

Dandelion Summer

Delila Sharp's lawn is covered in dandelions. Yellow spots of color on brown lawn. She has never had a lawn before. This one is small, an almost-rectangle, from the crumbling steps of the little brown house to the sidewalk, and it is hers. The dandelions begin to grow in the cracks of her steps, daring rebellion against concrete and humanity and she is proud of them. She steps over them carefully on her way to work, and makes Adam do the same. Adam has black hair and a small nose but large feet in brown shoes; a menace to dandelions and other small creatures. As the spring marches on the backs of ants towards summer, yellow turns white and petals turn to puff. Dandelions grow and die and grow a hundred times in the cracks and the dirt of her imperfect universe.

The left side neighbor, who has gray hair and blue socks and orange glasses, stops her one day to suggest she remove the weeds from the lawn.

If you weed, the neighbor says, your lawn will grow green again, like mine. Like all the other lawns.

Thank you, Delila says, polite denial. I have no weeds.

When it rains the clouds make the sky dark and the rain makes the concrete dark and even her hair turns dark when wet but the dandelions are never dark. They wave like so many tiny flames as the water and wind try to put them out. Sitting on her porch, Delila and the dandelions share a secret smile because they both know it will take far more than water and wind to kill a hardy thing like a dandelion.

One morning she leaves the house and finds all the dandelions gone. There is the lawn, brown and firm and rectangle. Adam comes out to find her sitting on the steps.

Why aren't you at work?

The dandelions are gone.

Adam does not really understand why this is important, but he says nothing and helps scavenge white puffs from the park down the road and blows small seeds into the dirt every day until the first bright blooms break through the brown grass.

It is only two days later that the dandelions vanish again in the night.

This time when Adam finds Delila, he is late to work. She is alone with the barren lawn, and the neighbor who brings her trash out, the two boys on their skateboards. It is a small world, the world from the front steps to the sidewalk, but it is her world and her yellow citizens are missing. When Adam comes home he tells Delila to put things in perspective. He says, *the stock market is crashing, the Iranians are building nuclear weapons, children are carrying guns in Africa.*

So?

There are so many terrible things. Things that could bring about the end of the world.

The end of the world doesn't mean as much to me as the end of my world.

Isn't it all the same?

It is not the same.

Anna visits, black hair twisted back, wearing silver shoes and a red silk scarf and every evening she tells Delila she is not getting enough Vitamin D. Anna is the younger sister but she is an engineer while Delila sells sweater dresses at the Gap and Anna's apartment has a dishwasher and curtains and a vacuum cleaner while Delila has a cracked toilet, cardboard covering the living room window, and dust. Anna stays only two nights, complaining of allergies. Delila knows she will tell their mother.

After Anna leaves, Delila refuses to leave the house. She sits by the window and watches for the dandelions to come up once again from the ground.

I'm not bringing you food, Adam says. And you're out of sick days. You'll have to leave by Monday.

Adam is right. She has taken all of her sick days, all the vacation days, and Anna's wedding is in only two months. Delila is the maid of honor, but in name only, as Anna has made all the arrangements herself, including her bridal shower. It will be perfect. It will be beautiful.

You're wasting your time with that boy, Delila's mother tells her when she calls. He's never going to marry you.

That's all right. I don't want to get married.

Of course you want to get married. You need health insurance.

I'll get my own health insurance.

You'll need a real job first. Anna says there's no glass in your living room window. Do you need more money?

No.

I'll have your father send another check. I want you to get glass for your window. You can't pay for that structure you live in—you should really come home.

Delila hangs up.

It is a midsummer afternoon when the dandelions return, and that night Delila sits by the window with a glass of wine and waits with all the lights off. The silence is hot with anticipation. She does not have to wait long before she sees the sneaking figure of the neighbor in a black wrap with her can of poison illuminated by the one street lamp. There is no sound when they wilt and die aside from the sound of the bottom of the wine glass hitting the window sill, Delila's footsteps on the stairs as she runs outside to stop the murderer, too late.

When they argue, the neighbor uses the word weeds. *Weed* is a slur in her smoke darkened voice, a judgment. Delila is no stranger to slurs, the way they cut and scrape, the way they are louder and sharper than other words. A dandelion has no ears and no anger, and while Delila wishes she were cool like a dandelion, the insults run hot in her ears. When she returns upstairs, Adam is still in bed, but awake, and he is hot and tired and bending under the heavy air.

