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Chasing Dandelions

Kelsey Lloyd

Dear You,

Content warning: this work contains
reference to domestic abuse

Do you remember dandelions? Not the yellow ones that littered every patch of green grass in the city. The white ones. The ones that you wish on. The ones where you pluck them out of the soil, scrunch your eyes closed, and think really hard about something you want. The ones where, after your wish has been fully formed, you suck in as much air as your lungs can muster, then blow with just as much effort.

When I was a kid, I used to wish for fireworks. Without fail. I would scrunch up my eyes, envision the explosions of light, blow, then fling my eyelids open. Also without fail, there were never any fireworks. I would chase those floating strands of fluff that I had severed from their stem with my breath. I would chase those dandelions, thinking that I didn't wish strong enough, I didn't blow hard enough, and that if I were given another chance, the fireworks would appear.

Every day, I would go out into my yard, pick as many dandelions as I had the time for, and wish for those fireworks I desired so much. Scrunch, wish, blow. No fireworks. Chase the dandelion wisps floating through the air. Scrunch, wish, blow. Still nothing. Chase the dandelions. Scrunch, wish, blow. Nothing. Chase.

Then one day, my family moved. Packed up and left in what seemed like a blur. We moved into an apartment in the city "for Mom's work." All I cared about was that there were no more dandelions, and I was sure that my wish would never come true.

That is until I met you.

Coming from a different city, I had no friends. Living in a stuffy apartment with no dandelions left me hopeless. I started a new school, in the middle of the academic year. A complete outcast.

Then, one day, after an invisible two weeks in this new world, you saw me. You sat down next to me while I read on the playground. You asked me what my name was and where I was from. I was too stunned to respond; I thought for sure that you would get up and leave. But you stayed.

You coaxed the answers out of me, stayed patient through my shyness, and became my best friend. That's usually how it works in fourth grade, isn't it? Every day, we would sit together at the blue table with holes in it that hid on the outskirts of the playground. We would stand on the benches that were attached to the round table, taking advantage of the unsecured seat to pretend

that we were "surfing in the USA". I don't remember where that phrase came from, but I remember that we loved it.

As we grew older, we also grew closer. We were each other's only friends; outcasts together. We were lucky enough to live only a mile away from one another, so you were at my house every day. I wasn't allowed to go to your house though. My parents told me that your dad liked Busch Light too much. At the time, I didn't understand what that meant.

Fourth grade came and went. Then fifth grade, then sixth. With each passing year, we made more memories. Defeating pirate ships, discovering islands. I would be a princess and you would be my prince charming, saving me from dragons and werewolves. Then I would tire of being the damsel in distress, so I would rescue you instead. We rode bikes around town, wreaked havoc in the stores, and always, always ended our day by begging my parents to take us to the park. When they did, we would push each other on the swings, jump off the teeter-totters, and pick the very best dandelions to wish on. You would tell me what you wished for, usually something that dealt with you and your mom moving away from your dad. Then you'd ask to know my wish too, but I never told you. I felt that I was wiser than you because I knew that if you said a wish out loud, it wouldn't come true.

One time, I asked you why you always wished to move away from your dad, but you said you didn't want to talk about it, so I never brought it up again.

Once we hit middle school, we weren't allowed to spend the night together anymore. You know, boys and girls. We were getting older and all that mumbo-jumbo. Our parents didn't understand that we had no intentions with one another. We were just friends. Along with this change, middle school brought on new adventures. The first signs of acne, which we made fun of each other for, and the Washington DC field trip, when we weren't allowed to sit next to each other on the bus.

The summer after eighth grade came and went, and we saw very little of each other. Our summers consisted of vacations and reading homework. When we did see each other, it was as if a day hadn't gone by, and we would jump back into the swing of things. They were for shorter periods of time though. Everyone seemed busy, and busy at different times. You would stay for dinner or we would get ice cream with my parents. We felt like we had to act more maturely around them because we were "becoming

young adults". But on the occasions that we were alone, riding bikes or playing basketball at the park, our imaginations ran rampant. We were still kids, even if our parents had other ideas.

Then high school started. We didn't have any classes together, and you hit a growth spurt within the first two weeks of the semester. The football coach recruited you, and I joined cross country.

We became our own people, separate from one another. We were no longer outcasts. The three elementary/middle schools had combined into one high school, so everyone was looking for friends. At first, we tried hanging out after school still, but our practice times were different and we both had lots of homework. We were parts of two different circles. You ate and practiced and partied with the football guys. I ate and practiced and had bonfires with the cross country team.

