

A journey about figuring out the parts of life that school and parents do not explain: being poor, falling in love, deciding a future, hiding family secrets, and being gay. Can Josephine, aka Yonder, survive long enough to understand the past and find a new future?

DANDELIONS

by Jennifer Buck

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Jennifer Buck

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First Edition

So odd
We are pretty weeds
Planted in the ground
A white star burst at the end
We wave
Eventually someone picks us
The wind blows
And like the end of a dandelion we are gone
so odd
we live
we could go freely
no passport
anywhere
yet
like a dandelion we sit here in the ground and dream.
-Yonder

Chapter Three

Ma'am had one look. If you only looked at Ma'am and she never spoke, you would think that she was just a bored and sad old woman. However, even though her face never moved from a wrinkled frown, she was very colorful with her words and the tone of her voice could convey everything. You especially knew the severity of your punishment by the mere annunciation and volume of your full name spoken from several feet away. Ma'am never said anything just to talk. You never saw her create small talk and other women never came over to sit, play cards, and gossip. Ma'am was all business. She was either cooking, overlooking the cleaning, ordering around the people working in the chicken coops, praying, or going through paperwork in her room.

I did not dare ask her about our family, her life, her parents, or what she thought of anything. I simply answered her when spoken to. What I learned of Ma'am came from my Uncle Teddy, an Uncle who liked to stop by after working on the railroad. He would become the storyteller once he would finish off

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a whole case of Budweiser. Uncle Teddy became very wise after a large quantity of beer.

“You see Josephine, Ma’am has seen the worst that life has had to offer. She saw a time when people were hungry, poor, and addicted to misery. I think she always felt that if things were in order and there were rules that she could keep some misfortune away. We always had rules, religion, and a schedule growing up but never love. She kept that from us so we would not long for something that she could never really give. She was strict with us so we wouldn’t end up like everyone else. Yet, despite her best efforts, her husband died a drunk and all of us kids have been a disappointment. She tries even harder with all of you. She will not give up. That is for sure.” Uncle Teddy spoke wisely but always ended up falling asleep in the middle of a story face down in the yard.

Ma’am was stern about how one did speak when spoken to. She did not stand for slang. She did not stand for cursing. She did not stand for incorrect English. If she knew the words I had learned from my uncles, aunts, and cousins she would surely whip every single one of us. At the age of eight, I learned pot, toke, stoned, blackout, loony bin, po-po, domestic

issues, and flashbacks to name a few words that my aunts and uncles taught me.

My Uncle Gib sold pot. Whenever Ma'am would leave for mass, my uncles and aunts would take a toke out back behind the chicken coops and get stoned. Aunt Dale was the only one who never showed up. I heard my aunts say that she would go drinking down on the south side of the railroad tracks and blackout a day or two before returning to her kids. I always knew this had happened when my cousins Dale and Dana Anne ended up at Ma'am's for a few days. Her husband would drop them off and go looking for her. This would end up in the cops calling Ma'am about a domestic issue. The po-po are what everyone called the police and it was amazing how many of them would run, including the kids, when we would see the black and white cars come speeding through the orange dust of the roads and up Ma'am's driveway. Someone was always going downtown for the night after a Saturday night on the farm.

Trevor usually showed up on a Monday with his dad Fern. Ma'am would tell my Uncle Fern that he was the best of her kids to try and make him feel better about himself. Trevor had a mother who died shortly after he was born. Uncle Fern was always smiling and

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kind to Trevor when we were around. I learned that this was not always the case. Uncle Fern had been to Vietnam before he was married and had Trevor. Over there, he was captured. His kindness was at times overcome by the flashbacks as Trevor called them. During these flashbacks, he would treat Trevor like a war buddy, giving Trevor a gun and making him sit in the trenches to fight. The trenches were really two manholes on the lot they lived on and it always ended with Fern getting in trouble for setting bombs off on the property. Shortly after this happened, Trevor would be at Ma'am's to torture me for a few days while Uncle Fern rested at Cherry Hill - or as Trevor called it - the loony bin.

While Ma'am was away at mass on Sunday, my aunts would commence a gossip session around the picnic table and have a good toke. My uncles always ended up inside the house, eating what was left of the fried chicken, drinking beer, and watching Sunday Night Wrestling on TV. It was easy to sneak around with Ma'am gone and everyone else in an altered state of being. I would always make my way back to the tall honeysuckle bush near the outside table. Normally, the conversation my aunts had was about women in town, their husbands, their boyfriends on the side, or how

they would one day meet the right man and move away from here. On this night, they were discussing Aunt Birdie running away.

