

Only the Dandelions - Sarah Richards

Natalie Greenberg leaned against the counter at the Oakwood Inn, a cigarette mashed between her fingers, the filter sodden and flat with tooth prints. The lunch crowd had thinned considerably, and only a handful of people sat in the restaurant now, scattered about amidst the empty tables still bearing evidence of the lunch rush.

Situated on the corner of US2 and Main Street, the Oakwood was a regional Mecca, and had what was probably the last remaining full-service fuel pump in the state of Michigan. The denizens of the town were often found here, as well as commuters, tourists, and hunters fiercely loyal to the region. They all passed through, for a bite to eat, a tank of gas, a room for the night, or, at certain times of the year, a bottle of deer urine. The Oakwood was the only restaurant for miles, and its gas pump wasn't closed on Sundays. The attached convenience store did a healthy trade in snack food, but the locals, long inured to living on the northern edge of the grid, tended to sit down in the restaurant to eat. They'd watch one another come and go, lingering over a predictable meal and perhaps chatting with a neighbor.

Natalie noticed these things. She studied the people that came in, and she paid attention to what they said and how they said it. She took note of behavior, manners, apparent net worth, and levels of attractiveness and intelligence. It didn't take her long to size up a person and deliver her somewhat jaded assessment which she presented as a simple statement of fact.

"Look at that one," she'd say to her friend Claire, "His wife just left him and he's out driving aimless. He doesn't know where he's going or what he's gonna do. Poor jerk. He never should have hit her."

Or “That family has been living down south for a long time, but they didn’t originally come from there. Thought they’d moved up in the world – and I’m sure they look pretty stellar compared to a passel of hillbillies. Accent is only faint, but the mother was surprised at her iced tea not being presweetened.” It was difficult to argue with Natalie’s observation and subsequent value judgments when she was so unfailingly accurate.

“I’m a student of human nature,” she’d say with a feigned air of self-importance. “I watch, soak it all in like a sponge.”

And wring it out later, after I’ve had more than my fill, she’d think to herself. Natalie’s emotional purging typically consisted of fits of frustrated rage in which she’d rant and howl on her walk home from work. So-and-so’s insufferable air of entitlement, Christ! Ordering me around like I’m her bitch! Or, That fuckin’ prick and his every-man-needs-a-honey nonsense. Not this filly pardner. Goddamn I hate people!

Because they disappoint.

But what else is there to do up here, she wondered, besides watch? There was certainly no social scene to speak of, unless you counted the lifers hanging out at the Back Forty or the sad cases at the Legion dances.

Somewhere in the back of Natalie’s mind was the notion that she, too, was fast becoming a lifer. Thirty-two years old, with three children to feed, a mortgage on a house that grew more and more ramshackle every spring, an estranged drunk of a husband who seldom saw or spoke to his kids, a once nubile body that was slowly falling to earth, cavities and no dental insurance — but at least she had a job. This was her saving grace, her one redeeming shot at a normal productive life.

She'd been working at the Oakwood Inn since she was sixteen. The idealistic ambitions of her youth had long ago vanished, and she was an old woman too young. She used to think, before she got married and became a mother—just barely in that order—that she'd move away from this nowhere town, head to Chicago, or maybe Grand Rapids, get a good job and a nice place, and be surrounded by meaningful people who had interesting things to say, people that were full of independent thoughts. Non-sheep. In her dreams of this hypothetical future, she was happy, smiling, beautiful. Not like this reality where she was angry, lonely, wretched.

And thoroughly in the throes of hormonal bleeding angst as she stood at the counter sucking on her cigarette. She married Wade Greenberg shortly after high school when she was already seven months pregnant. She and Wade stood before the Justice of the Peace—a shotgun wedding of sorts, only it was Wade's mother with a finger on the trigger. Left to his own devices, Wade may or may not have married Natalie, but his mother was not inclined to wait and see. She was unrelentingly adamant that Wade do the right thing, though it took her two months and one sound thrashing to convince him it was in his best interests. Fawn Greenberg was a formidable woman, and she harbored no illusions about her son, whom she knew to be pathologically unreliable and far too like his father.

Wade began to feel the pinch of domesticity after the birth of his son, an event that he declined to witness as he feared it would take the wonder and mystery of that very intimate part of a woman's anatomy and render it clinical, even distorted, and ugly. Overnight his home became noisy, filled with unpleasant smells, and his position at the center was now occupied by a shrieking stewed tomato. He often went out with his co-workers from the mill—they sat at the Back Forty commiserating the impact of babies on their respective sex lives—and didn't come home until well after midnight, sloppy staggering drunk. This was repeated countless times.

