

Dandelions by Gillian Drake

Words: 1503

" 'Scuse me, love. 'Scuse me!" Is she deaf or what? " 'Scuse me ..."

At last she looks up. Middle aged, grey hair, shopping bag with cats on it ... the others on the platform look the other way. They always do, like they're glad it's not them I'm asking. Pretending to see if the train's coming. Pretending they haven't seen me. That boy in the grey hoodie, he don't exist, no.

She looks like she might give me something. I've learned how to spot them."Spare a bit of change? I been sleeping under the bridge and I got no money for food."

I sees her go tense and she gets that look - is it sympathy or is she cross? Scared? Mouth goes in a thin line but I keeps looking down, keeps my voice low. Keeps on asking. She looks around, decides I'm not violent, not going to mug her.

There's weeds growing this end of the platform, them yellow dandelions poking through the gravel. I feels them squash under my feet. "Please." Hold out my hand with the few pence in it. She fumbles in her bag, opens her purse. A pound.

"Thank you -" ctd

Dandelions/1

"Haven't you got anywhere to go?"

Oh no. I don't want to get involved, just get onto the next one before the train comes and they all gets away. She wants a story for her pound, one of those.

"Isn't there a shelter or something round here?"

"I'm not from round here." I turns away. Starts walking. I don't want no questions, and besides - but she stops me, reaches for her bag, hands me this orange.

"Thank you." Thank you, thank you, thank you. I says it in my sleep...

"Vitamin C. You look like you need vitamins."

I set off again, quicken up, but she's walking alongside. Draws breath, for a lecture I suppose. A do-gooder. /ctd

Dandelions/2

"I'll give you something to eat. A meal."

What? Who is this? Social services? They don't operate like that. Some charity woman?

... Some perve? I looks around, see if there's a bloke somewhere.

"When did you last eat?"

When? Yesterday was it? That sandwich someone gave me, yesterday, whatever. My stomach heaves. I don't tell them everything but I'm not lying about the food and that. Not this time.

"I live just over there. I'll get you a hot meal." She points down the road. I could get away - but my legs goes all weak and I can feel my mouth filling up with spit. HUNGRY.

So I goes along with it, follows her down the road by the station, looking around all the time; and we're at the gate of a terrace house, end house, and she goes off along the side and I follows. I looks around, see it's easy to get away, low fence, and as long as I don't go in the house... What's her game? What's she after? Her, or her old man ... I can't see no sign of a man, though. /ctd

Dandelions/3

There's a sort of picnic table in the yard, table with benches attached like you see outside pubs, and she points to it. "Want to sit down? I won't be long."

So I'm like really tired, I don't get any sleep under that bridge and it's true I haven't eaten. It's true this time. So I sits down on the bench and she goes in the house and in a minute I looks up and around the garden like, and it's got grass and a lot of weeds. It's not like a tidy garden. All overgrown. Anyway, I 'm so hungry I start on the orange and before long she brings out a plate with eggs and potatoes, tomatoes and mushrooms and some green stuff. And bread.

"Thank you."

She sees the way I'm looking at the green stuff. "You look like you need the vitamins." She's got some sort of thing about vitamins, anyway it smells so good and I falls on it and don't look up and then she's back with a big mug of tea and a piece of cake and a paper bag with sandwiches in, and a bottle of water.

"Those are for later. Have a rest if you want."

"Thank you." / ctd

Dandelions/4

It's all I ever says, thank you. I drinks the tea, big gulps, and get started on the cake and it's good, so good I want to cry - *Oh look, he's crying, crybaby* - but I'm not going to do that - I'm never going to do that, cry, anyways she hasn't seen or pretends not to and she goes back in the house, yellow kitchen with them pink flowers in pots on the sill, radio somewhere, old people music - and comes back with another mug of tea.

What is it with her? Thinks I'm like her kid, I suppose, her son. They thinks like that, the women her age, they thinks, "If he was my son ..." then they gives me money, usually.

But now it's getting hot, sun up there shining down, and my stomach is full for the first time in days and I wait for the lecture, the questions, but they don't come. She leaves me there and I feels tired, so tired ...and the sun on my eyes when I shuts them is all patterns and blue and pink and I lays down on the bench thing and before I know it I'm asleep...

Then all of a sudden I'm awake again and I don't know where I am. The underneath of the bridge isn't there, them bricks and girders I sees every morning, all black with dirt, and I roll over, off the bench and onto the floor and I'm at eye level with them weeds. Bright yellow, the flowers, with them thick hollow stems, and I'm back picking them dandelions, a big bunch for Miss Thomas my teacher and I'm only a little kid and I takes them in to school because Miss Thomas she's kind and I want to give her a present. /ctd

Dandelions/5

Then the other kids sees me and it starts.

Dandelions!"

"Don't he know they're weeds?"

"Pee the bed like him! He picks them and that's why he pees the bed!"

Holding their noses. "Stinks! He stinks! Stinker!"

What school was that I can't remember, one of them. They were all the same, all ended the same. And then him my so-called stepfather ... there's all those times he hit me and I goes off in our yard and hides and lies down in them flowers , dandelions, all that ever grew there, and cries. I know exactly what they're like, the leaves with the jagged edges. The milky stuff inside, the awful bright yellow of them stinking weeds.

And they're everywhere here. Everywhere. The woman is gone, no sign. Door shut. Gone for the police, the social workers? But the back gate's open like a hint I should leave and I turn to go but before I know it I'm on my knees and tearing at the weeds, leaves, flowers and all, all of them, in a frenzy. Pulls them up by the roots and throws them on a heap, a huge

ctd

Dandelions/6

stinking heap. And they makes my eyes water and I can't see right or breathe proper but I don't stop, on and on till I've got them all and there's not one of them left.

"Stinker!"

And crying in the dandelions -

My eyes they're stinging and streaming but I'm not crying no, and I can hardly see for my eyes running and I runs too, I turns and runs out of the gate - down the street and past the station and past the railway bridge, running and running, bumping into people but I don't care and I don't know where I'm going but that don't matter either, just running and running ...

A few days later and I'm in another part of town, another bridge to shelter under. Another bridge, yeah, same black bricks though and metal girders, same cold ground, same stomach ache. Same crowds of people waiting for the trains. I holds out my hand with the few pence in it.

" 'Scuse me love ..." I keeps looking down, keeps my voice low.

ctd

Dandelions/7

Middle aged, grey hair, the right sort ... not her, though. This one's got a newspaper that she throws down and looks at me, filthy look, and walks off. It don't always work. But I takes the paper. It could be useful. And that night I looks at it and there's this headline. Kind Homeless Boy Cleared My Garden if anyone sees this boy tell him thank you.

Thank you.

Well, it's September now and the nights are getting chilly. I makes a fire with sticks and rags and all old stuff I've found under here, and I puts the paper on top. It'll burn all right that will, yes, it'll help keep me warm.

END

Dandelions/8