

Adult Short Story Winner

Hed: Dandelion Summer

By Danielle Stonehirsch

Delila Sharp's lawn is covered in dandelions. They are yellow spots of color on the dying brown grass. 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. It is hers. The dandelions begin to grow in the cracks of her steps, rebelling 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 when he stays over. Adam has black hair and a small nose but large feet, a menace to dandelions and other small creatures. As the spring marches on the backs of ants toward 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 tells her. I have no weeds.

The left side neighbor says, *I can take care of it for you. It's not hard.*

No, says Delila. This lawn is mine. These flowers are mine.

They aren't flowers.

That's your perspective.

The left side neighbor, who was invisible during the winter, is out every day in spring with her flowers and bushes and young pear tree. She clips, she mows, she fertilizes, she digs. She is awake early in the morning, and back in the house by late afternoon. Delila watches her warily.

When it rains, the clouds make the sky dark and the rain makes the concrete dark and even her hair turns dark but the dandelions are never dark. They wave like so many tiny flames as the water and wind try to put them out. One morning she leaves the house and finds all the dandelions gone. There is the lawn, brown and firm and rectangle. But it no longer looks like hers. Adam comes out to find her sitting on the steps.

Why are you just sitting out here?

The dandelions are gone.

Adam does not really understand the correlation, 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 after 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 right side 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.

The dandelions come back quickly this time, and Delila watches the bees return to circle them.

I'm allergic to bees, Adam tells her.

She pats his cheek. *I'll protect you.*

He smiles with his lips pressed together. *That's easy. No dandelions, no bees.*

Just walk down the front path and don't disturb them, she says.

Why don't we just weed the lawn? I can pull them up tomorrow.

Roses attract bees.

What?

Roses. They attract bees. Daffodils. Tulips. Pansies. They all attract bees.

Yeah?

If they weren't dandelions, if they were roses or daffodils or tulips or pansies, would you tell me to pull them up?

Those are flowers. Dandelions aren't flowers.

Why not? They are round and yellow and bloom in places other flowers can't. They are pretty, and strong. Why aren't they just as good?

Adam looks at her and he is still smiling, but it has cooled, and Delila presses her face to his chest so she doesn't have to see it.

Anna comes from Boston, her 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 reviews unpopular bands on the internet. 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.

You need to get control of your life, Dee.

I'm not in control?

All I know is you need a plumber, half the light bulbs are out, and your lawn is covered in weeds.

They're not weeds. They're just as pretty as other flowers.

You've been here eight months. Maybe it's time to come home.

This is home.

Have you made any friends? Anna asks in a diamond voice, clear and cutting.

I have Adam, Delila answers, but she suspects that she is lying.

After Anna leaves, Delila refuses to leave the house. She sits by the window and watches her lawn carefully for signs of attack.

I'm not bringing you food, Adam says. *You'll have to leave by Monday.*

I wish you'd just try to understand.

It's hard to understand when you're being crazy.

Delila does not feel crazy. *It wouldn't kill you to try another perspective.*

Maybe you should leave the house more. It might help if you got a real job.

I have a real job.

I know, I know. I just meant something steady. With an office. And people.

Not having an office doesn't make it not real.

Of course not. I'm sorry.

Adam sits on the arm of her chair and puts his hands in her hair. She pushes against them, wanting to be closer, but he takes it as a sign of aggression and leaves with heavy feet.

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

I don't want to get married. People can be in love and not get married.

Delila wants her mother to point out that she is not in love, but her mother says, *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.

Her mother never surprises her.