Natalie would wait up for him, poised in the living room of the house they bought on Second Street. She'd sit rigid for hours in the rocking chair, with or without a baby, gently moving back and forth in the dark, her eyes on the front curtains, awaiting the headlights that would beam along the wall and over her face as the truck pulled into the little driveway. She'd hear the sound of a door slam and a very impaired Wade Greenberg stumble into the house, knock over the floor lamp that stood next to the couch and curse at the lack of light.

"A man comes home from a hard day at work, and he expects to find a fuckin' light on."

"Yes," Natalie would say as she flicked a switch, illuminating the living room and temporarily blinding Wade, who'd throw his arms to his face, much like a newborn. "Your load is heavy."

"What the fuck's the big idea sittin' in the dark, sugarplum?"

"Because I can't stand the sight of you like this." With that she'd flick the switch again, plunging the room back into darkness.

After a while Natalie stopped waiting up for him. She'd put the children to bed—another had come not long after the first and then another again in short order—and lie in bed herself, tucked with a book she wouldn't read, dreading the inevitable arrival of her husband.

One night, last night, Wade didn't come home at all. Natalie woke before the sun and crept out into the living room, expecting to see him passed out on the couch or on the floor in a pool of his own vomit. Her first thought, upon noting the absence of his truck in the driveway, was that he had tried to walk home from the Back Forty, only five blocks away but an ambitious undertaking for a drunk. Perhaps he was curled up under a bush somewhere along the route. She quickly slipped on shoes and a coat and headed down the street to look for her husband. There was no sign of him anywhere outside the bar. Natalie reluctantly trudged over to the only

apartment building in town, the Beech House, on First Street, and rang buzzer #3, Screech Jorgensen, a burly Swede, the Back Forty owner and barkeep. After several minutes of muffled cursing, Screech appeared in the doorway, with crazy hair and bleary eyes.

“No man, I ain’t seen him since last night. Him and Bob Campeau were in drinkin’, but they left pretty early, like around twelve. Said they were headin’ to Gladstone. I don’t know what for. I didn’t ask. Not a secretary.”

Natalie returned home, more angry than worried. She felt that she would somehow know if Wade were dead. She’d sense it in her groin, a sad hollow pain. She paced a circuit through the house for an hour before her mother arrived to watch the kids while Natalie went to work.

Now, seven hours later, she sat on the front stoop with her youngest daughter, Violet, and her mother, lapping at a green popsicle. The broken pavement in front of the house was covered in an extensive chalk mural of flowers with smiling faces. The neighborhood noises drifted by on a warm breeze — children playing, lawnmowers buzzing, a distant radio faintly emitting country western music, and the occasional car cruising past. Natalie could smell meat grilling in a nearby back yard, and there was a hint of fresh cut grass in the air. Despite these odors reminding her that she would be having macaroni and cheese with hot dogs for dinner, and her own lawn was overgrown and strewn with dandelions, at this moment, life seemed peaceful.

Until she saw the police car turn onto her road and park in front of her house.

Here it comes. In a low tone, Natalie instructed her mother to take Violet to the backyard where the other children could be heard playing. Then, with a steeling breath, she turned her attention to the visitor, Sheriff Clement Hannaford.

“Where is he?” she asked through clenched teeth. “I’m not paying the bail money this time. I’ve had enough Sheriff.”

“Why don’t we go inside and talk about it?” the sheriff said.

“There’s nothing to talk about. You can keep him. He’s yours.”

“Now Mrs. Greenberg—”

“Don’t call me that!” she said harshly, her voice shrill. That title had never brought her much joy.

“How ‘bout I come in?”

Natalie opened the screen door and nodded to him to enter. He took a seat on the dingy, Kool-Aid-stained sofa while Natalie sat in her rocking chair near the front window, her arms wrapped tight about her as if to keep parts from falling off. She stared at him, waiting for him to speak. He cleared his throat awkwardly.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news for you, ma’am,” he said.

“He’s in jail,” Natalie said in a flat voice. “We’ve been here before Sheriff. What’s he done this time?”

“That’s true. We’ve been sitting like this before. But this time is different.” He paused, choosing his words carefully. “It seems there’s been an accident, and your husband was involved.”

