

Molasses

by Sean Lovelace

My girlfriend was home from work, at least two hours late and three inches shorter, which meant it had been a tough day. She rifled through the refrigerator, lifting a bottle of diet soda, sniffing it, frowning.

"This soda's gone bad," my girlfriend said to my clean T-shirt.

I shrugged. "Its upbringing?"

"You haven't cut the grass," she said to my clean T-shirt.

My T-shirt read BOO HOO.

"Grass," I said. "As if it's one big lump of lime Jell-O. I mean it's Bermuda and Fescue and St. Augustine, not to mention all the wildflowers. St. Augustine, come on, that's a story. What do you think about St. Augustine?"

"I don't," she said over a shoulder, on the way to the living room.

Long hours isn't just an expression, understand? Anything can change, under the wrong circumstances. Channels change. The television sat on its stand like a giant cube of sugar. I could hear it squawking, so I went outside.

The lawn was certainly tall, spongy beneath my feet, tendrils of grass tickling my ankles. Fallen leaves sat atop it like rafts on a green sea. Glazed biscuits squatted low, parting the blades with their doughy domes. I reached for one, then noticed it was a mushroom. I was out of molasses anyway.

The lawnmower gave me a don't-even-think-about-it look. A gust of wind leapt the fence, followed by a tree limb bending, yawning, cracking, and falling onto my crow-sketching shed.

Confused, I stared at my feet.

What if you looked closely at a lawn?

You would see wedges and spoons and slivers and beards and pebbles and broccolis and fans and straws and hearts of grass. If I could name the entire flora I would. But I can't.

I can name sunflower and dandelion and bloodroot and trillium and verbena. I can name wild potato vine. Like a river map, wild potato vine crept along the side of my crow-sketching shed.

A voice reached me from the end of the yard, then a swishing of Carolina lilies. Someone was wading Jangly Creek. Wearing oversized waders and the bowl of a pasta strainer atop her head, it was Joey.

Joey was a girl from the country who was always wading Jangly Creek into the city and selling people things from an inner tube she pulled behind her. The inner tube was once the lungs of a tractor, but no more. It now had fence slats and feed bags laid across, and held all types of useful things—shuttlecocks, disposable cameras, Play-Doh molds, and so on—things Joey found discarded, including a functional abacus, which is really quite rare.

“How are things?” I asked.

“Soapy.” Joey nodded to the water. “Someone spilt something, something neon and soapy. The fish are sinking. The beavers won't gnaw. They're hiding. I haven't seen a woodchuck for days.”

“Ah,” I said, putting my hands to my ears. “I don't suppose you have my barley?”

“And your yeast.” She handed over two recycled microwave popcorn bags, then snapped a few beads on the abacus. She had silly quick hands.

“A dollar and a half,” she said.

I gave Joey two dollars and told her she could keep the change if she could tell me about St. Augustine. She nodded and searched the burlap bags, finally producing a deck of playing cards. Shuffling, then squinting at the cards, she said, “Born 13 November, 354. Lived a worldly life of wickedness and false beliefs, had a mistress or three. Then got religion. Developed ideas of original sin and predestination. Considered the patron saint of brewers.”

“You're joking.”

“I never joke,” Joey replied, squirreling the cards away. She rubbed her nose with the business end of a flyswatter. I never

saw where it came from. Or where it went. Silly quick, I'm telling you.

We visited awhile. I told Joey how my girlfriend won employee of the decade and the way my stomach fluttered last week as I watched her fingers prying ice cubes from the tray, and Joey told me about how she kept finding oil filters and bottles of water in Jangly Creek and how her father's crops were doing and what the crows were up to. Joey was my crow intelligence. The crows were ignoring the corn. They were feeding off the highways, off the shoulders and the medians. The crows were circling the malls.

"I've never seen that," I said.

She said, "When's the last time you were in town?"

"Few months ago, I guess." For some reason, I nodded to the water, at a half-eaten chicken finger floating past. "I was in Harvy's for a jar of molasses."

Joey lifted her towrope and squinted into the sun off the water. "Harvy's closed last week. One of them giant syrup stores opened right across the street; sells every kinda syrup in the world, and cheap. Harvy's gone."

"No," I said, mostly just to hear the word. Harvy made his molasses in the old way, a low fire and boiling pots of sugar. He was an artisan of molasses, and I would miss him. Shaking her head, Joey pulled her inner tube down the winding creek, her legs parting the current, the inner tube riding dark and high, their shadow some mythical creature kidnapping an island nation. I watched her round the corner and collected my bags of yeast and barley and I swear each one of them weighed ten thousand pounds.

