

Dandelion Yellow

by Matthew Roberts

I.

There were fragments every day.

A wrinkled smile.

A set of olive-green eyes fluttering to sleep.

That iron-grey knot she somehow fit her hair into.

But he always stopped himself before the images sharpened, before the figure of his wife could begin to go about her housework, as of old, as though she were still with him. He instead directed his attention outward, where the golden stalks of a rich, sweeping, endless field blew softly toward him on a warm wind. Overhead, a palatial cloud passed by, sending unthreatening shadows across the sunlit expanse.

Chester stood up from his little bench with a little sigh and leaned on the railing of his elevated front porch, surveying the kaleidoscopic movements of the sunlight upon his farmland.

For a fleeting instant, his mind acknowledged the rich beauty of the crops, and the harvest surely due from them.

But their moment had not yet come. Making peace with Time's impatient temper, he sat down again, and reminded himself to dwell on the life still ahead of him.

But he was old, and Time did not take well to being ignored.

Somewhere on the powder-blue horizon, an old, classic pickup truck of the same color approached, brushing aside stalks of wheat and becoming more and more distinct from the sky. Like a zipper, the golden reeds indignantly righted themselves until the truck, breaking free of the field, rolled up to the edge of Chester's property. Then, a young man in bleached-white overalls disembarked and strolled up to the house, whistling "Go Tell It on the Mountain" as he went.

"Mornin', Chester!" he called, climbing the stairs to the balcony on which the old man sat.

"Mornin' yourself," Chester grunted, scooting over.

The young man sat down.

"Fine day," he said at length. "Hope you haven't been thinking too much."

"I been thinking quite a bit, Gabriel," Chester replied. He paused. "About Penny, y'know."

The visitor's gaze turned toward Chester and lingered there for a minute.

"I know, Chester," Gabriel said, his voice softening. "Pop and I—we're both concerned about you. He sent me over to see if I could take your mind off it a while."

Chester's eyes seemed to reach out into the farthest ends of the field.

"I'm left with no other option than to keep vigil here," he said. "Have you ever lost anyone? Don't you know what it's like?"

“That’s an odd question to ask of me.”

For a moment, neither man spoke.

“And I think you’re confused, Chester. I don’t think you’re doing her no good, dwelling on it. You’re a man of faith, just as I. You know this separation’s temporary.”

“But I can’t—”

“That’s why Pop sent me. He has a task for you, if you’re up for it.”

Chester stood. “Oh, I’m no good to your Pop, son. I can hardly swing a—”

Gabriel guffawed heartily, and Chester was forced to smile along.

“Oh, Chester, you just aren’t using your head, now. My father’s got young boys like me to work the harvest.”

“Then...”

Gabriel stood, extending a calloused finger to indicate some point on the horizon.

“There’s a new arrival in the neighborhood. You might be able to see the farmhouse where she’ll be living.”

Chester squinted. “Yeah, I think I see what you mean.”

“Anyway,” Gabriel continued, “She’s just a kid, ten years old. All alone, too. Her parents won’t be in town till much later.”

“Why’s that?”

Gabriel didn’t answer him at first.

“Pop’s always the first to know about these sort of things. He didn’t say why. But because of him you’ll never see a lonely face hereabouts, and I’ll always admire him for that. And after talking...”

Gabriel grinned. “Well, he and I thought you might enjoy the company this time.”

“Yes,” Chester replied. “Yes I would.”

The smell of wheat borne on the wind briefly stopped their discussion. Chester inhaled deeply, then sighed, smiled, and spoke.

“So I’ll...”

“Oh, get to know her, s’all,” Gabriel replied, setting his hands on the wooden railing and leaning forward. “And if she asks any questions, you answer ‘em best you can.”

He winked at him, then pushed off the railing and extended his hand out. Chester shook it. Then, turning, Gabriel moved toward the end of the balcony and nearly reached the stairs before stopping.

“Be gentle.”

“I’ll try my best, Gabe.”

“I know.”

The young man descended down the stairs and reached the old truck. The door was open and Gabriel’s foot was in the cab when Chester called out from the balcony.

“Hey, Gabe?”

