

Weeds and Sunflowers

My mother named me Sunshine, and the first thing she ever taught me was how to weave dandelions into crowns. Mama never let Dad pull out the dandelions or spray them with weedkiller. She'd once caught him with her gardening tools in the lawn, the broken corpses of dandelions all around him. She didn't speak to him for a week. She and I had taken the sad dandelion remains and gently tossed them into the little creek that cut through our yard. She'd told me, "Sunshine, flowers are to be treated with gentle hands and gentle thoughts."

"Dad says dandelions are just weeds."

"Well, that's because your Daddy believes everything he's told."

But she forgave him the same way she always forgave him — the same way she always forgave everyone. Dad used to say Mama was too gentle for this world, and it must've been true cause she died soon after that. Her funeral was full of dandelions.

I remember sitting outside the funeral home. They had cut the lawn short and blunt, and there wasn't a single weed to be found. I'd been trying to braid the grass stubble into a chain, but it kept falling into pieces. I felt someone big and warm sit down next to me. The grass rustled in complaint. I don't recall if he said something to me or if he just sat with me, but for just a moment everything was alright, and we were just two instead of three minus one.

Late that night, when neither of us were able to sleep, we stayed up reading bedtime stories. When my aunt had broken the news to me about Mama, she'd told me that my mom was in a better place. "She's in heaven now, and knowing her, I'm sure she lives in a castle in the clouds with all sorts of flowers everywhere."

So, when Dad read *Jack and the Beanstalk*, I kept thinking about Mama's castle in the clouds and how if I just had a cow to trade for some magic beans, I'd be able to climb into the

starry sky and see Mama and hear her tell me all about what flowers she was growing way up there. I wondered how you grew flowers in clouds. I was sure that if anyone could manage it, Mama could.

When I went back to school, I avoided the other kids, or maybe they avoided me, but that was okay. I didn't need company during recess. I was building caterpillar houses nestled between the great roots of the stubborn maple tree that the groundskeeper had tried to chop down twice already. He didn't like the helicopter seeds that rained down from its branches each fall. I liked to watch the seeds dance like drunk ballerinas as they fell.

I layered twigs like shingles and carpeted the inside of the house with leaves and grass. The house was small and sturdy, waiting for a tenant. I poked the roof. It held steady. I poked it harder. Nothing. I clambered to my feet and considered the squat little hut. I put one foot on its roof. I paused. *I can't ask a caterpillar to move in without making sure the house can survive a foot.* I put all of my weight on one leg, balancing on my house made of twigs. I heard a single snap of a twig, but nothing else. As gently as I could, I lowered myself from the caterpillar home. One of the shingles had cracked, but that was all. I replaced it with a new one.

Right one cue, I spotted a small black and brown creature, inching its way up a tree root. We called these teddy bear caterpillars. The thing was fuzzy and small and warm in my stubby hands. I'd always had small hands and short fingers, but it had never mattered. I was good with them. I could weave flowers and braid grass and build houses out of twigs. Yep, I was good with my hands. The caterpillar settled in its bed of leaves and grass.

Dad had a hard time looking at me after Mama died, and I knew why. I liked to avoid my reflections too. Cornsilk hair and deep brown eyes. And sometimes when I used my hands to make things, I had to stop and do something else. There was too much Mama in how they moved. There was too much Mama around the house too. I kept finding her long golden hairs snagged in cabinets and on the bathroom floor. Dad must've thought so too, because one day he told me we were moving. I thought about my teddy bear caterpillar in its twig hut and how no one would be there to get more leaves for the little guy.

The new house was smaller. The white paint peeled from the paneling to show the blue paint below it, and the blue paint peeled to show the beige paint below that. The windows were too small for the house, and the front yard was a sterile, uninterrupted green. Not a single weed. But, the inside of the house was warm and sturdy, and the stairs didn't creak when I climbed up to my bedroom. I decorated my room with a few dried dandelion crowns and stocked my bookshelves with bedtime stories and fairytales. Most of the books were dog-eared in places courtesy of Mama. I looked out my back window and dropped a book straight onto my big toe.

I raced noisily down the stairs and threw open the front door. My foot caught on the lip of the doorway, and I fell forward onto concrete, catching myself on my hands and knees. I scrambled upward, and ran barefoot around the white, blue, beige house to the backyard. Towering over me, casting long wavering shadows, was a field of sunflowers, their leafy stalks swaying merrily and catching the light. On my tippy toes, I stretched my fingers high and stroked the flower petals gently, like Mama would have. Blood trickled down my right knee.

When it was late, and Dad had gone to sleep, I crept into the garage with a flashlight that had come in a Girl Scout camping set. I shined the light at the neglected things scattered across the

room. Holiday decorations, photo albums, miscellaneous cords and chargers. I rifled through boxes and bins and garbage bags until I found Mama's canvas gardening tote. All the wooden handles still gleamed brightly, and no rust blemished the metal. My fingers hovered over the shears for just a moment before I snatched them up and ran recklessly to the backyard and the sunflower field.

The sunflowers whispered to each other as I surveyed them in their neat rows. The moon was out and full, and in the night, everything was shades of gray. I found the strongest looking bunch of sunflowers, and braided them together, their stalks still firmly in the ground. Then, I cut down the tallest sunflowers I could find, one after another. The whispering grew louder as I worked. I climbed up the braided stalk to reach its top. And then, I did what Mama taught me to do, and I started to weave the flowers together. I weaved them into a strong, thick chain. Ten feet high, twenty feet, thirty. I kept weaving. I kept climbing. I wove my ladder of sunflowers high into the night sky, higher than the roof, and then higher than the nearby trees, then higher still. I wove higher and higher until I could touch the lowest clouds. Its moisture beaded on my skin like miniature pearls. I kept weaving until dawn broke and birds sang, and I knew for certain that my teacher, Mrs. Theodore, hadn't lied when she told us the Earth was round. I was going to keep weaving until I found Mama's castle and saw her smile at me when I leapt off my sunflower ladder, into her garden in the sky.