

Dandelions
By Naomi Joseph, 7th Grade
Honorable Mention, Spring 2023

She's back again. Why does she always come back? Why can't she go to another coffee shop? Why can't she just take her dandelions and leave? In my heart I knew she'd never go away. It made me angry some days and happy on others. Sometimes I looked forward to her coming in every day with her thick, dark hair usually twisted up into a messy pattern you could tell she did herself and filled with dandelions. Her beautiful white dress covered in pretty lace and fabric that I like to imagine was woven together by tiny fairies.

I was sitting in this coffee shop trying to write a story for my class. It's not due for months, but I wanted a head start so I didn't get behind like I always did. She always disturbed me at the same time every day. Four in the afternoon, I can count on it. I had to admit that it's nice to have something to rely on every once in a while. She approaches my table in the corner of the shop with her elegant glide and graceful twirl. She hopped onto the chair across from mine. I could see the elaborate doodles she had done in class all over her arms and legs while she was bored. She looked into my eyes and recited the same line she repeated faithfully every single day. "Make a wish," she said. I closed my eyes and blew lightly on the dandelion she held in front of my mouth. I opened my eyes and watched the dandelion puffs fall silently onto the table, the floor, and on my bagel. "What did you wish for?" she whispered. "It's a secret," I responded, pushing my glasses up and refocusing on my story. We sat in silence for a while. I was working on my story and she was kicking her tiny feet that didn't even reach the floor and humming the same song she hummed every week. It kind of reminded me of a song a church choir would sing on a Sunday morning.

I typed a few words then it took an annoying amount of time for me to realize that I was just staring blankly at my computer. I slammed it closed and put my head in my hands. I was fighting back tears and I didn't even know why. I felt a light kick on my knee. "Are you okay?" she asked. I'd forgotten she was there. "Go home, Mae" I begged. She didn't say anything. She didn't leave either. I ran my hands through my dark hair that had grown way too long. I imagined my own mother sitting in this same exact spot just a few months ago where she sat every day, listening to me tell stories of what had happened at school that day and laughing at things I said that weren't even meant to be funny. Her laugh was loud. So contagious it would constantly annoy the owner. Eventually, he would succumb to its contagion and couldn't help but smile. I hadn't heard that laugh in so long; too long. I took my glasses off my face and sobbed into my hands. I'd tried to be strong. I really had, but I'm smart enough to know when to stop trying. If you really think about it, it's a good thing that I was weak. Because in order for there to be strong people, some of us have to be weak. That's just the way the world works sometimes.

No one asked me if I was okay. No one got up to check on me. They're all used to it by now. The boy who sits in the corner with his dandelion puff covered bagel. One day he might strike up a conversation. The next day he'll cry his eyes out. Most people are afraid to talk to me. Mae's just about the only one who isn't scared of me. She dances over to me and sits her seven-year-old self down in my lap. She leans her head on my chest. "I can hear your heartbeat." She whispered so quietly I almost couldn't hear her. I feel her tears dripping through my shirt. She cried whenever I did. I liked that, but I wasn't in the mood to be grateful today. I lifted her up and placed her gently back onto the floor. "Go home, Mae" I said. I got up, grabbed my stuff, wiped my face and left.

This goes on for weeks more. Every day she comes in and we either cry or we laugh. I'm getting tired of this routine. I'm sitting in the same exact spot eating the same exact thing trying not to cry the same exact tears that I never seem to run out of. I hate this. I know I can't keep going on like this. It's the second week I've skipped work. I've been getting countless calls and emails. I go to school, I eat here, and I go sit in my apartment and sulk. I try to get homework done and usually put in just enough effort to pass the class, which was why college wasn't likely in my future.

Mae glides over to my table one morning with a beautifully wrapped gift box. I check my watch. "Yep, exactly four o'clock" I thought. She shoved a dandelion into my face. I closed my eyes and made the same wish I made every day. The most unrealistic wish in the history of wishes. I opened my eyes and turned my attention back to Mae. "I have a present for you today." she said in her little childish voice. "What is it?" I asked. She took the box out of her lap and slid it across the table. I tentatively reached for it. Mae glanced at my hands. I noticed they were shaking. The daily coffee shop bagel was getting to be unfulfilling. The last meal I had was the sympathy casserole my godmother had baked for me after I lost my mother. Ever since then, I'd just been eating from the bag of cheese puffs I found in the car and drinking from the carton of milk that I kept in my fridge. I bought a bagel every day, but only because my mother used to eat bagels every day, so I'm used to having one at the table. I reached again for the gift. I unwrapped it with the same care a mother uses on her newborn baby. The wrapping paper was so intricately placed, I almost didn't want to unwrap it at all, but I did. Inside the wrapping paper was a box. I opened the box and there sat something I hadn't seen since I was with my mom. It was a Bible. "I told my pastor what happened to you and he told me to give you this," she said. I just stared. I hadn't even thought about anything religious since I lost my mom and the thought of relying on

