

DANDELION WISH

The baby had been born too early. Too small.

Livy stood on the driveway between her parents' house and the Mawhinneys'. The aspirin she had taken earlier hadn't gotten rid of the cramps in her legs. Her feet throbbed inside her sandals and the May sun beat down on her hair as if it had been the middle of July.

On the other side of the pristine white fence, Mrs. Mawhinney knelt in the grass. Her floppy straw sunhat, pinned to her thatch of curls, had a festoon of green ribbon on it to match her gardening gloves. "A month is a long time to be early," she told Livy. She stuck a pulling tool in the ground and yanked up a dandelion. "Now, I hear some of these doctors know their business pretty well these days. They know what to do with these babies." *Yank.* "Still, I think you ought to save your money, Olivia. I don't mean to discourage you, but you'll need that money later on."

Livy wished she could edge back around Daddy's Chevrolet and put its brown bulk between her and the older woman, or that she could creep back into the house and shut the door. It was too late to do that. It had been too late since the second Mrs. Mawhinney spotted her. In fact, it had been too late since the day Livy had slunk back here to her parents' house with her tail between her legs.

Yank. "You'll want to help your parents out," Mrs. Mawhinney said. *Yank.* "They didn't count on this, you know."

They didn't count on this? As if Livy had. As if Livy had wanted nothing in the world but to be here right now.

Mrs. Mawhinney pulled another dandelion with a sharp snap. Livy saw the broken taproot's white flesh staring through the dirt. "You're lucky, you know," Mrs. Mawhinney said. She drove the

puller back into the ground after the rest of the root. “Some girls in your position wouldn’t have had anywhere to go. Of course, you were a good girl growing up, so I guess your parents...”

Livy didn’t hear the rest. She was lucky? Her baby lay under a plastic shell in the hospital and Livy’s legs and head hurt and the front of her yellow sundress puckered over her stomach. She shouldn’t have tried to wear normal clothes again so soon. Maybe her body would never shrink back to the way it used to be.

She couldn’t talk back to Mrs. Mawhinney. Good girls didn’t do that. Instead she clamped her battered brown handbag under her arm and tried to smooth the front of her dress as if that would wipe her shame away.

Quick footsteps came down the walk behind her. From the other side of the car, Mama said, “Good morning, Cora.”

Mrs. Mawhinney put down the pulling tool and dusted dirt off her hands. “Good morning, Rose. I was having a talk with Olivia here.”

“I see that.” Mama came around the car, slim and elegant in a neat white blouse and beige skirt. Her powder-blue driving scarf shielded her hair. “Nice to see you, but we have to rush. So much to do.” She unlocked the passenger’s side door.

Mrs. Mawhinney said, “Yes, Olivia told me what you all were doing today. But I told her, I said, she ought to wait and see if -”

When Mama opened the door, a rush of hot air and the chokingly thick smell of leather upholstery caught Livy in the face. “Waiting and seeing won’t get things done,” Mama said. “We’re going to get ready as best we can.” To Livy she added, “Let’s go.”

Livy let herself carefully down onto the seat. The upholstery smell made her feel sick and the leather’s heat bit through her thin dress and into her bare calves. At least sitting took the pressure off her feet.

The car door shut with a solid thump. Livy clutched her purse in her lap, leaned back against the headrest and tried to hold her breath against the heat and the smell. In the side mirror she could see Mama standing very straight, looking somehow taller than she should be able to, facing Mrs. Mawhinney but not taking one step closer to the fence. Livy couldn't hear what they were saying. She didn't try.

After a minute, Mama came back around the car and got in. Livy gulped the breath of air from outside. She waited until the car eased into the street before she rolled her window halfway down, so that if Mrs. Mawhinney called anything after them, she wouldn't have to hear it.

At the bottom of the hill, at the corner of Stanhope and Bexhill, Mama said, "I thought we'd go to Coblenz. They have the best quality for the price."