Gabriel looked up and smiled. “Yes?”

“Thanks for doing this.”

Gabriel’s smile widened, and his eyes flashed.

“You know who to thank, Chester.”

Then, with a sputtering chuckle from the truck, Gabriel spun the powder-blue vehicle around, entered the golden jungle, and vanished into the daylight sky.

II.

A new form of energy seemed to come over Chester after Gabriel's visit, an energy that suspended his physical needs, similar to the old apathy so recently fueled by his grief. Nothing could be further from his mind than the gloomy thoughts of the past, and even his body's sharp demands for food and sleep faded into silence and bothered him no more.

He played his conversation with Gabriel over and over.

He pictured the ten-year-old with ten thousand different faces; he felt at once her neighbor, her mentor, her grandfather. He looked pensively at the distant farmhouse, contemplating its faint silhouette with anticipation—a promise dwelt within.

One day, the spectral visualization of his young visitant leapt from the sketchbook and into his life. It began with a breeze, a sweeping wind that sifted through the golden grain and played with the doves that fluttered about.

Then, it seemed for a moment as though a much larger dove was leaping up in flight at the edge of Chester's vision. But it remained anchored to the ground, and instead of taking graceful wing, it came barreling through the stalks like a lumbering baby elephant.

At points it would suddenly stop, confused about its course. Several times it would overcorrect and repeat the anxious search for direction—all the while honing in on Chester's house. However irrationally it moved, it did seem to have some idea of its destination.

At last the swishing movements of the wheat subsided, and the source of the disturbance revealed itself.

There was a dirty-blond head of curly hair.

Then a round, unblemished face.

Even from his distance Chester somehow recognized her as one of those special human beings far too innocent and good-natured for the filthy human world. But when she saw him, she did something that derailed all the plans and paternal sentiments he had conjured since Gabriel's visit:

“HELLO!”

This was bellowed at the top her of lungs, and Chester was certain he had no such volume in him.

“I GOT LOST! WHAT'S YOUR NAME?”

Chester, completely dumbfounded, just stood up and waved.

“MY NAME'S GRETA. I GOT LOST!”

“Why don't you come up here?” Chester whispered.

“WHAT?”

Chester used his hands to beckon her closer. She went about this with remarkable energy, at first bouncing and spinning in circles, then growing bored with this and switching to skipping. At one point she tripped—and recovered immediately, bouncing and skipping until she reached the stairs. These she took two-by-two, until she was standing at Chester's side.

“Hallo,” she breathed. “I'm Greta.”

“G'morning, Greta,” Chester said. “Have some lemonade.”

He lifted a pitcher and poured a glass for his young companion.

“Thanks!”

Then, with more liquid in her throat and more air in her lungs, she reiterated her greeting: “I'm Greta, by the way.”

Chester chuckled. “Oh, I know. Name's Chester.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Chester, sir.”

“Oh, ‘Chester’ is quite alright.”

“Okay!”

She looked at him with wide eyes, forgot she was in the middle of drinking something, and then dribbled lemonade down her school clothes. She spent a great deal giggling, coughing, and giggling some more as Chester handed her a napkin to clean herself up.

Her laughter, so pure and untroubled, warmed his wrinkled soul.

“I had the most worst day today,” she said suddenly. “Do you want to hear?”

Chester hesitated. “Only if you’re ready to tell it.”

“Well it *started* when we were lining up for *school* today. There was this girl named Amanda who always thinks she can boss everyone around. She’s—she’s the kind of person that’s always saying if the teacher isn’t there in fifteen minutes then everybody can leave but of course that’s not true so I went up told her so and told her, ‘Amanda, that’s not true and you know it and you’re trying to get everyone else in trouble, but then *she* said—”

“Greta—”

“‘Let me pull out my list of people wanted to know what Greta thought!’ And she took out a blank piece of paper and everyone laughed except me—”

“Greta—”

“I was crying and running down the hall because everybody was—”

Chester rested his hand on her head to quiet her down. She was terribly breathless and appreciated the chance to pause and take another sip of lemonade.

“That’s always a bummer, Greta.”

“Yeah.”