Him again after what He did to me was sickening. My mother took me to church every Sunday. She was the only thing that tied me to my faith. She's gone now. It hurt me so badly to think about it. Oh no, here I go again. Tears started to flow down my cheeks and I had to leave before I made a scene like last time. I heard Mae calling after me, but I didn't turn around. I'd apologize tomorrow. I left her again. As I walked outside I tried to imagine Mae's life at home. She woke up to the smell of bacon from her father cooking in the kitchen. Her mother combed her hair until it shined like sunlight. She goes to church on Sundays and her parents tuck her in every night. I'd do anything for a life like that. I felt sorry for leaving Mae, but I couldn't turn around. I'll try again tomorrow.

It's tomorrow. I opened the door to the café and heard the familiar ding of the bell that alerted the entire café of my presence. I walked over to our normal table. The Bible was still there. I sat down. I didn't touch it. I didn't think about it. I was so focused on not thinking about the Bible that I forgot to order my bagel. I just sat there waiting for Mae to come. I waited and waited. It was seven past four and I began to worry because Mae had never been late before. Then I realized I shouldn't be worried. Mae was simply trying to force me to open the Bible out of pure boredom. Well, it wasn't going to happen. I waited more. "Fine, Mae! You win," I thought. I reached out to the center of the table and gently pulled the Bible in my direction. I handled it like a bomb that was ready to explode. I noticed that on top of the Bible, there was a dandelion. I held it up to my face and made a wish. The same wish I made every day. It was an impossible wish. I wished, no, I prayed to have Mae's life. To be as happy as she was. I asked God, if he could even hear me anymore. I asked Him to let me live her life for just one day and forget the anguish of mine. "What am I doing?" I asked myself. I pushed my chair back and stood. If Mae didn't come, it was her fault. I left. I never even got to order my bagel. I walked

home to my apartment, went to sleep, and forgot that day ever happened. Maybe I will wake up and find that all this was just a bad dream.

I was late to the coffee shop the next day and Mae was there just like I had expected her to be. She sat at our normal table. Looking at her from a distance, I noticed she seemed a bit pale and weak. She hadn't seen me yet. Suddenly she hopped up from the table with a start and rushed to the bathroom. "Poor baby," I heard a man say next to me. "She's so sick." That news startled me. "What's wrong with her?" I asked the man. He looked up at me startled. "You don't know?" he wondered. I shrugged innocently. His look of surprise changed into one of sympathy. "It's cancer." The word literally shook the Earth beneath me. Honestly, I wasn't even surprised I hadn't noticed Mae had cancer. I wondered how long she'd had it. I felt guilty. I was ashamed that I had never asked about Mae's life. I had laid all my burdens on her shoulders without taking into account whether or not it would be too much for her to carry on her own. I closed my eyes and prayed for Mae. I never wanted her to feel this pain again. She had always been there for me from the very first time she walked into that coffee shop the day after I lost my mother and now I had to be there for her. I sat down in our spot. I broke down. I knew I needed to be strong for Mae, but I couldn't. Mae was the strong one and I was weak. That's the way it's always worked. I looked down and noticed Mae had put the Bible in my spot again. I opened it. I turned randomly to a passage. It was Mark chapter five verse forty-one. "Taking her by the hand he said to her, 'Talitha cumi' which means, 'Little girl, I say to you, arise.' Immediately, a flood of memories came rushing upon me. I remembered all the verses my mother taught me as a child and the stories I heard in Sunday school. This story came at me the clearest of all. It was my favorite story when I was little. I could hear my mother's voice echoing in my head, "Get up, little girl, get up," she would say. I was staring at the passage and realized that God was speaking

to me. I remembered all the reasons I believed before. I wanted God to be my reason for living. I couldn't live like this anymore. I couldn't live off of bagels and dandelions. I needed Him. It was the most wonderful feeling in the world. In my peripheral, I noticed Mae standing there looking at me with tears in her eyes. I beckoned her over. I held a dandelion in front of her face and told her to blow. She grinned. Her closed eyes looked so peaceful and calm while she thought of a wish. She blew. "What did you wish for?" I asked. She smiled up at me with pure joy and whispered, "Nothing, my wish already came true."