Natalie interrupted before he could continue. “He’s killed someone with his truck! Oh God! I knew... I just knew... it was only a matter of time.” She put her hands to her face, like she was trying to hold something in, to massage it back into her head before it exploded all over the floor.

“No ma’am, you misunderstand. It’s your husband that’s been killed.” There. He’d said it. “He was found in the river this morning,” he went on. “It appears he was out walking and perhaps stumbled and fell in. We’re still investigating.”

Natalie sat motionless in her chair, staring past Clem, looking down a long spinning tunnel to the reality of his words at the end of it. She had seen this moment in her mind’s eye a hundred times before this moment. She had spent nights in this very chair, staring out into the blackness, waiting for Wade to come home and being terrified that it would be the sheriff walking up her front steps. And he had. Three times before. To let her know that Wade was in jail. But this was different. He wasn’t in jail, he was... in the river.

“The river?” She said the words slowly, as a question. Was that really where he’d gotten to? Was this really how it would end?

“Yes ma’am,” Clem nodded. “He must have been out walking last night, and maybe he had too much to drink, and he misjudged his steps.” He had tossed in the “maybe” as a consolation, though they both knew there was little doubt Wade had been drunk.

“Where in the river?” We went skinny-dipping once, she remembered. A thousand years ago. Right off the trellis near the mill, where the river bends.

“Near the trellis by IXL Drive. Kind of a strange spot for him to be walking, eh?”

Natalie nodded, her stomach clenched and sore from the blow. So, it was at the riverbend. She stared off into space again, digesting this new information. It seemed inconceivable, yet not altogether surprising. She felt that she was removed from her living room, her house, this town, these words coming out of the sheriff’s mouth. A cold feeling of shock had taken hold of her. She knew that this moment in time would forever be frozen in her memory, and somewhere down the line, when she was lucid again, she would think back on how she sat completely

immobile in her rocking chair when Sheriff Clement Hannaford mumbled, “I’m very sorry for your loss,” as he tipped his hat and left the house.

Once the screen door slammed behind him, her mother scurried out of the kitchen, and clutched at her with frantic eyes.

“I heard everything,” she said softly. “Oh honey... oh I’m so sorry. Never should have happened.” She paused for a moment to nod in dismay, confirmation that this was indeed an unfortunate event. Natalie felt a lump rising in her throat, a giant bolus of anger and grief. Through the open window she heard her children playing in the back yard, and she put her head in her hands and cried.

The world had suddenly become more complicated and infinitely more simple in one fell stroke. There would be no going back now, no second or third or fortieth chances. It was truly over. Wade wasn’t coming back. Ever.

It was the “ever” that Natalie struggled with. She had wished him dead hundreds of times in anger and frustration, but she had never thought beyond the immediacy of the moment, which was the need for the back and forth of her relationship with Wade to stop. In desperate times, death seemed the only way. Pleading with him, screaming at him, threatening him had no long-term effect. Nothing but finality would stop him. And now it had happened. He had really died. She would never see his face again, that beautiful face, or stroke his long hair, or feel the heat of his body against hers.

The sheriff had said, “I’m very sorry for your loss.” But what does that even mean? What is my loss, Natalie thought as she sat on her living room floor. What did I really lose? He was never around anyway, always running off to the bar and distant places. The kids’ first days of school, their emergency room trips, their life lessons—it had been me alone. He was never the

husband, the father, he was supposed to be, so what is my loss? I didn't have him before. How is this any different?

Because now you'll never have him, Natalie told herself.

She had held on for so long, for so many years, hoping that Wade would have an epiphany, or something close to it, and realizing the error of his ways, would come home for good. Then she'd finally get what she was promised. When they were seventeen, before they were married, before there were children, they used to talk of how wonderful their life together would be. Wade was going to be a foreman at the mill, and Natalie, who had given up her dream of moving away from this town when she fell in love with Wade, was going to be the perfect housewife and mother. It's what she was supposed to want, after all. She imagined herself in an apron, baking cookies, and looking out the window, watching for her children to come home from school, her husband to come home from work. There were flowers in the yard and a minivan in the driveway. They were going to be so happy....

But real flowers wouldn't grow in Natalie's yard, only dandelions, and her barge of an ancient Oldsmobile was a far cry from a minivan, and Wade was no Ward Cleaver. She would sleep alone from now on. Really alone. He wasn't coming home ever again. It would be her, her children, and all the dandelions.