

Dandelions

“Mrs. Mallory?” Maisie looked up as the doctor stepped into the small hospital room she’d been occupying for the last few days. Maisie’s husband, Arthur Mallory, had been admitted with a stroke a few days before. She had just received word that Arthur was ready for discharge and was packing up his things. Maisie closed Arthur’s briefcase and stood, brushing lint off her slacks. “Is Arthur ready to go yet? He’ll be wanting to harvest his tomatoes soon,” she said, smiling. The doctor didn’t smile back.

“Mrs. Mallory, Arthur’s stroke was very severe,” he began. “He seems to have recovered well physically, but there’s still a problem with his memory. Arthur can’t remember anything that happened before last week. He thinks his life began last week and that he’s never been outside the hospital.” Maisie set the briefcase down slowly.

“He can’t remember *anything*? That’s 65 years!” she cried, trying to understand. The doctor rubbed his toe on the carpet.

“We don’t yet know if the amnesia is permanent. Any familiar place, person, or situation could bring back the memories.” The doctor’s voice seemed to fade in Maisie’s ears. *65 years? Gone?*

Maisie’s eye caught the faded photograph taped to Arthur’s briefcase, a picture of the two of them standing next to a wide field filled with dandelions. Long ago, when Arthur and Maisie had been newly married and looking for their place in the world, or at least a house to live in, their car had broken down beside the field. They had learned that a house beside the field was for sale, and they had bought it and moved to town.

Maisie set her mouth in a determined line. Arthur could *not* forget his life. She recalled the doctor's advice about familiar places bringing back memories, and planned her quest.

The next morning, Maisie managed to load Arthur into the car for their trip to town, despite his uncooperative attitude. "I told you that I don't like these outings," Arthur complained as Maisie's small Honda rolled along the well-traveled road to town. "The doctor says outings will make me more fatigued. I feel tired already." Maisie smiled and shook her head.

"We're going to visit your favorite place, Arthur," she said. "You'll be glad when we get there."

"The hospital cafeteria is the other way," Arthur retorted sourly.

Maisie parked the car in front of the public library, an old building full of even older books. Arthur had served as the director of the library before his stroke. Maisie pushed the door of the library open and breathed in the familiar scent of decomposing pages. "Do you remember what happened in this place?" she asked as they walked down the deserted aisles. Arthur shook his head stubbornly. Maisie sighed in frustration, remembering what Arthur couldn't.

When Arthur and Maisie had visited the local library for the first time after moving to the house on the dandelion field, Arthur had been horrified to note the lack of Homer, Herodotus, Plato, and Thucydides on the shelves. Arthur had confronted the bewildered desk attendant on the matter, becoming so passionate on the subject of ancient literature that he launched into one of his college lectures. The library staff, who had gathered to hear the speech, hired him on the spot for their library director position.

As they turned the corner into the fiction section, Maisie and Arthur were spotted by two old men perusing the shelves. Maisie recognized Bob Wattkins and Mallard

Withers, two of Arthur's old friends. Bob and Mallard didn't yet know about Arthur's stroke, and the situation could quickly become awkward if Arthur couldn't recognize his two best friends.

"Arthur! We took your advice and decided to reread the *Iliad* for book club," Bob called in a loud voice. Maisie noticed that his hearing aids were missing again. "I mean, you haven't really read a book 'til you've read it 16 times, am I right?" Bob broke into a wheezing chuckle. Mallard stayed silent, his perceptive pale blue eyes staring at Arthur. Arthur stared back.

"I'm sorry; do I know you?" Arthur asked. Mallard blinked.

"Time to go," Maisie decided, hurrying Arthur toward the door. She looked back over her shoulder at Mallard, who was still staring at them. "It's a long story," she called, pushing Arthur out the door. *And probably not one I'm going to tell any time soon*, she thought as she drove toward home.

Maisie slammed the front door of the house and angrily swiped the back of her hand over her wet eyes. She fought against the idea that Arthur might be gone forever, replaced with a sour, sedentary shell of a person who looked like Arthur but wasn't. Maisie pushed through the screen door that led out the back of the house. The door slapped shut with a sound reminiscent of a judge's falling gavel. Maisie's feet instinctively led her up a small hill and she sat down on the flat summit. Below her, the field seemed to move in golden waves whenever the wind blew down over the distant mountains. Maisie realized that the waves were made of small yellow flowers. She had walked to the dandelion field.

Maisie had a sudden urge to wrench a handful of dandelions from the ground, but old memories tugged in the back of her head and stayed her hand. *We are so fragile*, the memories whispered, *so easily shattered by one wrong move*. Maisie stayed

silent for a long time, listening to the wind and the memories until it was impossible to tell the two softly whispering voices apart.

The silence of the field was disturbed by the sound of huffing and puffing coming up the hill. Arthur heaved himself to the top and sat down a little ways from Maisie. Arthur picked a dandelion and stared at it, twisting it in front of his eyes. "It must have happened near here," he stated thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?" Maisie asked. Arthur looked over the dandelion to the great waving field below.

"Before this week, I had never been outside of the hospital," he said. "But I had dreams of other places. I remember a dream that happened near this field." He paused, trying to remember. "There were too many dandelions in the field to count. I thought it was a waste of a field. 'You can't do anything with dandelions,' I said. I remember that there was a girl in the field too, and she heard me complaining.

'You can do plenty of things with dandelions,' she said.

'You can't make buildings with them, like wood. You can't eat them; they're not veggies. They're weeds, and nothing can be done with weeds.'

'Dandelions are strange things. They can be a weed or a flower, depending on how you look at them,' the girl replied. 'If they are left on their own to destroy crops and make a lawn look ugly, then people think of them as weeds. But if you pick dandelions as a bouquet for your sick neighbor, or make their petals into jelly for a picnic, then they are a beautiful flower. One of the best skills in life is knowing how to turn a weed into a flower.'

"The girl taught me how to make flower chains with the dandelions, but then the dream ended and I woke up in the hospital. Then I was miserable, because I couldn't

remember who the girl was or how to make flower chains. It was all a dream.” Arthur frowned and set down his flower, as though resigning himself to fate.

Maisie heard her own voice echo in her ears- *the best skill in life is knowing how to turn a weed into a flower*. Arthur’s amnesia was the largest weed Maisie had run into in her life. She had spent the past day trying to remove the weed; to reverse a condition that could not be reversed. Maisie thought of her attempts to show Arthur the places where important things had happened. What if, instead of trying to get Arthur to remember places from the forgotten past, she helped create new memories in the present, ones Arthur could remember? Maisie wondered if she was able to let go of 35 years of memories and start again. It seemed an impossible task. *One step at a time*, Maisie thought. She would start with this field. Maisie had once had a reason to point out this field as special - *it happened near here; life and memories, joys and sorrows*. Now she would create another reason.

“I know how to make flower chains out of dandelions. I could teach you, if you want,” Maisie said. Arthur looked up hopefully.

“I’d like that. Where do I start?” he asked, looking at the vast field of flowers. Maisie smiled and picked two dandelions.

“We start right here.”