



Dear Cozy Readers:

If you're anything like me, May doesn't arrive quietly—it kind of kicks the door open, lets in a warm breeze, and says, “Hey... remember fun? Yeah, we're doing that again.”

I swear there's a very specific smell to early summer. Not quite sunscreen, not quite cut grass, the sweet fragrance of spring flowers and early summer blooms. The air is filled with pollen swirling on the breeze from trees coming to life after a cold winter nap. For those of us who suffer from allergies, it means sneezing and running noses along with pockets filled with scraps of Kleenex. However, I also fondly recall the longer days and warmer temperatures meant you could stay outside until the streetlights flickered on, and no one worried or checked your screen time and emails because, well... there were no screens to check when I was a kid.

The other day I caught myself pausing mid-afternoon, just watching the sunlight stretch across the yard, and it hit me: this is *exactly* how it used to look when I was a kid. Same golden glow. Same long shadows. Same feeling that something good was about to happen, even if you had no idea what.

Back then, plans were optional or nonexistent. If someone said, “What are we doing today?” the correct answer was always, “I don't know... let's go outside and see.”

And somehow, that was enough.

We'd wander into the yard, maybe with a half-melted popsicle dripping down our wrists, and before long, someone would yell, “TAG—you're it!” and suddenly it was chaos. Absolute, glorious chaos.

Running barefoot through the grass or dodging behind trees like they were strategic military cover. And always there was that one kid who always took it *way* too seriously—like this was Olympic-level tag and scouts were watching.

“NO TAG BACKS!” someone would shout.

“THAT DOESN'T COUNT!” someone else would argue.

And best of all, was Red Rover. Get a group of neighborhood kids together and we always started up the contact sport disguised as a safe children's game.

"Red Rover, Red Rover, send Nancy right over!"

First of all—why was it always me? Every time. Like the opposing team had a personal vendetta.

I'd stand there for a second, sizing up the human chain like, *Okay... weak link, weak link... definitely going for Tommy. Tommy looks like he just had a big supper.*

And then run! Full speed. No hesitation. Arms pumping, and hair flying.

Sometimes I broke through like a hero returning from battle. Other times ... I bounced off like a cartoon character and had to pretend that was part of the plan.

"Oh yeah, I meant to join this side."

Sure I did.

Somehow, no matter how many times you played, it never got old. Because the point wasn't winning—it was being outside together, laughing so hard you couldn't breathe.

That's the memory that sticks with me the most.

Not the games themselves, but the *noise* of it all. The laughter, the shouting, the occasional dramatic "I'm telling your mom!" echoing across the neighborhood like a warning siren no one actually respected.

And then—just when you thought the day couldn't get any better—twilight would roll in.

That soft, blue hour where everything slows down a little. The heat fades, the air gets lighter, and suddenly someone whispers, "Hey... fireflies."

All of a sudden, the mission changes.

Out come the mason jars. (Or let's be honest—whatever container you could find that wouldn't immediately get you in trouble.)

You'd creep through the yard like tiny, overly enthusiastic wildlife photographers.

"There! Did you see it?!"

"No, over there, by the fence!"

And then you'd catch one. That tiny blink of light, glowing in your hand like you'd just captured a piece of the sky itself.

For a moment, everything got quiet.

You'd hold the jar up, watching those little flickers pulse in the dark, completely mesmerized. Like you'd stumbled onto something magical that adults had somehow forgotten about.

Which, honestly... maybe back then adults had and now, sadly, we have.

Because somewhere along the way, we traded fireflies for notifications. We swapped running through the yard for scrolling through updates. And while I'm not here to declare war on modern life

(I like my air conditioning way too much for that and admit to spending too many hours on the computer), I do think we've lost a little something in the exchange. That easy, unstructured joy.

The kind that didn't need a plan, a reservation, or a password.

Just a yard, a few friends, and enough daylight to make something happen.

And maybe that's why May and the first patriotic holiday feels so nostalgic.

Memorial Day wasn't just about ceremonies and cookouts. It was the unofficial kickoff to summer and everything good. The beginning of late nights, backyard games, and that delicious sense that summer stretched on forever.

There was always a parade in town with a school band to watch. The radio carried the famous Indianapolis 500 Race, and we'd listen to the roar of engines and cheers of spectators for hours as if we could see the action through the radio transmission.

More laughter, running, and more staying out just a little too late and hoping nobody noticed. Knowing the fun of the holiday meant the school term would end soon and the excitement and fun of 4th of July and fireworks was just around the corner.

