**Dandalions**

By: [Poet by the Water's Edge](https://www.fictionpress.com/u/596357/Poet-by-the-Water-s-Edge)

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We lived simply, my mother and I. During the year she taught at school, but during the summer, we could go to my aunt's in the country and play every day in the field behind the house. We would blow dandelions and let them whirl and twirl in the wind, me chasing after them, whirling and twirling myself. But *mutti* said that I must never blow them at home, for some people thought they were weeds and didn't want them around. I promised I never would. She would sometimes bring out a picnic basket and we would eat*Kartoffelsalat,Gurkensalat,* and *Bienenstich*. Afterward we would sit in the sun and I would beg her to tell me stories of my brave papa who died in the war. She would tell me how wonderful *papi*was and how much he gave for his country. Then she would tell how he's now up in Heaven with God and the angels looking down on us. Heaven sounded wonderful, but I didn't understand.

"But why couldn't he have stayed down here with us?" I asked her.

"Ah, dear heart, he wanted to. But sometimes people can't remain with those they love, no matter how much they want to. So they leave gifts."

"Did papa leave you a gift?"

"*Ja*, child the best one of all. He left me you." Then she would laugh and tickle me and we would roll and romp on the grass. When I was tired I would lay my head in her lap and she'd weave daisies into my hair singing her lullaby. I would fall asleep in the meadow, but the next morning I would wake up in my bed, my hair smelling of flowers. I did so love the smell of flowers; my mother knew this. At home there was always a vase full that would perfume the whole house. Once when we were on a camping trip I grew so cold, but would not sit next to the fire because of how it smelled. So my mother tossed in flowers, and the black, ugly smoke began to smell of them instead. My mother tried to explain to me how something that looks ugly could smell beautiful, but I didn't understand.

There was a man on the radio. He talked a lot about how wonderful he could make Germany, and how much better our world could be. I thought it all sounded very exciting. But mama frowned when he came on. I asked her why she didn't like *Fuehrer* when he did and said such wonderful things. The other teachers at school talked about how he would bring Germany back, with her army like the one my brave papa used to be in and didn't she think that was such a wonderful thing? She listened to me carefully, and then drew me into her lap.

"It's like flowers and weeds, angel. Some people are like dandelions; he believes them to be weeds, even though I see beautiful flowers." I said ok, but didn't understand.

Not long after that we moved to my aunt's house for good. It seemed wonderful to me, to not go to school. My mama still taught me, but I would rather have her be my teacher than *Herr Steinheider*, and told her so. During the morning she taught me, during the afternoon we played, and at night she talked to me about the world. Then, one night, she said that another little girl and her family were coming to live with us, but that I must never speak about them to anyone, not ever. I promised that I would never, ever say anything to anyone, and even pinkie-swore I wouldn't, though I didn't understand.

Ruth arrived the next day with her family. She loved flowers too and told me how at her house she had a whole garden full. I wanted her to come out to the field, but our mothers said no, that she couldn't come out from the basement and that sometimes she would even have to stay in the room behind the wall-that-was-not-a-wall. And during those times we would have to be very careful; she not to make any noise and me not to talk about her. But the field seemed so wonderful, and she would have loved it far more than the crammed space behind the wall-that-was-not-a-wall. Mama said that she was like a dandelion that some people thought were weeds, even though she was a flower. But even dandelions got to whirl and twirl in the breeze while in the countryside. I didn't understand.

So everyday Mama would teach us in the basement, then I would run out into the meadow and pick as many flowers as I could carry. Then I would run back into the house and sit in the basement with Ruth. We would weave flowers in each other's hair and tell stories. Ruth's sister Ester was very smart, almost as smart as my mama. She could tell us what all the flowers meant. I remember one time I brought in a flower that made her laugh and cry at the same time. She told us it was the Star of Bethlehem and that it meant hope. I asked her why she laughed and cried and she said it was because of the yellow star she wore, that it sucked all the hope out of her. Ruth said she didn't feel anything sucked away because of her star; maybe it was just because Ester was older. Star of Bethlehem became our favorite flower and we linked it with the daisies, which Ester said meant innocence, to weave in our hair and to make jewelry and to press into our books. But the dried-out hope still made Ester sad. I didn't understand.

One night the men came. They dragged us out of bed and yelled at us. One of them shook me and shouted questions. They began to break things and hurt my aunt. One slapped Mama and said he would hurt me if she didn't cooperate. We never did anything to them, so why did they want to scare us? Then one of them shouted from the basement. They dragged Ruth and her family up the stairs. They yanked and pulled us out of the house and we were put on a truck and then onto a cramped boxcar. Ruth and I held each other. Our mothers stood near us, holding us, comforting us, talking in low voices. Ester played with her flower, a rhododendron. She told us it meant beware. Ruth's mother hushed her. We were frightened, Ruth and I, and asked our mothers what was going on. Mama laughed, not her sweet spring laugh, but a dead one that sounded like a bitter autumn's day just as the flowers start to wither. She said that the man on the radio was just doing a little gardening. I didn't understand.

When we got there, they took everything from us. Soon all Ruth and I had left were the flowers woven in our hair and our families by our sides. Then they took our families. Before they took mama, she bent down to kiss and hug me. She asked if I remembered what she had told me long ago about how sometimes people can't stay with the ones they love, but leave behind gifts. I did. She said that the only gifts she could leave me with were her love and our memories. She held me tighter than she ever held me before, then they took her away. I didn't understand.

Ruth and I clung to each other, but the men came again. Half of us were sent to one side of the room, half to the other. They didn't look at us, didn't care. They sent Ruth and I onto different sides. We watched each other from across the room, two children caught up in a grown-up's game. A game with strange rules that I didn't understand.

As they lead her group out of the room, a dried, dead blossom of the Star of Bethlehem floated to the ground behind her.

They gave my group ugly clothes and drew numbers on our arms. Then we were sent out. I looked for my mama, my aunt, and Ruth, but couldn't find them anywhere. No one would tell me where any of them were. Crying, I didn't understand.

As I looked there was ugly, black smoke that rose up from big chimneys. It choked me. It tasted sour and bitter, and burned my throat and eyes. I fell to the ground, under the smoke, choking and crying. Another puff of smoke left the chimney. The ashes whirled and twirled like blown dandelion puffs, but these stung my eyes. Another puff of smoke left the chimney. This one smelled of flowers.

Later, I understood.

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