We were our own people. You focused on football, then basketball, then baseball. Each passion had its own season, and I just wasn't a part of that anymore. I focused on school. I took all advanced classes, joined nearly every club offered, played violin in the orchestra, and trained year-round for cross country and track. We went our separate ways.

You know, I think that was good for us. I think that before high school, we found our identities in one another. Before that fateful fourth grade day, I was a nobody. I only felt like I had become a person because you saw me as one, not because I did. Being forced to not center my days around you was hard at first. But it forced me to find confidence in myself. I had to make friends on my own. I had to get involved in things on my own. I had to spend my small amounts of free time with people who weren't you. I had to learn to find myself worthy of other people before I was brave enough to treat myself as such.

But I did it. I made good friends and dropped the toxic ones. It wasn't easy, but I knew what kind of friendships I wanted, what kind of friendships I deserved, because we had built such a great one back in the fourth grade.

I still remember the feeling that swelled in my chest junior year when I walked into Spanish 30 minutes early on the first day of school and you were already sitting in the classroom. I glanced at the seating chart and saw that you and I had been placed right next to each other. Our school was relatively large, and over the course of those three years, this was the first class we had been in together. We hadn't spent time together, just us, in years. We'd exchanged friendly "hellos" and smiles in the hallways, but we may as well have been strangers. I remember forcing myself to walk toward you. I'm still not sure why it was so hard for me to put one foot in front of the other.

My heart was fluttering, whether from excitement or anxiety, I wasn't sure. But I remember feeling hot and cold and sweaty and shivering all at the same time. You looked up at me as I sat at the desk directly next to you, and for the split second of seconds I could have sworn I saw surprise flicker in your eyes. But composed as ever, you gave me that grin that I used to know so well, and after a few minutes of awkward small talk, it was just like old times. We caught up, you spinning wild tales of late-night rides to

Cry Baby Bridge, the bridge on the outskirts of town that everybody knew was haunted, narrowly escaping death, and me spilling all the juiciest gossip that I had heard from the girls on the cross country team who were more popular than me.

Spanish began and ended in a flash, and I knew it was going to be my favorite class that year. At first, we would purposely show up before the bell rang so we could talk, and then we would walk out together until our inevitable departure in the hallway. Then we started choosing each other for every partner-based in-class activity and group project. Eventually, I went to one of your football games specifically to watch you.

Since your games were on Friday nights and my meets were on Saturday mornings, I usually wasn't allowed to go. If I did, it had to be a home game, and I had to leave at halftime. But one day, my cross country coach decided to sign us up for a night race. A Saturday night race. I begged my parents to let me go to the game. I told them I wanted to cheer you on, that we had become friends again. They always liked you, and the fact that it was a home game helped too.

They eventually said yes, and I stood in the student section, half paying attention and half talking to my friends. It was a close game, only a two-point difference, and I remember the nail-biting end. We kicked a field goal. If the kicker got it, we would win. He missed though; probably crumbled under the pressure.

The other cross country girls and I hung around after the game, buying the last of the concession stand popcorn and hot chocolate. Eventually, we all had to leave. As I walked through the gate separating the football stadium and the parking lot, I heard my name. I spun around to see you emerging from the locker rooms. You were sweaty and smelly, so I made sure that you knew it. You grinned one of those classic grins and tried to shove your armpit toward my nose. Laughing, I pushed you away and said that I was leaving. You were too, so we walked out to the parking lot together. Our cars were only a few spots away from one another, so as I opened my driver's-side door, I could hear you ask if I still liked milkshakes. Of course I did. So I texted my parents and we went to the 24-hour diner. This is the night that I credit for changing everything.

We both stayed up past midnight that fateful Friday, yet somehow I still managed to run the best race of my career on Saturday. A 15-second PR. And to make things even better, you were there, waiting for me at the finish. I didn't know that you would be there. You claimed that it was to repay me for going to your game the night before, but what you really did was start a trend of us constantly "repaying" each other. I would convince my parents to let me go to the football games, even the away ones, as long as I left after I talked to you at halftime. In return, you would come to my meets, even the really early ones. Sometimes you would get there late and only see the last part of my race, but I didn't care if you saw me run. I was just happy that you came.

Eventually, our seasons ended. You had gotten injured during your last game, a torn ACL. That meant that you couldn't play basketball and we had to come up with

new excuses to see each other. With every opportunity we saw, we would grab on tight with both hands. I would text you that I was going to the grocery to ask if you needed anything, I could drop it off after. You would figure that you may as well come with me, just to make sure you got what you wanted. You would text me after a holiday, remarking that the candy was probably on sale. I would suggest that it was imperative for us to go to the store and find out. You'd pick me up, or I'd pick you up, depending on whose idea it was.

