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My Favorite Flowers

By: Jenny Lauren Meyer

I've lived next door to Leslie my whole life. When I was young, I used to be afraid to go anywhere near Leslie, and I would always hold my breath if I saw her, hoping I wouldn't "catch" the disease. My parents would make me play with Leslie every Saturday because she didn't have any other friends. They said, "*It'll be good for her Amanda, and you too,*" but it felt like I was babysitting Leslie more than anything else. To this day, her favorite thing to do is play "blocks." But I kept ringing the dreaded door bell every Saturday because I knew in my heart that I was doing the right thing. It made me feel good that I could help someone, even if it meant holding Leslie's hand to cross the street or helping her blow her nose, and when I saw Leslie's parents smile as they welcomed me into their home, I felt like a part of the family. It was just like having a little sister. And over the years, I've come to realize that stereotyping doesn't help. Saying that retarded people are ugly or stupid is totally wrong, because in one day, I learned more from Leslie about beauty than I could have accumulated in a whole life time.

We were standing outside in the warm summer grass of Leslie's lawn. And for once, she was being quiet. I sniffed in the fresh fragrance of flowers and closed my eyes, imagining myself somewhere else, anywhere else. Ah, I was on the beach and there was a gorgeous lifeguard.....Suddenly the smell of flowers became so intense that I sneezed. When I opened my eyes, Leslie's round pink face was right up to mine and she was holding a handful of yellow dandelions under my nose. She smiled proudly at her bouquet.

"Bless you, Manda," Leslie giggled. "Like my flowers? Aren't they pretty?"

I sighed, as my daydream disappeared in a cloud of pollen. “Leslie, put those down, they’re weeds,” I explained.

“Weeds, weeds, weeds!” she sang, dancing around in circles. Amused, I just watched Leslie as she made herself sickeningly dizzy and she fell down. “Ohhhhhhh.....” she moaned, still clutching the dandelions in her hand.

“See what those icky yellow weeds did to you?” I said, seizing the dandelions from Leslie’s sweating hand. “Now, why don’t we go inside, it’s too hot out here.”

Leslie pouted and folded her chubby arms across her chest. “No! I want to keep picking flowers!” she cried.

I quickly looked around myself, but it was just as I had suspected— no flowers. “Leslie,” I began, not knowing quite what to say, “dandelions aren’t flowers.”

“Dandy lions are my FAVORITE flowers,” Leslie replied. Maybe she had an IQ of 45, but this kid sure knew how to weasel around the subject.

“Okay, Leslie,” I said, plopping down in the grass beside her, “why are they your FAVORITE flowers?” I stressed the word favorite like she had, and she looked up at me and grinned.

“Because they’re different from other flowers. And they’re yellow.”

“But no one likes dandelions,” I said carefully, “Because they hurt the other flowers!”

Suddenly Leslie flashed a look at me that I had never seen from her before. Her eyes glared as if she has heard my statement a thousand times. She seemed hurt, and for a minute I forgot about her mental status. “No one ever gives dandy lions a chance!” she cried. “People always

kill my favorite flowers before they get a chance to grow! They don't hurt other flowers, other flowers hurt them because they're not like anyone else. If just once someone would look at a dandelion the way I do, they might change their mind."

It was the most intelligent thing I had ever heard her say, or anyone for that matter. Whether she was aware of it or not, Leslie had just told me something very significant about herself. She wiped away her tears with the back of her arm and studied the billowy clouds in the sky. "Look at that one, Manda," she declared, happily. "It looks like a doggy."

The moment was over. I don't even know if Leslie remembered what she had just said to me.

I stood up and brushed the grass off my shorts, feeling a little awkward. "C mon, Les," I said, grabbing her hand. "Let's go in."

Later that day, I thought about Leslie and what she had said. Letting my heavy feet lead the way, I went outside and picked a few dandelions from her lawn. Now, somehow it felt weird calling them "weeds." When I got back inside my room, I placed the yellow dandelions in a plastic cup with water on my window sill. They're my favorite flowers.