

DANDELION EFFECT

While cleaning the campus as a consequence for fighting, estranged friends restore their friendship over trash and a handful of weeds.

22-DE06-W36

FADE IN:

INT. HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM - AFTERNOON

Empty except for a circle of four male students and MS. MCCREERY, a deep-voiced and authoritative principal intent on molding young minds. A chair SQUEAKS, breaking the silence.

MS. MCCREERY
Who started it?

A beat.

MS. MCCREERY (CONT'D)
Monte? Ranger? Do you want the
talking stick?

She holds out a bedazzled BATON.

RANGER, the star varsity basketball player and he knows it, stretches his legs and clasps his hands behind his head.

MONTE, every inch his classmate's opposite, hides behind his hoodie and his dark expression.

Ms. McCreery hands the baton to Ranger, who takes it.

MS. MCCREERY (CONT'D)
Ranger, I'm sure you have something
to add.

The words hang in the air. Ranger glares at the other boys, twirls the baton with his fingers, glances at the clock.

RANGER
No, ma'am. Said enough.

INT. KITCHEN - RANGER'S HOUSE - EVENING

A cookie-cutter kitchen in a neighborhood tract home. Clean, organized, well-cared for.

The refrigerator door hangs open, blocking Ranger's head and torso as he hunts for an after-school snack.

RANGER
Gonna get himself messed up big-
time.

NICOLE, mid-40's and mother to Ranger, pays bills at the kitchen table.

NICOLE

I know you two haven't been close
in a long time, but have you tried
talking to him?

Ranger pulls a SODA from the fridge and closes the door.

Nicole catches his eyes.

RANGER

You sound like McCreery, making us
sit in a circle, passin' some
stick, telling us to share our
feelings like a bunch of girls.
Called it a "rest - a resting--"

NICOLE

A restorative circle?

RANGER

Yeah. Restorative my--

NICOLE

Hey. Language buddy. We don't talk
like that in this house.

Ranger takes a seat at the table across from his mother.

RANGER

Sorry, Mom. But you know what I
mean. Like makin' a bunch of guys
get all mushy is gonna solve
anything.

Nicole stops her work and fully enters the conversation.

NICOLE

What happened this time?

RANGER

Some kids were messin' with Monte.
Tossed his backpack over the
baseball fence. He didn't like it.

NICOLE

And where do you come in?

RANGER

Monte jumped all over 'em. I had to
get in the middle. The other guys
were twice his size. What's he
thinkin'?

NICOLE

Come on, Ranger. He's hurting.
Reach out to him.

RANGER

Seriously? Monte doesn't talk about
it. Not to anyone. What makes you
think he'd talk to me?

NICOLE

If anyone can rebuild a friendship,
you can.

RANGER

Seriously?

A beat.

RANGER (CONT'D)

I've got homework.

Ranger slides his backpack off the table, palms his unopened
soda, and heads out of the room.

EXT. BACKYARD - MONTE'S HOUSE

Monte slips through the back gate, letting it swing closed
behind him.

He shuffles up a gravel path to the back door of his house,
eyes averted to the disheveled and overgrown flower garden.

INT. KITCHEN - MONTE'S HOUSE - EVENING

A flickering fluorescent light casts a dim glow in the
kitchen. The refrigerator is plastered with family photos -
Monte, his mother and his father ANTONY. A POT of WATER
bubbles on the stove.

Monte empties a BOX of macaroni and cheese into the pot.
Stirs.

INT. BEDROOM - MONTE'S HOUSE - CONTINUING

Blinds closed and light off, stale air hovers in the room.
Antony lays sprawled across the bed.

Monte cracks open the door, pokes his head in.

MONTE

Dad? Dad, I'm makin' dinner. You
wanna come eat?

ANTONY

(garbled)
Leave me 'lone.

Monte closes the door.

INT. KITCHEN - MONTE'S HOUSE - CONTINUING

Monte dishes up food and sets it on the table near his
backpack.

He pulls a PHOTO - working with his mom in a vibrant garden -
out of the zipper pocket, props the photo across from him,
and sits down.