Then Spring came. We had eaten at Chipotle together, to support a school fundraiser, of course. You drove. We got back to my house, but before I got out of the car, you asked me out on a date.

A real date. I was so excited that all I could do was nod my head and muster out a feeble "yeah." I got out of your car and scurried inside, rushing to my bedroom and closing the door behind me.

I FaceTimed my friends, group-chat-style. Practically squealing, I told them about the night's endeavors. I had been keeping them updated on all of our random "adventures"; also known as grocery trips, speculating whether or not you would ever actually ask me out. Now that you had, they were the first people I wanted to tell. They weren't exactly supportive though. They never really liked you. They thought that you were just a dumb jock who partied and toyed with girls, like all the other football guys. But they didn't know you like I did. I knew better.

The next weekend, we went on our date. A Chinese restaurant. You paid, and I overate sesame chicken. Then we got ice cream. You paid again, and I got a stomach ache from the large milkshake I had ordered. You laughed at my pain, but you also gave me some Tums that you had stored in your glovebox. On the drive home, you asked me to be your girlfriend. Of course I said yes.

Life was so amazing after that. Every second of free time we had, we spent together. Your house, my house, ice cream shop, hiking, picnicking, walking on the train tracks, we did it all, and we did it all together. I fell for you. I fell so hard. I plummeted into love.

Remember the dandelions? I hadn't wished on one of those since I was a kid. Since we were kids together. Before, it was just because I had grown up. I had forgotten about them. But now? Now I didn't need to. I didn't need to chase after dandelions anymore because you had become my new dandelion. My new source of hope and child-like joy. After two weeks of dating, we had our first kiss and my dandelion wish was finally answered. Not only were you my new dandelion; you also provided my fireworks.

That first month flew by. Then the second, then the third. We were a package deal. My parents had always been stricter than your mom, and they were worried that if we spent too much time together, we would neglect our friends. We didn't really care, but my parents didn't take no for an answer. So we made sure to start carving out time for them each week. I don't know what your friends thought of me, I never asked. But my friends still didn't like you.

They had heard rumors. Rumors about bad things that you had done to past girlfriends, cheating and ma-

nipulating. Rumors about what you and "your boys" did when you were together on the weekends, drinking and smoking. Rumors about you taking after your dad. At first, I grew concerned. I confronted you about the rumors, but you assured me that they weren't true. You opened up to me about mistakes you had made in your past and how much you regretted them.

You were so vulnerable, you started crying, and my heart broke for the pain you felt, yet simultaneously swelled with a stronger love for who you had become. I told my friends that I appreciated their concern, but the rumors weren't true. You had made mistakes, but they were things of the past that I shouldn't hold against you. I had done things I regretted too, and I knew you better than them anyway. Even if you hadn't been perfect before, you were perfect now, and more than anything I wanted to be perfect too. Perfect to you. Or at least good enough.

Yeah, there were a few times when I had to pick you up from a party, and you were completely plastered, and you would say some unfavorable things or get too handsy. Yeah, there were times when I would pick you up from home after your parents had a big fight and you would take out your frustration by yelling at me. Yeah, there were times when you would push me further than I wanted to go, or take parts of me without asking, or punch a hole in the wall because you were mad.

But it wasn't your fault. You were perfect, and I just wanted to be good enough.

My friends liked you less and less and told me that I should dump you. They said I deserved more, but you were everything, and how could I deserve more than everything? You knew how they felt, so you didn't like it when I chose to hang out with them instead of you, even though most of the time I was with them because you had canceled our dates to have a "boys' night".

You said that my friends were trying to turn me against you. They were jealous, so I shouldn't be with them. You were right, so I withdrew. When I asked why you kept canceling our dates, you told me that you needed to relax and get away from the stresses of life. How else were you supposed to do that except by drinking and smoking and breaking things on the weekends?

That's what everyone else did. When you said it, it made sense. And I had to focus on school anyway, I didn't need distractions. You were just doing me a favor.

I have a confession to make: I believed these things for a long time. I had forgotten that lesson I learned so long ago: that I was a person outside of you and that I deserved to be treated like someone worthy of respect. I knew, deep down, that something was wrong in our relationship. I never dove into that feeling though. I knew that if I did, I wouldn't like what I found, and I knew, no, I thought that the weight of missing you would be too much to bear. For the longest time, trying to see who you really were was like trying to walk through a concrete cloud. I wasn't ready to let you go. You were my dandelion and you gave me my fireworks.

