

# Dandelions

*It was a pristine high school. The bushes neatly pruned and grass mowed. When you entered, you would see the sparkling tile floors and neat lockers and wooden doors along the walls. However, it was currently lunchtime and if you walked into the cafeteria, you'd find a little surprise. Sprawled on the floor, she made no attempt to move. Planting her face in the puddle of expired milk was a better option than facing the fingers, flashes, and laughter that surrounded her. If she had to, she could stay like this for the whole day if it would mean they left her alone. Yet, even this futile refuge was denied. Her classmates dragged her up onto her knees, so her hair hung, dripping the rancid liquid onto her colorful white uniform. Her eyes scanned the ground, catching the shoes of a teacher. The typical brown, leather shoes among the various tennis shoes. They only stopped for a few seconds before walking away. It was only when the bell rang that the crowd finally dispersed, and the girl could make her way to the restroom. It wouldn't matter if she came late to class. After all, none of the faculty paid her any attention. They averted their gaze, ignoring the scars and stains that adorned her skin and clothes. Her hands splashed the gelid water onto her blank face, bringing redness back to her pale skin. She fixed her oversized clothes with practiced motions, then squeezed out a tight smile onto her face in the bathroom mirror. It remained plastered on her face as she returned to class.*

#

As the rumbling sounded in the distance, the girl tossed and turned under the thin covers. Occasionally, she would awaken from the chattering of her teeth. When she finally believed that sleep would finally transport her back to a land of fantasy, her eyes burst open. Her face became illuminated by a flash of lightning before diving back into the shadows. Soft snores from her roommates drifted to her ears. Outside the room, there was the creaking of floorboards, and she attempted to allocate it to a member of the orphanage. But perhaps it was just an illusion, a mistake. Questions began to inundate all her thoughts. *Are you back? How was your journey?* Laughter sounded in and out as several voices mingled incoherently. Ghostly figures seemed to approach her, and she held out her hands, willing to be taken away.

Suddenly, her disorientated state broke. *I'm still searching for others, there are still people I want and need to meet.* She couldn't wait anymore. She had to go back, because maybe, maybe they would be there. Waiting. Getting off the cot, she frantically searched for a ragged jacket that did not bear the stains of food and drinks. She slid one off the hanger and slipped it on before dashing through the hallways and down the stairs, entering the kitchen. Stuffing a roll into her mouth and snatching an apple, crackers, and a bottle of water, she prepared to sneak back out. However, the door to the dining hall was closed, obstructing her escape. Her mouth quickly formed unutterable words before she tiptoed over to the door. Ever since she had lived in this building, she had struggled to open that one door without the hinges shrieking in agony.

Cautiously, she turned the handle and pushed slightly. Silence. She pushed a little more until there was a crack just big enough for her to slip out. Before she could move her feet, however, a deafening screech sounded from the hinges. She became a statue, listening for any signs of movement from the bedrooms above her. Just as she thought she had succeeded, her ears twitched.

"Who's there?"

It was the director. Lightning flashed and thunder announced its presence once again.

"Leah? Is that you?"

Leah kept silent, beginning to ease through the sliver of space between the door frame and door.

"Leah?"

The creaking of floorboards confirmed the girl's suspicions. She bolted from the dining hall to the main entrance and slid on a pair of frayed sneakers. Throwing a look over her shoulder, she shoved the main entrance doors open and burst into the ruthless streets. She began to run.

#

The dry thunderstorm continued to rumble in the distance as Leah walked under the streetlights, that soon gave way to the open sky full of storm clouds. From the streets to the hills. . .over the hills to the woods. . .past the woods and across the lake. It had only taken her a day this time. When the sun finally decided to greet her once again, she had stopped at her destination. Thousands of dandelion seeds rose to dance around her before returning to their clock. They were there to greet her. To welcome her. For once again, she was back. To watch. To reminisce.

