

THE DANDELION RIOTS

KIM SMEJKAL writes fantasy for young adults and not-so-young adults, always with a touch of magic. Her books include *The Dandelion Riots*, *Ink in the Blood*, and *Curse of the Divine*. When she's not writing, she's often lost in the woods, wandering a beach, or puttering around in her garden, and she currently lives on Vancouver Island in Canada with her family and anxious dog, Pigeon.



THE DANDELION RIOTS

KIM
SMEJKAL

PUSHKIN PRESS

Pushkin Press
Somerset House, Strand
London WC2R 1LA

The right of JEANNETTE KIM SMEJKAL to be identified
as the author of this Work has been asserted by HER in
accordance with the Copyright, Designs & Patents Act 1988

Copyright © Jeannette Kim Smejkal 2025

First published by Pushkin Press in 2025

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts.



Canada Council Conseil des arts
for the Arts du Canada

ISBN 13: 978-1- 78269-525-7

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by
any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or
otherwise, without prior permission in writing from Pushkin Press

Designed and typeset by Tetragon, London
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

EU RP (for authorities only): eucomply OÜ, Pärnu mnt. 139b-14, 11317,
Tallinn, Estonia, hello@eucompliancepartner.com, +33757690241

www.pushkinpress.com

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

For Ember—
adventurous, whimsical, funny, and fierce.
The original dandelion girl.

I

My birthday was the worst day of the year. Each one was the same: Aunt Melusine would arrive at sunset, stare at me, judge me, and then drug me. My birthday drug was a bright-orange pill stamped with black letters: MDC.

My Darling Child

Melusine's Dangerous Candy

Maybe Don't Care

Whatever MDC stood for, it was potent. I'd wake the next day in another place, with a new caretaker. For all I knew, shuffling my unconscious body around on an annual basis was Aunt Melusine's only job, although who would pay for such a service was beyond me.

It felt like a ridiculous thing—the structure of my life—but I was never really sure what was ridiculous and what was normal, and I strongly suspected Aunt Melusine wanted to keep it that way.

I sighed and toed the dirt under my feet. When I'd first arrived at the farm a year ago, all the open space had disoriented me. Looking up at the million stars had made me dizzy, the endless horizon had been frightening, and the giant block of open blue sky had pushed down, suffocating me. So

much space everywhere, reminding me I was an insignificant speck, and being so aggressive about it.

But I'd grown to love it. On lazy days like this, when the breeze whispered through the wheat and the brilliant sun took its sweet time arcing overhead, it was so pretty and peaceful. Being an insignificant speck felt like a blessing instead of a punishment.

I inhaled deeply and closed my eyes, trying to meditate like Darling had taught me. *Let go, Drinn. Everything will be fine. Be calm.*

It didn't work.

Another itch at my neck yanked me out of my fabricated peace. Bright yellow dandelions, complete with serrated leaves and hollow stems, grew out of my neck, one after another.

Impatiently, I yanked out each flower. It always happened when I was upset—this mass production of dandelions. The wilting graveyard at my feet was already ankle-deep, yet the subtle itches that came before each flower sprouted—behind my ears and along the back of my neck—refused to stop.

I barked out a laugh when it occurred to me that maybe my dandelions were fleeing out of self-preservation. They didn't want to be around when Aunt Melusine arrived either.

"Ya nervous, Drinn?" a gruff voice said from behind me.

Without turning, I dropped my chin to my chest.

There he was. The real reason I'd miss that farm.

I'd half hoped he would avoid me that last day and make the goodbye easier on both of us. But that wasn't Darling's

way, and I supposed I loved him all the more for it. Tentatively, I turned and looked up.

Darling towered over me, his forearms as large as aspen trunks and a back broad enough to blot out the sun. He offered a small smile as he clasped his hands behind his back and rocked back and forth on his feet. How he always managed to sneak up on me when he was so huge and the land was so flat was still a mystery. He was a sneaky boulder.

My sneaky boulder.

“Nah, I’m not nervous,” I said. “I produce and shed flowers for fun.”

That day, more than any other, my dandelions were a reminder that—no matter how much we pretended—our living arrangement wasn’t by choice. I was weird and different and had to be monitored, and Darling had made a deal with Aunt Melusine to do just that. He’d signed a contract for a year, and it ended at midnight.

Darling nodded in understanding, his eyes misting with tears. Sometimes, I still made the mistake of getting attached to my caregivers—my heart was criss-crossed with old scars by then—but the fact that Darling was equally attached to me was novel. It created a different kind of pain inside me: deeper and more jagged.