Her voice sounded the way it always did now when she talked to Livy: as if, even in the stuffy car, they somehow breathed two separate batches of air. "Okay," Livy said. She closed her eyes and let the warm slipstream from the open window float across her face like a scarf.

The light breeze mussed her hair. She used to be able to twist it up into a knot, but it hadn't yet grown enough out of the pageboy Theo used to like. Stray strands tickled Livy's cheeks and the tip of her nose.

Theo. He didn't deserve her thinking of him. He probably wasn't thinking of her, wherever he was.

The morning after she told him she was pregnant, she had woken up in their one-bedroom apartment to find the bed empty beside her. The sheets looked horribly smooth pulled up over his pillow. Somehow she had already known she would not find him sipping a mug of coffee in their galley kitchen or leaning on the rail of their tiny back porch. The single toothbrush in the bathroom and lone pair of slippers by the bed had only confirmed what she knew. His closet door stood open a sliver, enough to see the emptiness inside. If only her own body had been as empty.

How fast and how silently he had managed to strip the place. She had stood for a long time in front of that closet door. Already, with the pieces of her wrecked life scattered around her, she had known where she would have to go. What choice did she have?

No, Theo wasn't thinking of her. If he had been, Livy wouldn't have been here in this car with Mama right now: she would have been with her husband, where she belonged. Even so, she couldn't help remembering how, on this road, he would have hit the gas and rolled both windows in his battered orange coupe down all the way. He would have clamped the wheel with one hand while the other, fingers curled together like a baseball mitt, hung out the window to catch the air. Livy could still see his hands clearer than she should.

Those same square fingers had run down her bare arms lightly enough to make goosebumps spring up on her skin. Those palms, callused from lawnmower handles in the summer and shovels in the winter, had cupped her cheeks. So she didn't have to work to picture them now, the same way she didn't have to work to feel the thumpa-thump of the bass pounding through the coupe's upholstery and floor when Theo cranked up the radio to blast Jerry Lee Lewis and Bobby Darin.

The sun fell on Livy's closed eyes, turning the darkness hot orange behind her lids. She saw Theo's hand on the steering wheel and his sunburned forearm with twists of dark hair springing out of it. She traveled up that forearm to the elbow, where the edge of the sleeve of his favorite shirt touched his skin. The shirt was faded denim with a patch of brightly flowered cloth across the chest. Livy followed the bright patch to the row of white buttons that ran down the breastbone, and there was shirt's open collar, framing a triangle of sunburned skin. And there was the round hollow of his collarbone, and the line of his neck...

Livy opened her eyes. Glare off the road made them smart. The half-formed shape of Theo's face burned away.

The Chevrolet pulled up at the intersection with Fitzgerald Street. Before Livy could stop herself, she glanced out the window and traced the gray line of Fitzgerald until it disappeared around a curve.

Mama said, “We’ll go there later, after we take the things home.”

Livy jerked her eyes away from the window. How had Mama seen her looking? She knew she ought to say “Yes,” or “Good,” or even, best of all, “Can’t we go now?” She ought to want to go first thing in the morning and stay till last thing at night, but how could she, when she wasn’t allowed to do anything there except sit helpless? If she had wanted to go anyway, maybe she and Mama could breathe the same air.

The sign for Rockvale Center came up on the left, blue neon letters on a white backboard. Mama turned into the lot and parked as close to the entrance of the Coblentz Store as she could. Livy opened her door before the ignition shut off. Heat from the baking asphalt beat up against her bare legs and the sun hit her hair hard enough to scorch.

The store was a single big box of a room with a wooden floor and tall windows. Ceiling fans ran incessantly. Long bars of sunlight lay on the floor and lit up the racks and shelves. Dust swirled, sparkling.

A clerk in a gray pinstriped suit hurried over. His shiny black shoes rapped on the floor. “Good morning, ladies. May I help you?”

Mama drew her shoulders back. She had taken off her driving scarf and her hair gleamed in a shaft of sun. Livy’s hair was the same color, exactly like milk chocolate. Theo had once said it was the first thing he had noticed about her.