She looked into the horizon with a genuinely puzzled look. “Huh! It’s becoming a really, *really* beautiful day, Mr. Chester!”

Chester smiled. “I found that always helps. Sitting out here, with the warm wind blowing in your face... y’learn to forgive people for being mean. I feel sorry for folks that never learn to appreciate good company and fine weather like you an’ I do. Maybe if everyone did, we’d all be a nicer bunch.”

A pause.

“Hey,” announced Greta, “you’re *old*, aren’t you?”

Chester chuckled. “Yes. I reckon so.”

“Then you’ve been mad at least once?”

“Oh, yes. But you mustn’t be weighed down by those kinds of people. Forgive, Greta. Forget.”

“Thanks, Mr. Chester. I’ll try to do that.”

“Call me Chester.”

“Alright.”

Overhead, a great citadel of a cloud entered the sky.

“I got lost, by the way,” Greta said.

“I heard. You want me to walk you back?”

“No, that’s alright. I think I can see it from here.”

Chester pointed across the field. “There you are.”

“Yeah! But how did *you* know?”

Chester winked at her. “If you ain’t busy tomorrow,” he said, “why don’t you pay me another visit?”

Her voice was shrill with excitement. “Oh, can I?”

“Anytime, for as long as you please. I’ll wait for you.”

A shadow passed over her face. “Oh, but I’ll have school tomorrow, won’t I?”

He smiled knowingly. “Maybe so.”

“Well, I’ll be back *after* that.” She jumped up and grinned as Chester stood to see her off.

“See you then!”

“See you.”

Then, in her childlike way, she gave him a little hug around the chest. In a moment she bounded down the stairs, tripped again, sprung right back up, and swished her dirty-blond hair into a dirty-blond field and dove out of sight.

The field was at peace, breathing softly in the all-surrounding breeze.

And Chester, releasing a sigh he had kept pent up for longer than he could remember, was at peace too.

III.

The next sight he caught of her was through the rain-splattered window above his kitchen sink, where he stood washing dishes. He did not know what had inspired him to do this chore—these were dishes that he never used, dishes that were not even dirty—but the action seemed to take his mind off things.

The rain had surprised him. They were the warm kind of showers, and if it could be said, they were somehow not as *wet* as he had expected. Yes, he could run out in the curtains of water and become completely drenched if he so desired—but by the time he sought his towel, he found he was already dry. He pictured what Greta would think of the weather as she slowly bobbed into

view, now clothed in a dandelion-yellow sundress. She wore a cute little hat of the same color, and held a bouquet of prairie-picked flowers.

“Hello, Mr. Chester!” she called from the foot of the stairs.

“Just Chester, m’dear,” he replied. “Are you enjoying the rain?”

“What rain?” she giggled. “It’s the sunshiniest day today!”

He smiled and took her delicate hand as they climbed up the stairs. When their fingers touched he saw what she saw—a world warmer than his own, with the bright sun’s glorious beams roving across the field.

“Oh, *now* it’s raining!” she cried with delight.

When their hands released, his rain and her sunshine seemed to return to them respectively.

“Whoa! That was *weird!*”

“Suppose so,” Chester replied gently. “How was your day today, Greta?”

She looked disconcerted when he asked her. They sat down on the bench as before, and Greta stared out into the windswept field before replying.

“I missed school today.”

Chester coughed and stifled a chuckle, which failed.

“Why are you laughing, Mr. Chester?” she replied, scandalized.

“I’m sorry, Greta,” he replied. “May I ask why you missed school?”

“I—I couldn’t *find* it!”

His smile broadened. “Where did you look?”

“All *over* the place! I started by going down the main road to where the school bus always picks me up, but I couldn’t find the bus stop—*or* the school bus! And there were all these brand

new houses I never saw before, really big, pretty ones that looked like no one ever lived there yet! I thought I was *super* lost!”

Chester looked out into the field. “What’d you do next?”

“Well then someone came out of one the houses... this... tall...” She faltered. “The nicest man you’ve ever met in the whole world...”

She seemed at a loss for words, and Chester knew whom she had met.

“He told me I needn’t search for school again, because I’d be learning from you. Then he said that you were learning from *him*, and that sooner or later, *you’d* be learning from *me*, too!”

