



# Sweet Corn

By Pamela S. Brown

"Damn snapdragons," she mutters to no one in particular as she bends over to pinch their tiny heads. They keep multiplying, branching out. They don't stand in neat little lines anymore; they clump together like frivolous little bouquets.

She hates bouquets. Always has. Even when she and Elmer were courting, 60 years ago, she hated them. "Miserable mish-mosh, they are." When they were married she carried a single white rose. None of that mixed-up overgrown foolishness.

"Bessie! Hello! Bessie!" Oh no, she frowns, here comes Mrs. Chavitz. Thunk, thunk, thunk, dragging her bad leg behind her and tap-tap-tapping with that cane.

"Good afternoon, Myrtle."

"Good day, Bessie. I see you've been gardening."

No, Myrtle, I've been digging for buried treasure, she thinks. "Yes, well, when the sun shines I—"

"Say, did you hear about Gert? I mean Ralph, Gert's husband?"

Bessie begins snapping the rose bushes with big rusty shears. She doesn't wear any gloves — they make her hands all sweaty. "No, Myrtle."

"He took sick at the K-Mart and passed on during a blue light special! And Gert, well, poor Gert was so shocked she went out and got in the car and drove home. And Gert's blind in her left eye, on account of that cataract," she finishes breathlessly. ▶

Illustration by Mike Tenyson Smith

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"You don't say," Bessie exclaims, feigning excitement. She wonders what the blue light special was. Last time she was at K-Mart they had men's socks, six pairs for a dollar. 'Course, Elmer was alive then.

"It's the God's truth. Fell over and died." She accepts the rose that Bessie

Myrtle shudders. "Maybe for you it is, but I still don't like to think about it." She hangs the cane on the back of a wooden chair and eases herself down. "Sure would be nice to have a cup of tea." She takes a wrinkled handkerchief from her green floral tent dress and mops her forehead.



cuts for her, all dewy pink with yellow tips. She sniffs it carefully. "You know, Bess, this flower doesn't smell at all."

"Maybe your nose is worn out." That happens when you get old.

"I suppose," Myrtle says vaguely.

Bessie ignores her, pruning swiftly and silently. Finally satisfied, she turns to her guest. "I don't know when I've seen such a year."

"I know," Myrtle continues for her, "first Joe, then Elmer, then Florence, and then my Homer. And now Ralph. My, my. I do suppose the good Lord knows best." She crosses herself.

"I wonder who'll be next," Bessie ventures.

"Why, Bess Horton! That's dreadfully morbid."

"Oh, I don't think so. We've all got to go eventually." Somehow she enjoys upsetting Myrtle this way. Ever since Homer died in April, Myrtle has been coming over every afternoon. She can't tend the garden in peace anymore.

"Well Bessie, of course I know that, but it doesn't do a person any good to dwell on it."

"Why not?" Bessie challenges, opening the back door and helping her friend up the concrete steps. "It's a fact of life."

Bessie sets out two plastic cups. Ever since her stroke, Myrtle always drops things and Bessie doesn't feel like cleaning up any more broken glass. She pours the chilled tea and puts the pitcher back in the icebox. She adds two envelopes of Sugar Twin to each cup, on account of Myrtle's diabetes and her own growing waistline. "Don't get fat after I die, Elmer warned her. She isn't fat, really. She just needs to get out and exercise more. Ride the bicycle. But a tandem isn't much fun alone."

"So when's the funeral?" she asks, already mulling over what to wear. Perhaps the brown — it's so sensible, and it doesn't need ironing.

"That's the worst thing, Bessie. Gert says there won't be any service. Can you imagine? I never heard of such a thing."

"Oh, I don't know. Seems like a waste of money to me," Bessie comments, stirring her tea.

"But she's having him cremated, Bess. Not even a proper burial. I gave Homer a right proper service when he passed. I go to the cemetery once a week. That's a wife's duty."

"Oh, duty-schmooty. What good is it, really, hiding a body in a wooden box so the living can go to weep and wail over

it? And those silly gravestones: 'Here Lies So-and-So, He Was a Good Man.' Like they'd really write, 'Here Lies the Town Drunk, He Beat His Wife and Always Stunk.' What a big waste of money."

"I don't know, Bessie. It just doesn't seem right. I've pre-arranged for mine, you know, down at the Willow Rest Home. That way after I'm gone I won't have to worry about it."

"Well of course not," Bessie points out, "you'll be dead!" Sometimes Myrtle is so dense; she knows she ought to be kind, but she can't help it.

"Mrs. Horton, you are just horrible. Honestly!" She struggles to her feet, teetering on her cane. "I'll be going now. Thank you for the tea, and the flower."

Bessie watches Myrtle fight to open the door and clump-clump-clump down the stairs. A small smile is frozen on her face, partly from satisfaction and partly because she knows that Mr. Fellini from the bakery will be by with her crusty rolls in half an hour. Thank God she still has all her teeth.

Oh, no, the damn phone. Leave me be, she thinks. I don't want to sit for a free portrait. Who would look at it? Myrtle had one done and placed it at Homer's grave. The vandals stole it and Myrtle cried for three days.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Grandma!"

"I am not your grandmother."

"Oh, Mom, come on. You're a grandma now. It's okay for me to call you that."

"It is okay for Thomas and Allison to call me Grandma. It is not okay for you. Your grandmother is dead."

"Oh, Mom, all right. Say, the reason I called —"

"How are they?"

"Who?"