#

In a barren landscape lies a small, cold pond next to a dilapidated house. Dandelions attend to the lakeside with a sweet, musky scent. Trees guard the abode and adorn the hillside while an everlasting breeze passes through, though the rustling leaves are always absent. Sometime long ago, gales of wind welcomed the opening of innocent eyes. The silver sky greeted the infant, shedding a few drops of rain upon her glowing cheeks before an umbrella became a shield. A smile sneaks onto her face when she sees her mother. Her tongue then sneaks out along with it, urging a beam from her older brother's eyes as they peeked over the folds of the blanket. Her father's hands appear and tuck her in once again, ensuring her warmth before bringing her back to the crackling fireplace in the house.

It wasn't long before the wind that once caressed her left. She had uttered her first words, addressing her family members by name, and began to attend kindergarten. They were on a trip to celebrate her sixth birthday when she lost everything. In the midst of the pulsating flames, her eyes reflected her family's limp bodies, sacrificing their blood to the asphalt, as she unknowingly watched them depart. Gentle yet firm hands pulled her away from the danger, but her small,

chubby hands reached for the embers while her feet kicked at her savior, begging to join the rest of her family. She didn't notice the small trickle of vermilion on her forehead. She was too young to be alone in this world of facades. Sitting in a daze, her eyes took everything in, but her mind did not bother to process them. They caught some stranger in handcuffs. Crimson decorated his head, while bister vomit embellished his shirt. She tilted her head, confused. Her eyes moved to focus on the view before her, savoring the first few raindrops before she felt one hit her head. Looking up, she catches the disappearing edge of an umbrella. Twisting her body to glimpse behind her, she finds no one. *Baba?* Turning towards the sky, she lay down, closed her eyes, and wished for the rain to fall towards the heavens. Maybe then everything would be alright.

#

Mother, the one with a simple flowery dress. Father, the one with a slightly crinkled suit. Brother, a hand over his suffocating tie. Then there was her, Leah. A face full of bliss as she clung to her mom and brother's hands. She caught a dirtied reflection of herself in the photo frame, an object she had rescued on the day they had departed, taking it from the flames' greedy mouth just as she was dragged away. Her face was blank, and her eyes did not carry the tears of sorrow, for she still did not understand.

She never went back to the house after that. They didn't let her. After days under the watchful eyes of doctors, she was eventually deemed stable enough to be relocated to a more suitable environment – the orphanage. When she had first been brought to the orphanage, she had become oblivious of her very own name, for her brain recognized the damage that would incur if she truly came to understand what had occurred. The name, a label, was revealed on the back of the family photo. They told her that it meant delicate, sometimes lioness. But they didn't tell her that her name also meant weary. And she was exhausted. She wished to be the wild child whose parents would struggle to hold on to, to even have the right to be unruly. But that would not be her reality.

#

Embers used to dance a waltz in the fireplace, warming the family as they sat in a circle, full of mirth. Now, Leah sat on the chilled wooden floor, unwilling to light the logs and coal that lay in the ashen hollow. A long forgotten story book lays in her lap as her hand dances, waving at the little man on the pages. She looks up, as if there were someone next to her, and laughs. These small, hiccuping laughs make her whole body tremble. Rocking herself, Leah remembers how she, as a toddler, had once pointed into the distance, where the hills disappeared along with the horizon, and asked her parents what occurred in that obscure terrain. Just like how she had rocked in the car along with her family. Before they left her alone. Shaking her head, she stands up before falling into a daze. Wildly turning and waving her hands, she begins to remember.

A hand yanks at the back of her collar, causing her to break from her dance and collapse.

“Leah! What in the world do you think you are doing?!”

She did not care to stop. She lay sprawled on the floor like a broken doll. Her eyes were a complete void as she remained mute and listened to the director’s tirade. It was similar to a calming melody. Once the director was panting with anger, Leah paused her movements.

“Why are you here? If you resent me so much, leave me on my own. You go do your duties and watch over those other children. Not that you’d really do that. Maybe just return to some office of yours and continue using the money meant to buy us food and drink for your cosmetics. Since I cause you so much trouble, just give me my freedom. . .” A dreamy grin abruptly appeared on Leah’s face as she was pulled away from reality once more. “Aren’t those who are waiting, and those who fly away, just so similar?”