She fell silent for a moment. Chester pondered the words too—how could *he*, an aged old man with many more years of wisdom—how could he possibly learn from this girl?

Greta again tried to whisper out some kind of explanation: “I felt...”

“Like you knew him, somehow,” Chester murmured. “Like you knew him your whole life, in a hundred thousand different faces and kindnesses and kisses on the forehead.”

“Yeah...”

“You met the Boss, my dear.”

“Who is he?”

“I think you already know.”

Greta stood up anxiously.

“But...no—oh!” She clutched her head. “So many things are coming to me, Mr. Chester! Where was the school bus, *really*? What are those houses—they weren’t there before! Why did it start raining only when I touched your hand? Why didn’t I skin my knee when I fell yesterday? Who is that man?”

Unbidden, tears entered Chester's eyes—tears for Greta, tears for Penny, tears for the ones whose sadness pursued their loved ones through the impenetrable curtain of the Eternity.

“You know, Greta, you know!”

“And there's more,” she whispered. “This house—I *know* where I am. It belongs to our neighbors, Mrs. Penny and Mr.—”

She covered her mouth.

“Mr. Chester,” she cried, “you're dead!”

Silence—silence reigned.

Chester rose with terrible slowness. He towered over her for a moment and seemed even older than before, but the moment passed, and his face broke into a tired smile.

“That's right, my dear.”

“But how can you be here? You're—”

“Don't use that word!” His voice held an edge of authority. “It holds no meaning here. Do I appear ‘dead’ to you now? Am I a cold, lifeless statue in this place?”

“No.”

He sat down again and took her hand. She shuddered at his touch and at the rain that rushed around her.

“Back in the other place,” Chester said, “I fell asleep, and didn't wake again in that world. Instead, I woke here. I awoke to the warmth of another world—my same exact house—but better, larger, more perfect in every way. And I stepped out on the porch for the first time and felt the warm breeze on my face and a golden eternal harvest stretching out as far as the eye could see.”

His eyes filled with tears of delight.

“I knew, Greta. I was expecting it...waiting for it. The pain, the cancer...I left them behind...Pop called me home, my dear. Who would possibly say no to that?”

Greta couldn't speak.

“*You*, my poor, poor girl,” Chester whispered even more gently, “did not expect it. Your pop was simply driving you home from school yesterday when the other car came straight at you. It didn't stop.”

His voice, too gentle to even be heard, quavered with emotion.

“It didn't stop.”

“There was a mighty big crash,” Greta said. “I closed my eyes.”

She exhaled softly.

“When I opened them, I was in an old truck. My dad weren't driving no more; it was a younger guy in white overalls. He told me I needed to sleep, needed to stay still for a while.

“And I did,” she whispered. “I forgot all about that. I forgot all about it. I tried to go to school and forgot all about—”

“Oh, Greta! No one your age...no child should ever expect to—”

“But I'm not mad, Mr. Chester!” she cried. “I'm—I'm not even mad or sad at all!”

“G-God bless you, my child.”

His eyes could not check the well of tears behind them now. It was a forgiveness too beautiful to be witnessed.

“I hope my dad's okay—”

“He is, he is! O my God!”

“And the other driver... and my friends at school, even, oh, even Amanda!”

Chester bowed his head fervently.

“Oh, Mr. Chester, isn’t it wonderful? I can’t even *remember* being angry or sad anymore!
It’s so, so beautiful!”

His voice was a weak rasp. “God bless you, God bless you!”

She released her hand from his grasp and stood in her sunny realm.

“I think you should stop it raining, Mr. Chester.”

“I’m not ready yet.”

She turned around and faced him—faced him with eyes he never bothered to notice before—olive-green eyes, eyes like Penny’s.

“It’s all making sense now, Mr. Chester. This morning I saw—or maybe just felt—I don’t know—but I think my mother was on the couch in the...the other place. She was crying, crying till kingdom come, and I didn’t know what to do. I asked her over and over what the matter was, but she didn’t seem to hear.”

Chester gaped at her.

“You—you could feel your mother’s presence? From the other world?”