Why is this so important? Why can't you let her do what she wants?

Adam's question seems valid to part of her, but the part that speaks is angry. *Just because it doesn't fit her ideas of what lawns ought to look like doesn't mean my lawn isn't valid.*

That makes...no sense.

It doesn't have to make sense to you. That's my point. It makes sense to me.

Didn't you have an interview today?

They hired someone yesterday.

The next day she blows the dandelion puffs on the left-side neighbor's lawn, but these seeds never see the light of the end of summer sun. Their loss is mourned, yellow stillborn children. The perfection of her green unbroken lawn is nothing next to the radiance of a dandelion conquering the tyranny of concrete. *You cannot tame me, a dandelion says. I will always rise.*

Don't listen to your mother, her father says when he calls. You're the creative one.

I don't want to be the creative one.

What do you want to be?

I just don't want to be "one" of anything.

You're going to leave a real mark on the world.

And if I don't?

I sent the check, your mother is right you need that window.

It's summer, I don't need the window.

He has already hung up.

Delila has had four interviews in three days, all in the same black pants and white sweater Anna gave her for Christmas.

Where do you see yourself in five years?

Ideally working for your organization! she says brightly to the woman, who has gray hair and a silver necklace and black glasses and four sheets of paper. She writes on two of the sheets,

towards the bottom. Delila leans forward slightly to see, and the woman catches her. She moves her paper a small bit closer.

What would you say is your biggest weakness? asks a man with a tie and red hair and no glasses.

My perfectionism, she tells him, and the lie makes her clench her fists. *I have to make sure all the work I do is perfect, which can mean spending too much time on things.*

He writes on his paper and she carefully leans back, not looking.

Do you work better in a team, or on your own? says a man with no hair and round eyes and a nose that comes to a point. The two women on either side of him say nothing.

I work very well on my own, but I also work very well in a team, Delila tells them, looking only at the woman on the left, who does not look away from her paper. The man continues to look at her. *I mean, I am very independent and can work with limited instruction, but I am very sociable and enjoy using my communication skills to interact in a positive way with my co-workers.*

All three put pencils to paper.

Tell me about a time you showed initiative, says a second man in a blue polo shirt with a silver watch and a gold wedding ring.

In college I was secretary for the Gaelic Culture Society. I helped plan the annual—

He stops her as he looks down at the graduation date on her resume. *Something after college? Last week I took it upon myself to refold all of the polo shirts on the sale table, without being asked.*

He smiles, but sadly, and Delila imagines the girl he interviewed before her was just back from PeaceCorps, teaching orphans in Namibia. Or completing research on a Fullbright in Argentina. Delila imagines that girl owns a suit and a bicycle and speaks Mandarin.

We'll be in touch, he says.

She gets none of these jobs.

One afternoon in early August just before the last hard rain, Delila sits on the front step with a clear green water pistol, shooting at the dust she sees rising in the air. It is after her fourth shot that she sees the small hole dug in the farthest corner of the lawn. She goes to investigate, leaning slowly over the hole bending at the waist. A squirt of water fills the hole and she turns to see another nearby. The holes continue in a line, all on the edge of the left side, but all squarely on *her* side. Delila straightens, holding her clear green pistol with both hands. In only six steps she is on the left side neighbor's front step and knocks with a fist holding the pistol. When no one comes to the door, she knocks on each window, first to the left of the door, then to the right.

You have no idea what you're doing! Delila shouts into the closed window on the right. There is no answer, and the only one to hear is the small black cat running from under the bushes, and Adam who is now coming up the walkway. He grabs her by the elbow.

Come inside, he says tensely. He tugs, but not hard enough. Delila pushes his arm away and he puts up his hands, walking backwards across the lawn and then turning to open the door to her house. As he disappears inside Delila uses the water gun to draw a stick figure holding a dandelion, with a thick slash cutting through its center. The rain begins as Delila reaches her armchair in the living room, which she has turned towards the left side window, and the warning is gone when the neighbor returns two hours later.

Delila and the neighbor war over color and perfection through the end of summer when he begs her to stop.

This is all you do, he says and she is confused because while she recognizes the sadness in his voice she does not understand it.

She cannot be allowed to continue, she explains. *She must be made to understand beauty is not perfection.*

It isn't important.

Of course it is.

Am I important?

Of course you are.

Am I as important as a hundred dandelions? What about one dandelion?