It is the hottest day and the rhododendrons are losing petals on the dark dirt under the left side neighbor's windows. Delila sits cross-legged with her laptop in the center of her lawn for three hours. Her ears vibrate with the shadows of the noise from last night's concert. She needs 350 words by 5, but she only has one word on the page. Reverberate. She highlights it and pushes down Shift+F7 for the thesaurus. Echo. Resound. Ring. She deletes the word and writes another. Connect. She pushes Shift+F7. Attach. Join. Fix. Unite. Disconnect (antonym). She types words and presses Shift+F7 until the battery runs down and the screen blackens with a pop. She takes the computer into the house and plugs it in. She hears the noise of a lawn mower starting and knows that the sound is too strong. Her fingers tear at the cardboard covering the window and it pops free onto the bush immediately below it. The neighbor is

mowing Delila's lawn with her black and red lawn mower, running the grass and twigs and dandelions down with precise sweeps. Delila climbs hastily out her window, knees bending heavily with the 8-inch drop.

This is trespassing! she shouts over the motor. *That is an arrestable offense!*

The neighbor turns off the machine. *I thought I would help,* she says. *I know you're so busy with work it's hard to take care of the lawn. I'm retired, I have time.*

Delila knows perfectly well that the neighbor knows perfectly well that Delila is not too busy with work, and the lie is another precise cut. After the neighbor retreats into her small house, Delila picks up all the disfigured bits of dandelion in her cotton skirt and moves them to the neighbor's grass. She lays each torn flower in three short lines, a small accusatory graveyard.

The night's summer wind has blown them away before morning.

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 streetlamp. There is no sound when they wilt and die aside from the sound of the bottom of the wineglass hitting the windowsill and Delila's footsteps on the stairs as she runs outside, 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 judgments, the way they cut and scrape. A dandelion has no ears and no anger, but the insults run hot in Delila's ears. When she returns upstairs, Adam is still in bed, but awake, and he is tired and bending under the heavy air. She lies down to put her face in the curve of his neck.

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.

That isn't a point.

They fall asleep not touching. In sleep, Delila's fingers curl around Adam's wrist, but he is gone before she wakes up.

The next day she blows the dandelion puffs onto 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 weight of the mourning falls entirely on Delila. Adam is unburdened as he searches her refrigerator for spare parts and leftover bits to make his dinner.

Does she live alone in that house? he asks.

Yeah.

Does she have any children?

I don't know. I've never seen any.

Grandchildren?

If I'd seen grandchildren, I would know she had children, wouldn't I?

So what does she do during the day?

Delila had never thought about this. A black hole opens in the narrow space in her mind her neighbor occupies. *She's retired*, she tells Adam.

She can see that Adam has more to say by the way his shoulders tighten and shift forward, then back. She waits for the words, poised by the table with silverware still in her hands. He does not let go of his words, though, and after five breaths she raises her hand higher and lets the silverware fall in a clatter onto the table. His shoulders move again under her eyes, but he neither turns nor speaks.

One afternoon in late 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 someone has 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. She shoots that one too. The trowel-dug dandelion-size holes continue in a jagged line, all on the edge of the left side, but all squarely on her side. Delila straightens, holding her pistol with both hands. In only six steps she is on the left side neighbor's front step and knocks with the fist holding the weapon. When no one comes to the door, she knocks on each window, first to the left of the door, then to the right.

It's not even your lawn! 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 backward across the lawn and then turning to open the door to her house. As he disappears inside, Delila stands on the neighbor's uncracked concrete patio and uses the water gun to draw a stick figure holding an uprooted 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 toward the left side window, and the warning is already gone when the neighbor returns.

Adam 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 needs to understand beauty is not perfection, she explains.

It isn't important.

Of course it is.

Am I important?

Of course you are.

Am I as important as a hundred dandelions?

Stop.

What about one dandelion?

She does not realize this is a serious question, and she hesitates.

The sound of Adam leaving is the same as the sound of wilting dandelions.