“Yeah, it was easy, really.”

And Chester gaped at her.

“I just sat next to her,” Greta continued, “and she...like, she just stopped crying so loud. She shivered for a bit, and I grabbed a blanket and kinda draped it over her. Then she fell asleep. It was all a blur, y’know? I forgot about it when I left to find the school bus...but now I know what that man was talking about. What good’s a school bus in heaven?”

And she laughed! It was a clear, bright laugh that rang throughout the skies, a beautiful, bell-like sound that drove Chester’s clouds away and released the sun from its cage of fog.

“Let’s go for a walk, Greta. Let’s go visit your mother.”

Then she took his hand, and they descended the steps together and strode into the endless golden field.

IV.

An attractive country house rose above manicured lawns, exhibiting a degree of ornamental, gardenesque beauty comparable to the wild, natural beauty of Chester's home. Ripe fruit trees neatly dotted either side of a yellow brick path, some of which leaned toward them invitingly as they walked past. One tree released a shining, delicious apple into Greta's waiting hands. She chomped an almighty chunk out of the side and giggled with delight.

"Oh, it's delicious!" she exclaimed—to the tree. Its emerald-green leaves rustled cheerfully, as though enraptured by Greta's sincere compliment.

Bewildered, Chester gaped at Greta and her rapidly growing unity with the natural forces of heaven. He could feel her wisdom and faith quickly surpass his own as she grew more comfortable with the reality he had shown her.

"She'll be inside," Greta said. "I can feel it already."

As Greta and Chester drew near to the house, a ridiculous apprehension grew within him. He wanted to stop in his tracks, to turn back, to run all the way home and continue living the way he always had.

What if I see nothing? I probably will!

What if I can't experience the same thing with Penny?

He looked at Greta—her childlike faith, her undoubting assurance, her weightless joy—and his own fears receded.

She would teach him.

A classic, sky-blue pickup truck was already parked in the driveway of Greta's house. Gabriel sat in the flatbed with his legs dangling off the edge, plucking out a bright rendition of "Amazing Grace" on an acoustic guitar as they approached him.

"Afternoon, Greta! Chester!" He tossed the guitar into the air, where it lost velocity, hovered momentarily, and then packed itself into a case that lay open nearby.

"Gabe!" Greta cried in greeting. "Did you come to see my Mom, too?"

"Oh, no," he replied. "That's none of my business."

"You're quite welcome to."

"I want you to know, Greta," he said, "what you're doing—it's very generous. It shows great faith, enduring sadness in the other world, when you don't have to no more."

This seemed to go over her head. "*I'm* showing Chester how to talk to them—well, not really *talk* to them, you can only really kinda comfort them, and all."

Gabriel and Chester exchanged a paternal smile.

"Well, allow me to give you some advice before you go," Gabriel said. He kneeled down to Greta's level and whispered in her ear. After a moment, she nodded enthusiastically.

"I'll leave you to it, then," he said.

The house was prefaced by a roomy veranda, and as they climbed the steps onto this platform, Gabriel called back.

"Hey, Chester?"

"Yessir?"

Greta waited at the door as Chester shuffled over to the edge of the veranda.

There was a twinkle in Gabriel's intelligent eyes.

“Just because you’ve finally found the greenest grass,” he said, “don’t mean God’s stopped teaching you anything. Just remember that, son.”

Taken aback by the unexpected reminder—or perhaps in being called “son” by a seemingly much younger man—Chester did not reply and returned to Greta. With a lovely smile, she opened the door and admitted him into her house.

“What’d Gabriel whisper to you back there?” Chester asked.

“He said, ‘Take his hand, so he can see.’”

And as she did so, Chester beheld a woman seated on a sofa in the front room. She possessed a smaller frame—like Greta’s—but it seemed to Chester as though she were at the tail-end of her youthful beauty. Huddled in old, worn-out blankets, the woman was in utter distress, sobbing silently—her shuddering voice unheard through the barrier of worlds.

Greta tugged Chester fiercely toward the couch, seating herself on it and immediately going to her mother’s aid.

“Mommy, Mommy, dear!”

