

## **Yellow in the Dark**

Anissa Ljanta

He had declared war on weeds. The ropey tails of seeding plantain, traditional thistle foe, clover, everything was fair game but Harold saved a special vehemence for dandelions.

Rose quite liked them. The cheery yellow heads made her smile. There was no colour in their house. Everything was brown. The formica of the kitchen bench, the plastic covered couches in the drawing room, the starched crinkle of their summer sheets. Brown. Brown. Brown.

The seasonal changing of the sheets was always Labour Day.

“Everything in its place and at the right time”, Harold would say.

It was Harold, Mr Rowe, Sir or Father. Being called Harry put the man into an angry spin for days. The grim corners of his mouth heralded nothing good for Rose.

She looked around, startled out of her thoughts by the grandfather clock chiming. Panic set her heart racing. Rose weighed all the things she had to do against the time until Harold returned.

Assemble the apple pie, whip the cream with a quarter teaspoon of vanilla essence and a teaspoon of icing sugar, fold the newspaper and place next to his armchair, pick-shuck-steam the corn, set the table, freshen up and change her dress. Harold hated it when she served dinner wearing the same clothes she'd done housework in.

Rose looked down at the letter in her hands. Jane's uneven scrawl lay languid on a sheet of refill paper. The sort the children used to have for school. She wondered idly why her daughter still had school paper. Jane had barely gotten to fifteen before she had fled. She'd taken a hairdressing apprenticeship of all things. Such a smart girl to go into the trades.

Harold had been apoplectic. Not that Jane saw. She was long gone. Rose had made sure of that.

She folded the letter until it was a tiny square that fit into the secret pocket she had sewn into the inside of her apron. This letter followed the same formula as the others. A few lines on what Jane had been up to, then a plea for Rose to come and stay. To leave him. Lately Jane had taken to threatening to talk to the police.

Rose stood, smoothing her apron over her dress. Crisp floral in shades of brown. Making the final calculations to get everything done before the clock struck six, she moved, with her usual precision, to the back door, and into the garden.

Picking corn always brought back memories of Jane and Edward.

There were good times. Mostly outdoors, where the children couldn't make a mess that Harold might chance upon. Rose clutched her stomach at the thought of little Eddie. Her economy of movement usually extended to her thoughts, but he sneaked in sometimes.

With the smell of freshly cut grass, visions of him building giant nests of clippings.

With the rain, the muddy bottoms of his corduroy trousers.

So much energy in that boy. Protecting him from Harold's steely gaze and barbed tongue had been a challenge.

Rose's fingers caressed the cornsilk of each cob after she snapped them free of their moorings. The silk was the same colour as Edward's baby hair.

Her gaze went to the back of the garden beyond the big trees. The place Harold called the family graveyard. Three generations of Rowe's had lived here. Portraits frowned out from their oily frames all the way up the main staircase of the house.

There were five people buried in the graveyard. Four had headstones. Rose had risked only one argument with her husband in the thirty-one years they had been married and it was about

the missing headstone. Rose rubbed her left arm. It hadn't healed well, it stuck out at a funny angle and hurt when rain was coming. Harold had set it himself. Their family didn't go to the doctor.

Three ears of corn safely in her basket, Rose stooped to clip three sprigs of rosemary to go with the lamb. With secateurs. Harold hated ripped stems. Rose liked working with her hands, still kneaded her bread the old way even though Jane had sent her one of those newfangled bread making machines. It was still in the cupboard. Rose took it out and dusted it every month. Buffed up the chrome. Pretending that Jane was coming to visit even though the likelihood of Jane returning was about the same odds as Edward coming through the door.

The moment she registered the thud of the secateurs landing in her basket, Rose caught a glimpse of yellow through the trees. The garden dropped away, and the breath tangled in her. Rose's eyesight wasn't the best long distance these days and she squinted trying to see better. That yellow. It was the same sunny hue as the woollen hat she had knitted for Edward. He had been wearing it the last time she'd seen him. The yellow of it had made her smile as she shooed him outside to play ball. Harold had erupted in fury at the colour.

"Inappropriate" he bellowed, "The boy is nancy enough with you mollycoddling him, without yellow for god's sake."

Rose moved into the shadow of the big trees that framed the graveyard, her footfall loud on dry leaves. And there it was.

Renegade yellow. A dandelion.

She stood in wonder. The last dandelion flowers she could remember seeing had been clutched in Eddie's hand. He had loved making wishes. Harold was vigilant in his war and this small rebellion of yellow seemed to Rose like an omen of good in the dark.

Rose picked the flower and held it up to an errant ray of sun slicing through the shade of the trees, drinking in the happy of it. The basket was forgotten, hanging on her good arm.

Her eyes followed the ray of light to the ground, where another miracle waited. A dandelion clock. A wisp of a ghostly ball. Rose was transported back to Edward's last days. He had loved the graveyard, the one place his wildness wasn't out of place.

She tucked the flower behind her ear and bent to pick the dandelion clock. Rose walked back through the trees to the garden holding it tenderly. The faint chimes of the grandfather clock calling out its warning through the trees.

Rose raised the dandelion clock to her lips and blew, making her wish. Hearing little Eddie's sincere instructions echoing through the years.

"Wish for something Mother! Your heart's desire, go on!"

She did. Her outbreath carried worlds of hope.

The dandelion seeds, loosened from their anchoring parent, drifted back to the shadows. Rose swallowed a mad desire to go after them all and bring them safely back to the light, but she could hear the discordant clatter of the metal pot lid on the pan of water she'd left to boil. The thought of Harold's return from town hall had her heart lurch and hurry back to the kitchen, but not before folding the spent dandelion stalk into the tiny pocket in her apron with Jane's letter.

Rose had barely enough time to change into an evening dress before the clock struck six.

Heart hammering, hands fluttering over hair, tying her apron as she took the stairs.

Harold liked her to be at the door when he arrived home, to kiss his cheek and take his coat.

She waited, stilling her breath. Preparing herself. Running through the choreography of the evening ahead. The same as every other evening.

She heard the front gate and the tread of feet approaching.

Rose took a deep breath and rehearsed a smile, but the shadows behind the decorative glass of the front door showed two people instead of one. Perplexed, Rose opened the door to the police. The big officer took off his hat and said, “Mrs Rowe, may we come in? I’m afraid we have news it would be better to sit down for.”

Rose took them through, fingers tracing the outline of the square of letter and dandelion stalk through the brown of her apron.

Harold had been found dead. At his desk, his customary three o’clock on the dot cup of tea still warm but pooling over the account book he’d been bent over.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Mrs Rowe”, this was the smaller of the officers, though his face revealed he wasn’t sorry at all.

“I’m not sorry”, Rose surprised herself by saying. “He wasn’t very nice.”

And she had taken them out to the graveyard where she had returned from the shops those years ago to find fresh diggings, Harold’s story of Eddie running away from home assaulting her ears.

Later, mother and daughter took great care planting up the mound of his grave with dandelion plants. They’d ordered a special headstone. Etched into the hard cold stone were five letters.

Harry.