The scar from this break would never heal right.

I cleared my throat. “I came out here for some peace and quiet, and of course, you had to ruin it.” I nudged one of his giant arms with my fist.

Darling grunted but didn't say anything. He looked younger than his sixty years because he was an old man naturally blessed with long blond hair. Standing together, it was no stretch to imagine we were related: my hair wasn't as soft, thick, or long, and it was closer to the burned-out color of dust than wheat, but we were both light-haired, light-skinned, and had grayish eyes. Darling had called me "sister" a few times by accident; "son" a few times too. But lately, he'd called me "my child" and that had felt a little too real for both of us, so he'd stopped.

My fake smile fell away and I pinched my lips together, trying to quell my own tears. "If you'd only tell me where we are," I whispered, "I'd come back here one day." One last time for me to make that request. One last time for Darling to shake his head and stay quiet.

I liked to think it was a spell my aunt cast that kept him silent, but I knew it was fear.

I plucked another flower from under my ear and scanned the horizon. There was only one road leading to Darling's farmhouse, but Aunt Melusine never came to fetch me by conventional means. She sprouted out of the ground like a cleaver weed: one moment not there, the next moment there, and only living to choke.

Almost everything about Aunt Melusine felt vaguely ridiculous too.

"You're wrong anyway, Darling," I said quietly. "I'm not nervous; I'm terrified."

Normally, Melusine would spirit me away, well-drugged

and under the cover of darkness, and I would start a new prison sentence tomorrow.

This year, I was going to escape.

Terrified was too mild a word.

Darling didn't respond for a while. He shuffled from foot to foot, his long blond hair swishing around his shoulders. "I made a birthday cake," he finally said, tipping his head towards the farmhouse. His normally sunburnt face had turned even redder, the color of beets. He looked ready to explode with the effort of keeping all of his emotions inside. "Needs at least two mouths to chomp it."

He slung his arm across my shoulders, the weight almost pushing me into the ground, planting me like one of his seeds.

I wouldn't have minded one bit.

I bit my lower lip before it could even think about quivering. "Even though I have no idea where we are, one day I'm going to find this place again. Keep your eyes on that wide horizon, Darling, I mean it." I was stubborn, after all.

That did it. Darling stopped trying to hold back his tears as he pulled me into a suffocating hug. I hugged my warm, soft, sweet boulder back, and didn't pull away. Not even when my own tears started soaking his shirt.

By the time we'd calmed down, neither of us was in the mood to chomp the cake at all.

Instead, Darling went to tend to the chickens while I sat on the back steps and picked at the peeling paint with my fingernails. I sighed. Already, I was tired and it was barely

mid-afternoon. My body's nervous habit of flower production expended so much extra energy, draining my powers when I needed them the most.

Leaning forward, I put my palm to the ground, feeling the compact soil.

A faint tingling in my fingers began, like the itches at my neck but more subtle, and it soon spread through my whole body. *Are you ready?* I asked. *Can we do this?*

I listened carefully as the thrum under my fingertips pounded a low, steady rhythm, waiting until it synced with my heartbeat.

We're ready, I heard.

Best I could ever describe my powers to Darling was that the earth and I understood each other. The network of roots under my fingertips was almost like an extension of myself. When my powers were at their peak, it felt more like I was accessing a secret room inside me, rather than calling on something external. My own name was the sound of that thrum, the whirl of life itself: *Drinn, drinn, drinnnn...*

I'd made Darling's wheat grow strong and tall by asking. I'd persuaded the pests to pack up and move far away.

Now, I memorized the unique feeling of this land under my hand, claiming it, vowing to return and protect it. The thrum under my fingertips got stronger, more insistent until it echoed through my veins.

To have any hope of returning, I needed this place to tell me how to find it again.

“Drinn?” Darling called out sometime later. His voice was extra gravelly as if he was having a hard time forming the words. “She’s arrived.”

I pulled my hand away from the soil and flexed my fingers, my joints stiff and popping after being held in the same spot for so long. I stood on shaky legs.

The sun was touching the horizon, the light beginning to fade.

“We’re ready,” I said aloud. I could do this. I had a good plan. It would all work out.

With my resolve, the wreath of dandelions froze at my neck, dying quickly as with autumn’s first frost, biting deep. With each step I took up the back stairs and into the farmhouse, they fell off, leaving a trail behind me like shattered glass.