“Well even if she left with a colored, at least Birdie got the hell away from here.”

“I think he was half wet back, half colored.”

“He said he was going to take her to California. Something about him being a writer or artist or some shit.”

“You know most of those men in Hollywood are fairies.”

“Come on, not every man in Hollywood is a homo.”

“Whatever, Liberace, Elton John, Rock Hudson.”

“They are obvious. Fairies are obvious just like some of those dykes are obvious like that Billie Jean King”

“You know who is going to be a fairy? That little Solomon boy that belongs to the rich Carpenter family who walks with his quick little walk and always looks so pretty.”

They all erupted in laughter.

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“You ever worry about Josephine sis?”

“Worry about what?” my mother asked.

“Playing with the boys all the time, fighting with you over wearing girl’s clothes, hell even fighting with the boys...I mean you worry she is like one of them? Like one of them dykes?”

I did not understand completely what they were talking about but I felt like one of my secrets had been told. I stood very still waiting for my mother to answer.

“What are you doing outside child?” It was the tired and irritated voice of Ma’am standing behind me.

“I had a bad dream and was looking for Mom,” I quickly thought of the lie.

I waited to be told to go get a switch but just as I was about to accept my punishment, Ma’am looked through the honeysuckle bush and saw her daughters drinking beer, passing a joint, and laughing. She saw one smoking a cigarette and then heard one say the word penis. At that, she picked up the yard rake that was leaning against the house and went charging out of the bushes. I had never seen a table full of grown

women scream and run like that. I could see my aunts and mother screaming, ducking, and trying to run.

Ma'am was yelling at the top of her lungs while swinging her rake, "This is not a bar! This is not a hair salon! This is not a whore house!"

I wondered how long Ma'am had been standing behind me listening. The next day Ma'am asked to speak to me alone. She never just sat and talked to you unless she was about to whip you and wanted you to understand why God wanted her to do it first. I knew this was going to be serious. Ma'am was standing in the kitchen cutting up cucumbers. She motioned for me to come and stand with her, handed me a knife, and showed me how to cut the cucumbers up.

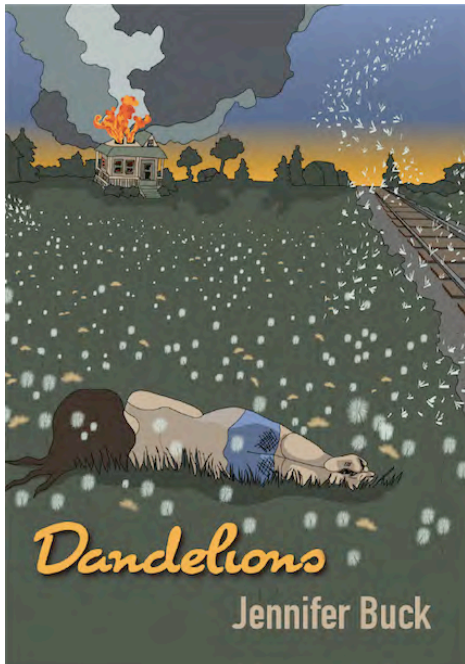
"Josephine, you need to learn how to be a lady and stop acting like a tomboy. You are going to spend time with me in this kitchen and learn how to cook and clean. No more of that roughhousing outside nonsense for you because you need to not play with boys. The bible tells us much about sin. However, sin has developed into so much more with time these days. It is the duty of our priests, our church, and our elders to teach us about avoiding sin. You are too young to attend mass with me and your mother refuses to allow

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you to go. So, it is up to me to teach you right from wrong here in this house. You see Josephine, as a woman, you have an obligation to God. You are to learn to keep a house, cook, clean, and marry a man so you can keep him right in his ways and grow a family with him. The right man will look for the quality of a woman who is like the women in the bible. All that nonsense your aunts and mother speak of when it comes to women is of no concern to you. They get the men they get by not being good Catholic women. You will learn from me. You will stop dressing like a tomboy. You will learn to blossom. You will not be bound for hell. You will become a good woman who is a good wife. I did not spend enough time with my children like this one on one but I am going to do it with you. You are going to listen and become a good woman. Do you understand?"

"Yes Ma'am." That is all I could say.

Even though I wanted to become a writer and marry Lynda Carter I agreed with her so I would not get into any more trouble. Plus, I was becoming more and more concerned about going to Hell. This place that I lived in now was bad enough.



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