That evening, Delila makes noodles with black olives and pepperoni with all the lights off, watching the lawn. At 4 a.m. she falls asleep, fork in her hand, cold noodles on her lap. There have been no shadows in the night, no creeping figures. When she awakens at 10 a.m. though, all the dandelions that have grown on the left side of the lawn have been plucked away as though they had never been. Delila shrieks with rage. Her fingers are leaden with fury as she turns her doorknob and stamps to the neighbor's lawn. She tears at the rhododendrons until red and fuchsia petals cover the dirt like perfect bloodstains. The daffodils uproot easily, but the begonias cling desperately to the ground and are beheaded. The roses claw at her hands, the hydrangea petals tear away, leaving the bushes with open wounds. When her fingers have razed every flower, she leaves the mess mixing with her own blood and returns to her house. The police arrive after she has cleaned her cuts and is wrapping the last Band-Aid around the last finger.

We received a complaint, starts the young officer. He is too young not to worry about being taken seriously, and his insecurity leaks a defensive tone into his voice.

Delila is too guilty not to take him seriously, but his tone brings back her fury. *I can't imagine what for*, she says in her sister's voice.

Destruction of property, explains the officer.

I have no idea what you're talking about.

The officer looks at the neighbor's ruined garden. Her eyes do not move from his face. Her stare makes him shift his weight left and right. *You ripped up your neighbor's flowers.*

I did not rip up any of my neighbor's flowers.

The officer looks from her eyes to her hands, scratched and dirty and covered in neon bandages. *There is more than one witness.*

I was weeding, Delila says, each word articulated.

She receives a \$300 fine and a stern warning.

When she shuts the door, she smiles. The neighbor's flowers won't grow back this summer. They are not as strong as dandelions.

The rhododendron petals are swept away by breezes and the shuffling of small animals, but the dead flowers remain, roots suffocated in the open air. At first a source of fierce joy, as the days pass Delila begins to watch them with uneasiness. The petals brown and rot untended, the grass grows to ankle height. The neighbor does not leave her house and neither does Delila. She writes or pretends to write in her armchair facing the left side window and eats all of the Campbell's soups, all of the pasta, all of the cereals, all of the frozen pizzas, until all she has for breakfast one morning is a can of mushrooms and a bag of kettle corn. When she has finished these, she puts sneakers on with no socks and takes a small mirror from her bathroom. She leaves through the back door and creeps over the boundary to crouch by the neighbor's side window. Her feet sink into the broken flowers and soil. The window is in the kitchen, and when Delila lifts up the mirror, she sees the neighbor. She wears a gray dress and no shoes and her orange glasses are on the counter. She makes tea while she cries. Delila never cries, and she is mesmerized by the steady tears and the way the neighbor's face leans to the right as her eyebrows come down and her mouth tightens. Spots of yellow shine from the edge of the mirror, and Delila moves it so she is able to see the photo of yellow pansies mixing with alyssum and lilacs. She turns the mirror back and forth and finds photos of daylilies, morning glories, black-eyed Susans, irises, alliums, even orchids all blooming in summers across a decade. Adam might think the neighbor is crazy for crying over flowers, and her mother might think the neighbor is crazy for the garden photos covering the kitchen walls and surfaces, and Anna might think the neighbor is crazy for having orange glasses, but Delila does not think she is crazy. The neighbor's world is small, like Delila's, and it has ended. Delila shuts her eyes, and

her world ends for a moment too, but when she opens them her broken dirty house is there, and the brown almost-rectangle of her lawn shines with a few half-opened dandelions.

Fall weaves its path through the trees, and soon the only flowers left alive on the block are Delila's dandelions. She picks each one and ties their stems with a blue ribbon. She leaves them on the neighbor's porch. Several days later she returns from a large concert in a small bar and finds a gray pot with three purple pansies. Pansies are strong flowers, and they live in the dirt homes Delila digs for them under the glassless window until mid-November. By the time the pansies succumb to the frost, her house is bone-chilling cold, despite the socks she has stapled to the edges of the cardboard on the window to cover the cracks. In December she finds an old space heater under the window, and in January she leaves salt on the neighbor's walkway in the mornings after dawn. In February in the evenings they pull up the blinds on their side windows and silently tune their televisions to the same channel. In March they prepare themselves for April, as they watch carefully the first green shoots rising from the dirt.