“Good morning,” Mama said. “We’re looking for baby clothes.”

“Yes, ma’am. How old is the baby?”

Mama looked at Livy, who felt herself redden. “Newborn,” she mumbled.

The clerk's little eyes, far away behind thick glasses, took in Livy's dress and the shape of her stomach. "Your child, miss?"

Miss. Livy had taken her wedding ring off months ago, when she first came back to her parents' house. She should have kept it on. "Yes," she whispered.

A smile glided across the clerk's face, as smooth as milk. "Congratulations. Is it a boy or a girl?"

Why did he act like it was something to celebrate? Prissy little man in his prissy pinstriped suit and shoes. For one second Livy let herself see Theo's strong square hand again, his fingers bunched into a fist...

"Livy," Mama said.

"It's a boy." Livy gripped her handbag tight in the crook of her arm and stared down at its crumpled zipper as if she had never seen it before.

"Congratulations," the clerk said again. "Follow me, please." The black shoes rapped their way to the back of the store. Mama followed, head up, shoulders back. Livy trailed behind.

Racks and shelves went past in a blur. The waxy, lemony smell of floor polish made Livy wish she hadn't eaten breakfast. The clerk stopped in front of a corner shelf. "Here we are."

"Thank you," Mama said. "We'll take a look."

"Take your time." The black shoes mercifully rapped away.

Livy looked at the piles of tiny clothes. There were layettes and onesies, shirts no bigger than a handkerchief, socks so tiny that one would barely have fit over Theo's thumb. There were pastel blues and pinks, greens and yellows, all soft and clean and perfect.

A week ago, blood had stained Livy's sheets. The glass doors of the tan building on Fitzgerald Street had swished open to let her into the throat-burning stink of disinfectant and a haze

of white fluorescent light. She lay on a narrow white mattress while waves of pain piled on her like heavy quilts.

After, when the worst had ended, they had put a bundle in her arms. A tiny red squinched-up face. Arms as thin as pencils. They had only let her hold it for a minute before they took it away again.

Mama picked up a blue-and-white striped shirt. “What do you think of this?”

For an instant, Livy imagined the scrap of fabric spread out over Theo’s callused palm. Mama said, “It’ll be big for now.” She could have been talking to any stranger woman she had decided to help. “He’ll grow into it. They grow so fast, you know.”

“Okay,” Livy mumbled. She forced herself to take the shirt. The fabric felt so thin that her bitten-down fingernails could have torn it.

The baby’s skin had been too red. His shallow chest, even to her inexperienced eyes, had heaved uneasily as if the lungs inside didn’t know what to do with air. *“A month is a long time. You ought to save your money, Olivia.”*

Mama had a white onesie. “You’ll want a few of these. They’re easy to manage and it’s nice and warm now. He can wear them all summer.”

Livy took another scrap of fabric. She could have crumpled it and the shirt together in her hands. Mama touched the pile of onesies. “You look through these and pick a couple more you like. I’ll look at sleepers.”

Livy shuffled forward. She held the two pieces of clothing slack in her fingers, but didn’t touch the pile. Mama held up a blue flannel sleeper with a yellow duck on the chest. “How about this one?”

Livy shook her head. She stared at the brown straps of her sandals, stretched across the tops of her swollen feet. “Do we have to do this now?”

For a second she didn't think Mama had heard. Then a strong hand gripped her chin.

"Olivia North. Look at me."

North. Theo's name. The surprise of it dragged Livy's head up. Mama said, "You need to get yourself together. You have responsibilities."

Livy's fingers went limp. The baby clothes fell on the floor. "You don't have to tell me I was wrong."

"Olivia."

"I shouldn't have married him. I know it's my fault."