Leah watched as the director snatched the wrinkled photo from her hands and ripped it into pieces. Her eyes caught glimpses of the flowery dress, the hand over a tie, a wrinkled shirt, a pair of large angelic eyes, and four pure smiles. Her face hardened as she listened to the clack of the director’s shoes as they faded into the distance. At least she was alone once more.

#

This wasn’t her first time at this dilapidated house. She had returned home many times before. Once, as a middle schooler. She had placed the torn photo within the pages of the chapter and tottered to her feet before trekking to the lakeside for a walk. It was her morning routine, to observe the dandelions, for wildflowers can not remember the frustrations they’ve overheard, but can carry the grievances with the wind to a place where they can be understood. A skill many individuals believe they possess, but in fact cannot. Leah squats down and blows hard at the little white clocks. One puff. Two puffs. The seeds race into the air and go on their merry way. She follows them as if they were the pied piper, around the lake and to a nearby spring. Gulping down the sweet water, she searches her pockets for the crackers she had taken from the orphanage. Munching on these, she returns to the house with a newly found bounce in her steps.

Wandering through the all too familiar rooms, Leah finds some of her brother’s unfinished homework, carefully hidden away from the hawk eyes of their mother. She pulls it out from the crevice, smoothing the creases of the paper to reveal the pre-algebra worksheet. So long ago, she had believed her brother to be a genius. But maybe it was because she was just too young. Finding a small stub of a pencil, Leah finishes the worksheet, methodically writing the numbers in her brother’s handwriting. She finishes with a satisfied smile before kneeling down and tying her frayed shoelaces into a confident look. Leah knows that the door is ajar, that time was mercilessly rolling, flowing, running, but she couldn’t help it. She grabs the apple she had placed on the table nearby and runs outside the house to the bleak little garden. After she had buried the pristine fruit into the ground, she stared intently at the soft mound of disturbed earth, inquiring softly:

*Are you back? Are you tired? How was your journey?*

#

The naïve eyes opened as the zephyr delivered the smoky, licorice aroma of anise, the pungent scent of garlic, and a whiff of ginger's woody and floral accents. She had fallen asleep upon the kitchen table. Stretching, she goes outside to admire the apple tree she had grown years before. Leah plucks the magnificent fruit from the tree, rubbing it against her clothes before taking a crisp bite. Stumbling back into the house almost like she was intoxicated, she appreciates the steam of fresh soup wafting up from the stove, and the bowls and plates that decked the table with duck, vegetables, and scallion pancakes. Squeezed in between the dishes, she finds the test papers with handwriting so similar to her brother's. The red marks only indicate a full score. On her seat, there's the backpack that her parents would have helped her wear. A blooming smile plants itself across her face. *They're back!*

Her eyes glance out the window, catching the parched leaves which embellish a suddenly empty tree, stubbornly hanging onto their wishful thinking. The corners of the smile immediately drop, balancing out into a line. The heavenly fragrances dissolve into the earthly smell of the somber dwelling.

Leah had long known. That everything was gone. But there had to be something that she could hold onto. Somewhere, in the distance, the dusk which hid behind clouds would expose the bewilderment in her heart. Somewhere, chaotic high-rise buildings would occlude the face that refuses to accept defeat, only accepting those who were full of yearning and ambition. There was something forlorn about Leah, about this humble abode. Those who are pining, who are in pursuit; those who are waiting, who flew away; they are just too similar.

The stains on her shirt and jacket glow softly against the rays of the sun. She silently ties her battered shoes, ignoring the holes and the thin fabric. As she turns to look behind her, she sees the open door. They had come to take her back to the orphanage. She smiled softly. At least they had allowed her another day. Of course, she'd be back though, but who knows when. Ember and dandelions embrace her, gently nudging at her memories to bring solace. But she has none. A tear fights to escape her eyes as she watches the unyielding time flow and flow and flow.

*Have you returned?*

*Please come back, I beg of you.*

*Come back and take me home,*

*Back to your side.*

If only you were still by my side.