Stupefied, Chester watched as the woman’s shudders seemed to pause, as though she were somehow listening to the very words Greta now spoke.

“Mommy, I’ve brought an old friend, look!”

Though the woman did not do as Greta directed, Chester felt a strange sensation—as though his presence was now noted, understood.

“It’s Mr. Chester, Mommy! You remember him. How nice he always was! Well, he’s here with me now—we’re together. Isn’t that nice?”

A long, silver tear hovered somewhere above the woman’s nose.

And Greta, extending a tender finger toward the shivering face of her mother, touched the droplet and absorbed it into her own skin. At her touch, the woman's taut muscles relaxed.

"Mother, you can't stay in here all the time," Greta said, almost sternly. "So why don't you go visit Mrs. Penny? Tell her what I told you—Chester's here with me!"

Chester stumbled backward. Greta looked alarmed.

"Mr. Chester—"

"H-h-how! How can you *stand* it, Greta! The sadness—the heartbreak—my God, it overwhelms me!"

He sank down to his knees, dumbstruck.

"That's your problem, Mr. Chester," she whispered.

And there no longer stood a child above him—but, it seemed, a flourishing young woman, more mature in every way, her voice losing the girlish goofiness and acquiring a solemn yet entrancing timbre.

"You take the whole burden of misery on your shoulders, and forget, Chester, you forget!" Her voice, so rich and lovely, overflowed with notes of pity and compassion. Boiling tears forced his eyes shut. "It's not your sadness, Chester, it's hers. It's Penny's sadness; you've taken it with you and held it so tightly that neither of you can let it go."

Two small arms wrapped around him, and the voice was young again. "You're mixing it all up!"

Chester opened his eyes—and met the olive-green's of Greta's. He knew now what must be done, realized at last the task Gabriel had given him—recognized finally that it was Greta, after all, who had been teaching him.

He broke free of Greta's embrace and turned on his heel, leaving the house, leaving the now-empty driveway, leaving the green grove of apple trees swaying in the warm celestial breeze; he was walking, briskly moving one foot after the other, but this was not enough, he broke into a sprint, somehow, somehow!—he was not growing tired at all, but stronger, faster, faster than he had ever run before, faster than he had run in seventy years, in his boyhood—one foot after the other, right, left, right, left, covering more ground with every footstep, with every footstep his wrinkled skin smoothing and relaxing into beautiful, *beautiful* youthfulness.

Miles and miles of golden reeds shot by in seconds, they were nothing, distance, time, all obstacles rendered surmountable by the invigorating breath of God! Up the stairs, past the kitchen, into the dark hallway of tragedy that he never trespassed.

And, daring to stop, he stood face to face with the Door.

It had remained closed and locked since he awoke in it one fine morning...awoke to find himself bereft of Penny's warmth and her break-of-dawn kisses.

He paused outside of it and exhaled deeply, his eyes flicking away from the brass doorknob to the mirror which hung on the door. It now showed a different reflection, one of youth, the picture of a twenty-something with a smooth, handsome face and wavy black hair.

Confidence flowed into him like new blood, and, gripping the doorknob, he let himself into the bedroom. There, on the closer side of the great four-poster, beneath the color-bespattered quilt of her own design, lay the shivering body of his wife. A sob of joy rose in his throat—he went to her at once, sinking to his knees and looking up at the unseeing, olive-green eyes that gazed into the wall of the other place.

“Penny, Penny...”

Her shudders became less pronounced as he ran a hand across her head, stopping at that iron-grey knot she somehow fit her hair into. He undid the twine at the base of the knob—just like he used to, whenever she overslept him!—and watched with admiration as the silvery wires fluttered down into their natural places.

“*Know*, my Love, on the darkest of nights. *Know*, my Love, on the stormiest of days. *Know*, my Love, when the restive dryness consumes you and drives you to the edge, that you too are awaited!”

He watched her fearful eyes flutter, approaching sleep.

“Soon, my love. Soon.”

And her eyes shut peacefully, not witnessing the golden light of the realm around him, her ears not hearing Chester’s soft words or the distant peal of Greta’s clear laughter or the homely sputter of Gabriel’s old truck...

But her mouth curled into a smile, all the same.