Monte stares at the photo while he eats alone at the table.

EXT. SCHOOL YARD - DAY

Under a heavy sky, a sports field, a basketball court, and a
decrepit school garden surrounded by a chain link fence.
Students huddle in groups, eating lunch.

Monte sits alone at a picnic table with his backpack.

Ranger slides onto the seat next to him. He opens his own
backpack and rummages through it.

RANGER

Forgot to do my math last night.

He pulls out a page of homework. Monte ignores him.

RANGER (CONT'D)

Got a pencil?

Monte doesn't respond.

RANGER (CONT'D)

See, it goes like this. I say 'You
got a pencil?' You say, 'Man,
Range, you gotta come prepared.'
Then I say, 'Tomorrow, Monte. I'll
come prepared tomorrow.' And you
hand me a pencil that's missing an
eraser cause you don't want to
share the good ones.

Monte half-smiles under his clouded expression.

Ranger unzips the small pocket of Monte's backpack, reaching his hand inside, grabbing a pencil.

The photo slips out. Ranger picks it up.

RANGER (CONT'D)
What's this?

Monte rips the photo from Ranger's grasp and tackles him, pushing him off the bench and onto the concrete.

Monte lands a fist to Ranger's jawline.

Ranger rises and stumbles backwards, his face a mix of shock and despair.

INT. PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE - DAY

A desk in a disarray of papers separates Ms. McCreery from the two boys. Bloody and bruised, their eyes darken as Ms. McCreery bridges the space with her words.

Monte holds his backpack tightly in his lap.

MS. MCCREERY
Boys. Acting like little boys. What will it take to get through to you?

She opens a file on her desk.

MS. MCCREERY (CONT'D)
Right here. Eighth grade. And I quote "Monte and Ranger. Place in different classes. Disruption. Talking too much." If you've got so much to say, why are you using your fists?

RANGER
I only asked for a pencil.

Closes the file.

MS. MCCREERY
Right, Ranger. Seems like you two are missing something. Look. Monte. I know it's been a rough year. Things at home aren't the same, but that's no excuse. I have no choice but to extend consequences--

She rises from her chair, pulls a TRASH BAG and a GARBAGE PICKER from a closet.

MS. MCCREERY (CONT'D)

We call this 'campus beautification.' You'll beautify the grounds and your attitudes at the same time.

She hands the bag to Ranger and the garbage picker to Monte.

MS. MCCREERY (CONT'D)

On the blacktop. Now.

She skirts her desk and opens the door for the boys to exit.

EXT. BLACKTOP - DAY

Gray clouds hang low, threatening rain as the two boys cross the basketball courts.

Ranger stalks ahead of Monte, picking up trash as he walks.

Monte reaches the metal garbage picker around Ranger's ankle, tripping him.

Ranger stumbles.

RANGER

Watch it.

Ranger continues his work.

Monte watches, drops the picker, and slinks off to a corner of the blacktop.

EXT. BLACKTOP - CONTINUING

Along the fence line, Ranger stoops, picks up a wrapper, drops it into the bag as he whistles: "I Come to the Garden Alone."

He approaches the gate to the abandoned student garden.

He stops, peers through the chain link fence.

INSERT

Weeds grow high in the garden. Litter dots the raised wooden beds, now warped with age. Beyond the garden fence, dandelions pepper the sports field.

RETURN TO SCENE

The gate CREAKS on rusty hinges as Ranger enters.

Ranger pauses and looks back at Monte before crossing the threshold to the garden.

In the background, Monte hunches in the shadow of the school building and follows Ranger's movements with his eyes.

EXT. GARDEN - CONTINUING

Ranger snakes the rows, picking up trash as he goes, the bag dragging against the ground.

Ranger pauses, studies this forsaken portion of the schoolyard.

He looks out at the sports field.

He looks back to the barren garden beds.

He looks back at Monte.

He looks again to the field, drops the bag and exits the garden.

Monte stands, his face a mask of confusion.

