Blown Away

The white gates of Roseland Elementary loomed over Emma. Her first day of third grade had finally come and now, her hands shook with nerves as she gingerly pushed open the gates. Upon entrance, it became immediately clear that public school was nothing like her homeschool. Hundreds of children ran about a great stretch of dark asphalt, each seeming to tower over Emma's slight frame. Handballs beat against the ground in deafening cracks; metal swing sets screeched in wailing cries; feet stomped and voices screamed. Her senses felt overwhelmed. Warily venturing across the great expanse of land, Emma found a safe corner of grass and seated herself, careful not to stain the sunny yellow of her new dress.

Shielding herself from view with her backpack, Emma nervously picked at the pink sequins on her shoes and waited for the first bell to ring. From the corner of her eye, Emma spotted a horde of shadows moving to overtake her. Sneaking a glance from over her backpack, Emma found a group of three kids approaching. They all held taunting smiles on their faces, laughing at some shared joke. *They were laughing at her; they had to be*. As they crept closer, Emma's heart rate began to spike.

"Hey!" a boy with short brown hair called, motioning something with his hands.

His voice rang loudly, another sound assaulting her inundated ears. She curled further into a ball. When she didn't respond, the boy looked to his friends and shrugged. A girl with long blonde hair and purple glasses tried calling to her again, thinking she might not have heard.

"Hey! Are you new?"

At this point, they were practically upon her, formidable figures blocking out the sun. Anxiety filled her consciousness, sweat beading from her palms. Natural instinct kicking in, Emma leapt to her feet and ran. She ran all the way across the schoolyard, not stopping even as she heard the yard attendants call after her. She ran until she reached the far fence, quickly climbing the chainlink. Then, she jumped.

After a jarring landing, Emma walked a ways, looking back every so often to see if someone had chased after her. Confident that she had not been followed, Emma stopped and took in her surroundings. She seemed to have wandered into some sort of meadow. Tall, luscious grass grew all around her, reaching towards the bright sky. Hidden among the blades grew a single dandelion. Leaning down, Emma grasped the smooth stem with the intention of picking it. Just as

her fingers came into contact with the plant the earth beneath her began to rumble. Stumbling back, Emma watched in awe as the ground seemed to split, revealing a willowy figure from deep within.

It was a fluffy looking boy, covered head to toe in a white coat. As she looked closer, Emma realized that it was not fur that covered the figure, but rather dandelions. In fact, it seemed the boy was made entirely from dandelions! With yellow flower buds for eyes and green stem lips, the figure swayed side to side unsteadily as though it could blow away at any second.

"Hello," Emma said after a moment's hesitation.

The dandelion boy, noticing Emma for the first time, cried out and jumped away in fear. His reaction startled Emma, who was only trying to be polite.

"It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you," she tried.

Appearing to calm down, the dandelion boy cautiously approached Emma, a look of uncertainty on his face.

"My name is Emma," she prompted, holding out her hand.

"Hello," he replied finally. "My name is Leon...well, actually Dan D. Leon, is what some people call me, but that's kind of long so you can just call me Leon for short," he rambled, reaching out to take her hand. His palm tickled Emma's hand, the feeling like soft feathers dancing along her skin.

"What were you doing in the ground?" Emma asked, looking back to the patch of dirt behind him.

Leon glanced away nervously. "I was hiding from The Winds."

"The wind?" Emma asked in confusion, noting the gentle air that swayed around them.

Leon shook his head: "The Winds. They are not to be confused with The Breeze or The slight Draft. The Winds make up a vicious storm that destroys everything it touches."

Emma shivered, Leon's fear contagious. She thought back to the malicious faces on the playground. She too was hiding from something horrible. The sharp intake of breath drew Emma's attention back to Leon who was staring past her with a look of sheer terror. Following his gaze, Emma saw a dark cloud traveling towards them at full speed. Trees shuddered, whipping wildly as The Winds approached. Thunder boomed, lightning cracked, wind tore through the sky.

"Come on!" Leon yelled, taking Emma's hand.

Together, they ran through the trees, as The Winds gained on them.