"My grandchildren."

"They're fine, Mother, but —"

"Well, good. And how is that wretched beau of yours? What's his name? Egbert? Edsel?"

"Ethan, Mother, and he's not wretched. I —"

"Well why won't he marry you then? Two children and a nice house and obviously he's sleeping in your bed and doing who knows what to you every night."

"Mother! What Ethan and I do in bed is none of your business. We don't need to be married. Our commitment is stronger because we trust each other."

"Is that why you called me crying last summer to say that Ethan was carrying on with some bimbo in his office?"

"Mother, that was a long time ago."  
"Well," she sniffs.  
"Anyway, Mom, I called to tell you something exciting."

"What now?"  
"I'm pregnant."

She should say something like, "Well, isn't that nice," but she simply doesn't feel like it.

"Come on, Mother, you know we've been trying for two years. Aren't you happy for me?"

Bessie giggles. "Seems to me there's only one way to get pregnant. And in my day, we didn't treat it as a chore. A man and a woman ought to treat sex like a gift from God, instead of always expecting it to bring you something. You two just had Allison, anyway."

"Mother, I've never heard you talk like this. Is something wrong?"

"Good heavens, girl, no. I'm not a virgin, you know."

"Well obviously, Mother, but —"

"Well, what else did you have to tell me?"

"It's a boy. I'm due in January."

"What do you mean, it's a boy? Did you consult a psychic? I never went for that sort of stuff."

"I had ultrasound."

"That was stupid." Honestly. She saw it on television once, that young snip Connie Chung or someone, watching some woman with a big fat naked belly all covered with grease. They stuck some sort of contraption on her, looked like an electric razor, then bzz-bzz and the other machine made a black-and-white picture of a baby. Bessie knows that picture was a fake. You can't see inside anyone's belly.

"My doctor wanted to make sure the baby was healthy."

"Why would you do that? Are you on drugs?" Kate acts like such a floozy, and Ethan, well Ethan is a Democrat. She knows all about Democrats.

"No, Mother. Hang on a second, Allison wants to say hello."

"Bla ga ba ba!"

"Hello, Allison, I haven't the faintest idea what to say to you. You don't understand anything. You're just a silly child."

"Mum mum mum!"

"No, I'm not your mom. You and your mom seem to have mixed up your roles. Well, that's not surprising. Poor little lamb, being raised in a house full of kooks."

"Bla bla poo mum!"

"Mom, I've got to go. Allison has to go potty."

"Goodbye, then."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Take the baby to the toilet."

She hangs up. Kate would be far better off without those two brats. She was going to dental school when she met Ethan and got pregnant. Dropped out, too. Needed time to find herself. Bessie knows the truth about that garbage.

She changes into a pink gingham shift. "I will go barefoot," she decides out loud.

Oh no, not again. "Hello, what do you want now?"

"Mrs. Horton? This is Vinnie Fellini, from the bakery." She loves how he says Mrs. — more like Miz but not at all like that new-fangled women's lib Ms. stuff.

"Yes?" He never calls first. He reminds her of Elmer when he was young.

"I'm afraid there's been a mix-up. I didn't hold your rolls. Could I bring you a crusty loaf instead?"

She contemplates this. She supposes it will be all right, even good for a change. What the hell. "Very well, then."

"Sliced?"

"No, Mr. Fellini, I can still manage my bread knife." Stupid young man, probably thinks she ought to be locked up in a nursing home. Just because she's 78. Next thing you know they'll come and take all her forks.

She tidies the kitchen, setting a place for herself. She stares out the window at the other houses on her street. They all look the same, a parade of pastel Cape Cods with giant oaks out front. Before he died Elmer wanted to move to Florida. Palm trees there. And enormous cockroaches.

"Mrs. Horton, I'm here!" Rap, rap, rap. That was fast. Mr. Fellini's face peers through the wire mesh of the screen door. She sees that his eyes are tired — probably from staying up all night with that new baby. He is brandishing a baguette, and a brown paper grocery sack. Not one of those silly white plastic things with no use whatsoever, but paper. Good solid paper.

"Indeed," Bessie remarks, unhooking the latch. "I see you've failed to bring me a proper loaf."

"I, uh, we, uh —"

"Never mind, young man. Bread is bread. Unless it's rye. Hate those damn seeds. What good are they? Seeds are for birds."

He ponders this for a minute. "But some seeds are good."

"Oh, God, boy, they're all good. Listen, Mr. Fellini, just because this old lady says she doesn't like something ▶



### A matter of character

"Strong characters make strong stories," the judge noted of Pamela S. Brown's winning work, "Sweet Corn."

"I found her delineation of Bessie to be memorable and three-dimensional," the judge said. "I was also impressed by her ability to render a senior citizen, a widow, both feisty and vulnerable — in what is a poignant story — without resorting to stereotypical soupiness. The story has bite along with its sentiment."

Brown is a junior at Ohio State who stumbled onto fiction writing. "I took [a creative writing course] because it fit my schedule," she said.

It also fits her talents. Last year, the first short story she ever wrote placed second in the English department's fiction contest. "I was shocked it placed at all. The award gave me a lot of courage."

Brown says the story "Sweet Corn" was "just there; it needed to be written. These stories just appear in my head."

She hopes readers will see in it the incredible richness of life. "We stereotype the elderly and take them for granted," she said. "We think we know what the elderly are supposed to be like; it delights me when they're not."

Brown writes because "It's what I'm meant to do."