

She said...

The Dandelion Lady

"Never lose sight of the fact that old age needs so little but needs that little so much." – Margaret Willour

When I was growing up in Lakewood, N.Y., an annual rite of spring for the neighborhood kids was to pick dandelions and bring them to the Dandelion Lady. In return, she promptly rewarded us with a thick, round peppermint candy – one for each batch of dandelions.

The combination of my boredom and my sweet tooth drove me to tug and pull at those unfortunate weeds in backyards and front yards in my neighborhood. As I yielded bunches of dandelions, my hands became stained and stinky.

The Dandelion Lady lived in a duplex on the next street over. A back-alley entrance led to her second-floor dwelling.

With my arms overflowing with dandelions, I relied on my feet to Braille each step as I scaled the steep dark stairs. A sense of mystery and magic accompanied my climb up the musty passageway to her tall heavy-handled door.

I patiently knocked. Nothing. I knocked, again, a little harder this time. No response. Not brave enough to try a third time, I started back down the stairs, my dandelions growing limp and my hopes dashed.

Then, when I heard some wrestling with the doorknob, the turning of locks and a slow creak of door hinges, I turned around. As the door inched open, a narrow beam of light emptied into the dark hallway, framing the frail old woman.

There were no sounds of life in the background of her place. No one inside hollering, "Who is it?" No one cursing or yelling, "Get the hell out of here."

There was no aroma of food cooking, either. No bacon frying.

No coffee brewing. No stew simmering.

And as far as I can remember, The Dandelion Lady

and I never had a formal introduction. Over the years, word spread about her, causing a mutual understanding of the purpose of this visit and her rather generic salutation.

"Hello, there," her fragile voice strained to greet me. After that, there was no need for words.

The Dandelion Lady reached toward me to take my harvest. Slowly and carefully, so as not to spill the entire batch, I relinquished it to her. And as promised, she produced a thick gritty pink peppermint candy that would rest in my jaw and slowly melt away the afternoon's lull. In those days, my insatiable desire for candy mattered most.

Although today, as dandelions bloom abundantly, I wonder about The Dandelion Lady. What was her real name? Where was her family? What was she doing with those dandelions? Was she making dandelion wine or was she mitigating loneliness?



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A resident of Southeast South Dakota, Paula Damon is a national award-winning columnist. Her columns have won first-place in National Federation of Press Women, South Dakota Press Women and Iowa Press Women Communications Contests. In the 2009 and 2010 South Dakota Press Women Communications Contest, Paula's columns took three first-place awards.

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■ by Paula Damon

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