Even now, all these years later, that feeling still sneaks up on me.

It's in the way the air changes. The way people linger outside a little longer. The way conversations seem easier, lighter—like everyone collectively decided to loosen their grip on whatever was stressing them out back in February.

I caught myself the other evening, standing in the yard as the sun dipped low, and I had this sudden, ridiculous urge to catch one of those lightning bugs and watch it glow.

Of course I didn't—because, you know, adulthood and neighbors watching—but the *feeling* was there. That same spark of fascination.

That same pull toward something simple and joyful and just a little bit carefree.

So maybe that's the assignment this May.

Not a full lifestyle overhaul. Not some grand “return to childhood” manifesto.

Just... small moments.

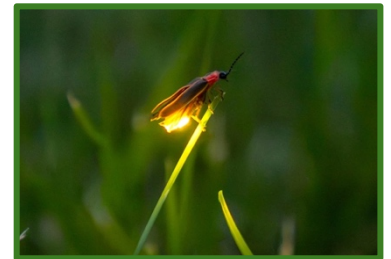
Stay outside a little longer than usual.

Watch the sunset instead of the clock.

If you see a firefly, don't just walk past it—pause. Appreciate it. Maybe even try to catch it (gracefully, if possible).

And if someone yells, “Tag! You're it!”

Well... you know what to do.



CROSS OVER NOVEL – MY CURRENT PROJECT:

What's better than a cozy mystery? How about two favorite cozy mysteries combined into one new story? Meredith and Doug Gardner are driving down from Meadowood, Ohio to accompany their oldest son Johnny to Charlottesville, VA to tour the university and to interview for an elite scholarship. Naturally, the perfect place to stay during their trip is the Magnolia Blossom Inn hosted by Maddie Brooke.

Do you see a trend here? Merry will need Maddie and Grannie's help when her son Johnny is detained as a person of interest for the murder of the very same professor that interviewed him earlier in the day. There's blood on Johnny's sleeve that matches the blood on a baseball bat and the professor's head wound.

Sheriff Doug Gardner goes toe to toe with Detective Allen Crawford of the Charlottesville police, even though he is far away from his own jurisdiction. The clues are there, but can the men find them? Or will it take Maddie and Merry with their gal power to unravel the corruption and greed discovered under-wraps in the halls of the university?

My latest cozy mystery project will combine the characters of my two favorite series in a title tentatively called: "***Merry & Maddie: Admission to Murder***" – a Maddie Brooke Mystery. I'm hoping to finish writing and editing for a July release in time for unveiling during the VA Highland's Festival and the Readers & Writers Day at the end of the month. I haven't finalized the cover yet, open to suggestions on it. Maybe something depicting the school and magnolias with, of course, Luke standing guard.

Keep watching my social media for updates on this next exciting tale.



MAY 2026 TASTY RECIPE:

BANANA STREUSEL BREAD

From the Martha Stewart Collection

Ingredients:

Streusel

- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, room temperature, plus more for pan
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup unbleached all-purpose flour
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup packed light-brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon kosher salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped pecans

Cake

- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups unbleached all-purpose flour
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon baking soda
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 stick unsalted butter, melted
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 2 large eggs, room temperature
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup buttermilk
- 3 very ripe bananas, mashed until smooth (1 cup)

Directions

1. Streusel

Preheat oven to 350 degrees with a rack in lower third. Butter a 9-by-5-inch loaf pan; line with parchment, leaving a 1-inch overhang on long sides. In a bowl, combine flour, brown sugar, cinnamon, and salt. Stir in butter and pecans until small clumps form and mixture is evenly moistened. (Streusel can be made ahead and refrigerated, covered, up to 3 days.)

2. Cake

- a) In a large bowl, whisk together flour, baking soda, and salt. In another bowl, whisk together butter, granulated sugar, eggs, vanilla, and buttermilk; stir in bananas. Make a well in flour mixture and pour banana mixture in. Stir together until just combined (do not overmix). Spoon half of batter into prepared pan. Sprinkle half of streusel evenly over batter. Add remaining batter, then sprinkle remaining streusel evenly over top.
- b) Bake until golden brown and a tester inserted in center comes out clean, about 1 hour, 20 minutes. (If top is browning too quickly, tent with foil.) Let cool in pan 20 minutes, then transfer using parchment to a wire rack. Let cool completely before serving.