Theo North, Yard Work. Livy Brennan was a good girl. Livy Brennan shouldn't have looked at him, but he pushed the mower back and forth across the neat velvety lawn, and her eyes rested on those hands and traveled up the sunburned arms with the taut lines of muscle under the skin. She took in the faded denim shirt with the patch of color across the front, and the dark sweat stains under his arms and across his back, and his broad shoulders and deep chest. What high school boy had ever looked like that? And even then she kept looking, noticing the way the dark curly hair sprang up on the triangle of skin inside his open shirt collar, and the way the faded sweat-stained cloth lay against his sunburned neck, and finally her eyes inched up the last tiny distance to his face.

Not handsome. Square, with a crooked nose, a hard jaw and stubble blackening the chin. But he saw her watching him, and he looked straight into her as if every thought she had ever had hung shining up in the sky for him to see.

His eyes were blue, the color of smoke. They had a laugh and a dare in them. Livy Brennan was a good girl, but those eyes held the whole world.

In the store, in front of the piles of baby clothes, Mama held Livy's chin tightly enough to hurt. "This isn't the time," she said.

Livy whispered, “Mrs. Mawhinney said we shouldn’t buy clothes yet. She said he’s too little. He probably won’t live.”

The tiny red face in the folds of the white blanket. Those eyes had opened once while Livy held him. They were blue, the color of smoke.

She didn’t notice when Mama let go of her chin. Then fingers closed around her arm and she stumbled in her mother’s wake down the row of shelves.

At the cash register, the pinstriped clerk smiled. “Did you find everything you need?”

“Yes, thank you.” Mama sounded as calm and polite as if she were passing the time of day with a neighbor. The clerk reached for the pile on the counter. Livy watched tiny clothes move through the sparkling dust in the air. The blue striped shirt. A white one. A green one with a white teddy bear on the front. Three onesies. Two sleepers. When had they picked up all those things?

She heard a snapping noise. Mama had opened her purse.

No. Livy fumbled for her handbag and unzipped it, but Mama shook her head and counted money out of her own wallet. Then the shop bell jingled again and they were back outside in the sunlight.

In the car, Livy sat with the white paper shopping bag on her lap and her handbag at her feet. The heat wrapped around her like a wet towel. She wanted to open the window, but her skin felt so thin, her face so swollen and fragile, she thought the breeze might tear it.

Mama didn’t say a word. Livy stared at the dazzling surface of the road. Ahead, at the intersection with Fitzgerald Street, the traffic light was green. Maybe it would stay that way and they could sail right through it.

The light changed. The Chevrolet pulled up at the intersection. Livy closed her eyes, not to see up the road toward the hospital, where the baby lay in a tiny cot with that plastic shell over him. The chair beside the cot was made of plastic too, hard and green. The edge of the seat dug into the

backs of Livy's thighs when she sat and watched the baby sleep with his bare red chest jerking up and down. The doctors said she should not touch him, not with a fingertip or even a breath.

"Livy," Mama said.

Livy opened her eyes. Maybe Mama was going to get angry at her. For a second she even wished she would.

Mama said, "I'm going to tell you something."

Livy couldn't read her expression. She tried to straighten up in the seat, even though her body wanted to melt into the upholstery, or maybe turn into mist and blow away. "Yes, ma'am."

The light changed. Mama looked back at the road and pressed the gas pedal. "When you were a baby," she said, "one afternoon your father was at work and I was home with you, and Hap Mawhinney knocked at the door."

Hap Mawhinney was Mrs. Mawhinney's husband. Livy didn't know what this had to do with anything. Mama rolled her window down partway. The fresh air played with her scarf and washed across Livy's face, as cool as a damp cloth. Mama went on, "Hap told me that he'd locked himself out of his house. Cora wasn't home. He asked me if he could borrow an axe."

"An axe?" From somewhere outside herself, Livy heard her own surprise.

"Yes," Mama said. "He wanted to break the front window so he could get in."

Break the window? The Mawhinneys' bay window was one of the prides of Mrs. Mawhinney's life. In good weather, she washed it at least once a week. Mama said, "Now, this all might make more sense if I tell you that I could smell the whiskey on him from halfway across the porch."