EXT. FIELD - CONTINUING

Ranger scrambles through the field, picking dandelion after dandelion, gathering them in his fist like a prize bouquet.

He stops and turns back to Monte, throwing him a wave.

He continues picking dandelions.

EXT. GARDEN - CONTINUING

Ranger slips back through the open gate, his precious cargo safe in his grip.

He moves to the nearest bed, kneels, shoves the stem of a flower into the dirt.

He looks to Monte, hungry for a reaction.

Monte takes a step forward, stops.

Ranger continues sticking one flower at a time into the dirt. He pats the dirt securely around each one, filling the bed with little dots of yellow.

Ranger, done planting, rises and smiles as he surveys his work.

He turns, finds Monte across the blacktop in the shadows.

RANGER

Monte! We're done. I beautified the campus.

He gestures to the dandelions sticking up every which way from the garden bed.

RANGER (CONT'D)

Aren't they bee-yew-tee-ful?

Monte stares at Ranger strangely, as though looking through him, but doesn't say a word.

Ranger, seeing the lack of reaction, looks up at the sky.

RANGER (CONT'D)

I tried. I really tried.

A raindrop splatters on his upturned face.

A steady rain begins to fall.

The dandelions fall against the earth.

Beauty destroyed.

EXT. BLACKTOP - CONTINUING

Monte watches the destruction from the shelter of the building. He slips his backpack from his back, unzips the small pocket. Retrieves the PHOTO of Monte and his mother in a garden.

Monte's shoulders shake with grief as he studies the photo.

He looks to Ranger, forlorn in the garden.

A beat.

He returns the photo to its home and walks around a corner, his back to Ranger and the garden.

EXT. GARDEN - CONTINUING

Standing next to the planter box, trash bag at his feet, Ranger watches Monte walk away.

Ranger stomps down a row, splattering mud onto his jeans. He shoves trash into the bag and slays the tallest weeds, his arm a sword.

The gate CREAKS.

Ranger stops.

In the entrance, Monte stands, a single WILDFLOWER poking through a clod of mud in his hands.

Monte approaches Ranger, tears mingling with the raindrops on his cheeks.

Ranger nods, sinks to the ground at the nearest bed. Drops the trash bag. He digs another hole with his fingers.

Monte places the flower in the hole. The two replace the dirt around it - together.

They stand and face each other.

RANGER

Why?

Ranger gestures to the wildflower.

MONTE

My mom.

He slips the photo from his backpack and hands it to Ranger.

RANGER

This?

MONTE

She left, Range. Took off one day and hasn't come back. Why'd she leave? What did I do to make her go?

A beat.

MONTE (CONT'D)

It's all I got. Can't risk losin' it, too. Can't let anyone take that.

Ranger slips the photo back into the pocket of Monte's backpack and zips it closed.

Soaked with the rain, the boys continue removing trash from the garden.

EXT. GARDEN - DAY

Sunlight pours into the garden. It still sports rickety wooden planter boxes, but the dirt is fresh and the weeds cleared. Monte and Ranger work in the beds. A WAGON with three ROSEBUSHES rests at the entrance to the garden. Ms. McCreery watches from her office window.

Monte tosses a handful of dirt onto Ranger's shoes.

RANGER

Hey, man. Come on. Those are new.
Don't ruin 'em.

Ranger playfully bumps Monte with his shoulder.

MONTE

Ouch! That hurt!

He rubs his shoulder, smiles, then reaches across Ranger's shoulders for a 'bro hug.'

RANGER

Think I forgot my shovel. You got
one I can borrow?

MONTE

You gotta come prepared, Range.

RANGER

I will. Next time.

Monte heads to the wagon and pulls out two hand shovels. One is missing part of the handle.

MONTE

Right. Next time.

Monte hands the broken shovel to Ranger, keeping the better for himself.

He grins triumphantly.

They use their shovels to dig a large hole in the planter.

They drop the shovels in the dirt and head to the wagon.

Together, they lift a rose bush from the wagon and carry it to the planter box. As the teens settle the blooming bush into the soil, we

FADE TO BLACK