But fireworks aren't always a good thing.

You brought passion into our relationship, that's for sure. But most of the time, that passion showed itself

through aggression. If I asked a stupid question, you would yell at me. When you had a bad day, you would punch the wall. If I was late to something, you would grab my arm and pull me out of others' earshot to ask why I didn't care about what was important to you. When your parents had a bad fight, you would hit the wall again. Then one day, it wasn't the wall that you hit. It was me.

I was stunned, and you apologized. You cried in my arms. I forgave you. But then you hit me a second time. Then a third. I started acquiring bruises that reflected those I remember your mother trying to hide. Now I was the one layering on makeup and wearing long sleeves, even when the weather didn't call for it. You stopped apologizing. You stopped crying. Instead, you made me believe that I was to blame. That it was my fault. Again, I believed you. You were perfect, and I was trying to be good enough.

Then it was the day after graduation. The rain was pouring and the wind was howling and your mood reflected the weather. Your parents had been fighting again so you'd left home and picked me up to spend time together before boys' night started. You were letting out your frustrations, hitting the steering wheel and cursing about your dad. I asked why your mom didn't just leave him, and all of a sudden you were cursing at me instead for suggesting that. I apologized and you told me to forget it. We stopped at CVS on the way back to my house, per my request. I ran in while you waited in the car, making sure to be fast. I didn't need you to get any angrier.

Apparently, I had taken too long anyway. I got back to the car and you yelled at me for not respecting your time. I kept apologizing but you kept yelling and I felt sick. When you dropped me off, you didn't even say goodbye before you went careening out of my driveway. I walked inside, grateful that both of my parents were at work so I could have the house to myself. My stomachache got significantly worse and I ran to the bathroom, just able to lift the toilet seat before throwing up. I still had my bag from CVS with me. I took out the pink box and took a deep breath before opening it up to pull out the pregnancy test. I followed the instructions and, after 5 minutes, looked at the stick. Two lines. I was pregnant.

And now I'm writing this letter. When I saw that positive test, it was like I had suddenly reached the end of a road and was staring down the edge of a cliff, deciding whether or not to jump. I knew how you would react to this. We had had scares in the past. I knew you would tell me to abort the baby. You would accuse me of sleeping around. I didn't know what to do.

It was really hard to keep this secret from you over the next few days as I thought about what future actions to take. I almost let the news slip more than once, especially during our good moments. Our time together would always begin well, overflowing with love and laughter. But then they would end equally badly, with you yelling at me or hitting me again.

Last night I looked at myself in the mirror. I looked at the bruises I had been hiding, and I felt like your mother was the one staring back at me in the mirror. I remembered her also trying to conceal her bruises. I remem-

bered you being sad and missing school sometimes when we were children. I didn't want my baby to grow up that way too. I remembered myself asking you why your mom doesn't just leave your dad. Maybe I should ask myself the same thing.

Do you remember the dandelions? I do. I remember when dandelions represented a dream. When they brought me joy and hope. I remember when you became the sensational embodiment of what I had once chased the dandelions for. I remember when you became too much. You gave me my fireworks, but I had stopped wishing for them long ago. I knew the risks I would be taking if I did leave you and the fear I would feel. You, who had been my whole world for so long. You, who had once brought me the brightest of joys and also the darkest of despairs. I didn't know if I could do it. You were perfect, and I just wasn't good enough. Right?

I told my parents. I told them everything. I told them how you treated me. I told them what happened with my friends. I told them I was pregnant. I told them I wanted to keep and raise the child. They were not happy about any of it and it was all I could do to keep my dad from marching over to your house. But in the end, they're supporting me, and we're moving away.

By the time you get this letter, I'll be gone. I'll be raising our baby in a loving household, somewhere where there are dandelions. And I'll be healing too. This is hard. I'm scared to leave you. I'm scared of what my life will look like without you. But it's not just about me anymore; now it's about my baby too. I know what kind of life I want my child to have, and I just don't think you can be a part of that anymore. I need to relearn that lesson I had mastered so long ago: that I'm a person outside of you. That I deserve to be treated with respect, and that our relationship no longer reflected that. I want my future baby to grow up knowing that, and to see it in me. And now, when I scrunch up my eyes and blow the wisps off a dandelion, I have something new to wish for. Something better.

Love,
Me