"In there!" Emma shouted, as a large hollow oak tree came into view.

The two squeezed into the trunk just in time. They listened as The Winds bellowed in rage at their sudden disappearance. Safely inside, Emma and Leon waited out the storm, passing the time by playing games and discussing their favorite things. Emma spoke of how yellow was her favorite color because it reminded her of sunshine and bumblebees. Leon shared her love of the color; as it turned out, they had many things in common. By the time the storm had quieted down, Leon and Emma had formed a friendship—something Emma had never had before.

Cautiously peeking out of the tree, Emma saw that The Winds had passed. She was saddened by this because she really enjoyed Leon's company.

"Would you like to play tag?" Leon queried sheepishly.

This brought a smile to Emma's face. Together, Emma and Leon played for hours, running around and amusing themselves through all sorts of games; they played hide and seek, leapfrog, and even ring around the rosie. Three times The Winds came back, and each time the friends would hide out in their secret spot inside the old oak tree. Emma had never had so much fun.

Finding a willow tree with low hanging branches, Leon began to climb, Emma following close after. Up and up they went, through the foliage until they finally reached the top. Side by side, they rested on a thick branch, looking out over the meadow. Up this high, Emma felt as though she could brush the clouds with her fingertips if she stretched far enough. A soft breeze shook the leaves, sending several scattering across the sky. Leon watched the leaves in the wind, strangely quiet.

"What is it?" Emma asked, concerned.

Leon continued to gaze out at the leaves, wistfully, as though he hadn't heard the question. Finally, he spoke: "The leaves travel in the wind. They don't know what is out there...surely they are frightened, but they travel the wind regardless of their fear. If they didn't they would never see the sky; no one would ever see their beauty."

Emma didn't understand. What was he- A thundering boom broke Emma's train of thought.

"The Winds!" she cried.

Quickly climbing down from their perch, Emma and Leon ran for the oak. Safely inside, Emma turned to ask Leon something when she realized that she was alone.

"Leon!" she called.

Emma found him standing outside, facing the oncoming storm.

"What are you doing? Come on!" Emma shouted.

The thunder grew louder. Leon turned to face her, his eyes wide with terror.

"I don't want to go," he whispered.

Lightning lit up the sky.

"I'm afraid..." Leon looked back to the storm. "But that's okay. It's okay to be afraid."

The earth trembled as The Winds drew near. Emma grabbed his hand, tugging him towards the oak, but he was immovable.

"Leon, please!"

Leon gave Emma a sad smile. "Everything is going to be okay."

With those final words, The Winds were upon them. Left with no other choice, Emma ducked into the oak and watched in horror as a tidal wave of dark clouds hovered over Leon before crashing down in a gust of wind.

Silence followed. As the dust began to clear, Emma slowly left the protection of the trunk and looked around. The sky was bright once more, the trees billowed softly in the gentle wind, birds chirped happily from their nests, but there was no Leon. Quiet tears streamed down Emma's face. He was gone. A low rustling from above caught Emma's attention. She glanced up to find the leaves from the willow blowing in the wind. Emma rose to her feet. She knew what she had to do.

The school playground looked the same as when she'd left it. Children ran around, playing games with one another. Climbing over the fence, Emma slowly made her way back to where she had abandoned her backpack. Leaning down to pick it up, Emma froze as a dark shadow crossed over her.

"Hello," spoke a familiar voice. It was the boy from before. He was standing in front of her along with his two friends. "My name's Eric. What's yours?"

Emma stared down at his outstretched arm.

"I'm Emma," she finally said, taking his hand.

Eric grinned and introduced Emma to the rest of his group.

"We were wondering if you wanted to play tag with us," the girl with purple glasses invited.

Emma nodded, smiling shyly.

Over the course of the day Emma grew to like the group, all of them turning out to be very kind. She even found out that yellow was also Eric's favorite color.

Months passed before Emma ventured back over the fence and into the meadow, only this time with her new friends. As she came upon the clearing she abruptly stopped. Covering the meadow were hundreds of dandelions, all swaying in the wind. They were beautiful.