grew larger, and was not so little anymore. She soon felt too big for the daisies, and they parted ways.

Night fell, and the Sunflower hung her head. She enjoyed her time with the daisies, but she had outgrown them. She asked the Gardener, "Why do I feel this way?"

The Gardener replied, "My sweet Sunflower, I know you felt comfortable with the daisies because you looked similar to them were admired by them, but you grew, and they did not. Sometimes, we grow and change, and we do not grow the same way as others. You will find your place in my garden, I promise." The sun rose, and the Sunflower once again stood tall.

The Sunflower still wanted to find her place in the garden, so she went to the tulips. She and the tulips were both yellow, and although they looked rather different otherwise, they accepted her as part of their group. The Sunflower thought they were very elegant, and the tulips liked the Sunflower's confidence in the sunshine. Soon, night fell, and the Sunflower shrank away from the sun. The tulips did not like this. They wanted the Sunflower to be fun and confident all the time! When the sun rose, the Sunflower stood tall, and the tulips were glad she was back to normal.

But again, night fell, and again, the Sunflower turned her face to the ground. The tulips soon grew frustrated with the Sunflower for not always being fun. They told her they wanted her to be confident and happy all the time. The sun rose, and so did the Sunflower. The tulips were pleased with this. As the sun

began to set, the tulips began to see the Sunflower starting to wilt. They were tired of this and grew angry that the Sunflower would not stand tall like they wanted. So, they asked her to leave.

Night fell, and the Sunflower cried. She asked the Gardener, "Why were they angry with me?"

The Gardener responded, "Oh dear Sunflower, every flower is different. Some flowers must be planted only once and will bloom each year; other flowers must die and be replanted every year anew. You are special, Sunflower, because you stand tall and then recede with the sun - that is why you are called a sunflower. The tulips did not understand this. They wanted you to be something you are not. You are beautiful and perfect exactly as you are. You will find your place in the garden soon." The sun rose, and once again the sunflower stood tall.

But the Sunflower was discouraged. Maybe the garden isn't for me, she thought. So, she decided to leave the garden and try to find flowers elsewhere to be friends with. She came upon a field of wildflowers, free and full of adventure. They were all different types of flowers, and some had fuzzy stems like her own. They welcomed her and taught her how to dance in the breeze. They did not mind that she looked sad when night fell. Everyone was welcome in the field. The Sunflower loved feeling free among the wildflowers. But the Sunflower soon realized that the field was not the place for her. Some of the wildflowers were not very nice to each other, choking and stifling each other's growth. Others came and left too quickly for the Sunflower to become friends with. She missed the garden, and soon returned.

Night fell, and the Sunflower grew quiet. She asked the Gardener, "Are you sure I belong in the garden?"

The Gardener answered, "Yes, my beautiful Sunflower. I know that sunflowers can grow well in fields, but not all fields are the same. The field you visited was full of lovely wildflowers, but you did not fit in well with them. You saw that some flowers will destroy others, and you felt the hurt when other wildflowers moved on too soon. I missed you when you were gone; you are so perfect for my garden. Please stay. You will find your place." The sun rose, and once again the Sunflower stood tall.

Time passed, and the Sunflower decided to give up trying to find friends for a while. Night would fall, the sun would rise, and the Sunflower continued to rise with it. Although she was alone, she found solace in it. But after some time, loneliness set in once again. The winter frost was coming, and she still had not found her place in the world.

One day as she basked alone in the sun, the Gardener came to her. "Sunflower," she said, "You are more beautiful than you were when you were little. And you have learned so much about the world. You have learned that you are beautiful just the way you are. You have learned that sometimes, people grow in different ways. You have learned that your differences make you special. You saw that some flowers are not good for one another. And you learned how to be alone when it is best. Most flowers never learn as much as you have.

"But now, sweet Sunflower, the winter is coming. The days are getting shorter, the sun is not as bright as it once was, and soon, it will be too cold for you. I have been thinking a lot about you, my dear, and I believe I have found the perfect place for you."

The Sunflower was overjoyed. "Where is this place, Gardener? Where in the garden do I belong?"

The Gardener replied, "I do not think you belong in the garden at all. I think your place is somewhere else. I think you'll like it."

The Gardener tenderly carried the Sunflower out of the garden, and into her home. She lovingly washed the soft soil from her fuzzy stem. Then she carefully put her into a vase with many flowers the Sunflower did not recognize.

"Sunflower, these are other flowers that do not grow in my garden. There are orange lilies and roses and alstroemerias. I think you will all be perfect for each other and make my home more beautiful than any garden."

The Sunflower looked at her new companions. They were the radiant colors of the sunset - red and orange and yellow - and they all smelled so wonderful! The flowers were all very kind to each other, radiating love and happiness and making the Gardener's home beautiful. As the first cold snap came, the flowers in the vase stayed nice and warm. They saw the Gardener's face every day as she stopped to smell them and admire their beauty as a bouquet.

And as her petals fell and her stem turned down, the Sunflower realized she never belonged in the garden at all. The little Sunflower was happy she had finally found her place in the world.