Livy straightened up to stare at Mama's profile. Tall, gangly Mr. Mawhinney always wore suits and perfectly pressed shirts and ties. He sold insurance for a company in the city, but he looked

like an investment banker. “Whiskey?” Livy said. She felt like a parrot, repeating every word she heard. “He was drunk?”

Mama glanced at her. “You’ve seen him walking home from the bus stop after work,” she said. “You’ve seen those brown bags he always has.” That was true. Ever since Livy was little, she could remember Mr. Mawhinney walking past their house with his briefcase in one hand and a squat brown bag in the other. Mama said, “Why do you think Cora never lets him drive their car?”

The Mawhinneys’ blue Cadillac sat in their driveway for the whole neighborhood to see, but come to think of it, Livy had never once seen Mr. Mawhinney get behind the wheel. The car sat there all day while he was at work, unless his wife went shopping. Why hadn’t Livy wondered about that before?

Stanhope Road came up on the left. Mama signaled and made the turn. “Now,” she said, “that day he locked himself out, Hap could have done all sorts of more sensible things. He could have used our phone to call a locksmith, or he could have tried to get hold of Cora, or at the very least he could have stayed at our place till she got home. But I gave him the axe and went back inside, and after a few minutes, I heard the glass smash.”

Livy clutched the bag of clothes in her lap. “He really did it?”

Mama glanced at her again. Livy saw a smile play around her mouth. “He did.”

Livy pictured the bay window with the glass broken out, and Mr. Mawhinney trying to climb through headfirst, his long legs in their elegant pants thrashing around in the air. Before she knew it, she burst out laughing.

Mama joined in. The small neat houses on Stanhope glided past, and there Livy and Mama were, laughing together in the fresh air that streamed through the open window. Finally Livy caught her breath. “What happened then? What did Mrs. Mawhinney say?”

“I don’t know. Hap got the door open and brought the axe back over before Cora got home. In a couple of weeks, they had a new window. Cora never said a word to me about it. I’m not even sure she ever found out where he got the axe. But do you know what?”

“What?”

They pulled up at the stop sign with Bexhill, next to a bank of lavender azaleas. Mama turned to look at Livy. “That’s why I gave it to him. Because I already knew all about Cora.”

For a minute Livy didn’t know what she meant. The mailboxes on Stanhope went past, and their own came up, with the neat letters spelling “Brennan” lined up on the post. Mama pulled into the driveway. On the other side of the white fence, Mrs. Mawhinney’s green ribbon fluttered in the breeze as she inched on her hands and knees through the grass, scanning for dandelions.

Then Livy understood. “Mama, when Adam’s old enough, I’ll teach him to wish on dandelion seeds.”

She didn’t know where the words had come from. After all, according to some people, her tiny, fragile, too-early baby might never come home at all. But when Mama looked at her, Livy knew the two of them pictured the same thing: the seeds dangling from their tiny white parachutes, hovering in the air and drifting wherever the breeze took them. Even between the bars of the pristine white fence.

Mama’s mouth twitched. “Good. Now let’s get busy.”

Livy opened her door and pulled herself out of the car. The sun streamed down on her like a hot shower.

This afternoon, the glass doors at the hospital would swish open to let her in. Down a disinfectant-smelling hall, she would find a little cot with a plastic shell over it, and a waiting empty chair.

Livy held the clothes bag tight and looked out over the grass. Paint-bright yellow splashes dotted it everywhere.

Yes. She could see him there on the velvety lawn, her son Adam, a sturdy little boy in a T-shirt and shorts. His arms and legs would be sun-brown. One small, square hand would grip a dandelion stem. Above his fingers, the head of the flower would be a perfect white sphere of seeds.

His mouth would open into an “O” when he drew breath to wish. His milk-chocolate hair would gleam in the sun. His eyes would have a laugh, and a dare, and wonder in them, and they would be blue, the color of smoke.