She does not realize this is a serious question, and while she hesitates, he continues, *I can't wait any more for you to figure this out.* The sound of Adam leaving is the same as the sound of wilting dandelions.

Anna calls five days after Adam leaves and eight days before the wedding to tell her it's off. *I'm coming over*, she says, as though she lives nearby when in reality she needs to fly from Boston to Oregon. When she arrives, she does not ring the bell, and she surprises Delila from under her blanket on the couch. Anna lies on top of Delila and they spend five hours watching I Love Lucy before Anna tells her she left Chris for an architect she met at a party 36 hours before meeting the architect's wife, whose name is Carla, and who has red brown hair and a gold wedding ring.

What did Mom and Dad say?

I haven't told them.

Delila giggles, and stops, shocked, but Anna laughs too, and they imagine every guest showing up to the wedding next Saturday except for the bride, the groom, and the maid of honor.

Can I stay until after the honeymoon should be over? Anna asks.

Your office will let you have that much time?

I didn't tell them either.

That evening Anna makes noodles with black olives and pepperoni while Delila sits curled with both feet on her chair and her chin on her knees and explains the problem of the dandelions. They eat the noodles in the kitchen in front of the window, with all the lights off, watching the lawn. Each night for five nights they watch I Love Lucy and eat noodles in the dark. On the fifth night, Anna tells Delila her office called to terminate her.

So...your job is open...says Delila.

You're welcome to it.

As they wash the dishes in the dark, a small figure with gray hair and a black wrap pauses in front of the house.

That's it, says Anna, I'm going to tell her.

Anna...

But Anna has dropped her fork on the table and olives fly in small arcs from where it lands, decorating the scratched wood table. The chair is pushed back and the door is flung open before Delila's hand can catch Anna's elbow. She follows her sister to the edge of the lawn.

This is NOT your lawn, says Anna to the woman, who puts up a hand but says nothing. You have no right to tell my sister how to keep her property.

Anna, starts Delila, now holding her sister's shoulder.

Anna continues, She could have you arrested for trespassing. What you're doing is illegal.

The woman finally speaks, and Delila is surprised by how soft her voice is. *Excuse me— There are no excuses to offer. I expect to never hear my sister complain about your inappropriate behavior again, or we will be filing charges. You know perfectly well we would be well within our rights.*

Anna! says Delila, shoving her sister.

Anna is surprised. Well we would be!

Anna...that is not my neighbor.

Both girls turn to look again at the small woman in the black wrap. Anna's hands fly to her mouth. Delila keeps one hand clenched on her sister's shoulder, and reaches one out to the woman, but only halfway.

I'm sorry, says Anna from between her fingers.

The woman waves, makes a sound as though she may speak, and instead turns and leaves.

Anna and Delila run into the house. Delila is laughing, but Anna is not.

I just verbally assaulted an innocent woman! This is not funny!

It's just...I never thought of telling my neighbor I could lodge a legal complaint about her trespassing. You're right. I could.

Anna laughs too now, and Delila feels steadied by the sound, and the knowledge that she's had the power to stop the neighbor all along, like Dorothy's red shoes. The comparison makes her begin to laugh too.

Anna is still there when Adam comes to take his ice cream maker and his blue-ray player the next week. Delila stays in the back room while Anna opens the door and shuts it loudly only minutes later. Delila shuts her eyes and her world ends for a moment, but the sound of Anna opening the back room door causes her to open them again, to find the world still there.

They call their parents together, sitting on the bed.

I'm coming over, says their mother, as though she lives nearby when in reality she needs to fly from Houston to Oregon.

No, Anna says. *I'm going back to Boston next week, why don't you meet me there?* She looks at Delila, who nods vigorously.

When Anna leaves, Delila, who has black hair and gray eyes and no glasses and red shoes, stands in the doorway until the taxi has turned the corner. Once the street is empty, she shuts the door and returns to the armchair in the living room, which Anna has turned to face the television again. It is quiet, and she soon gets up to make noodles with black olives and pepperoni and eats with all the lights on in every room of the very small house.

When autumn comes the left side neighbor's lawn turns brown like Delila's and so does the right side neighbor's and her lawn disappears into the sameness the way it was always meant to. Now none of them are perfect, but all are beautiful, and Delila knows she too is imperfect and this makes her beautiful. The dandelions will be back in the spring, and Adam will not, but she will live to warm her cheeks again on spring sun because she is a hardy thing, like a dandelion.